

MARGINS SPEAK: DISEMPowering THE MAINSTREAM

MEXICAN PROVERB

"What didn't you do to bury me but you forgot that I was a seed."

'Are you not ashamed?

To have created us low creature,
Forcing us to eat The leftovers of others?'

- Karamela
son of Chokhamela - a
14th century saint

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A newsletter by the Department of Sociology, Maitreyi College

SOCIOLOGUE

आओ बात करें

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From the editors' desk...

On September 2013, the students of the English and Foreign Languages University announced the celebration of 'Asura' week (meant to be a political response to the Hindu majoritarian festival, Vinayaka Chaturthi). The followers believed that "the 'Asuras', like the Dalits and Adivasis, have long been demonized by Hinduism with festivals celebrating their murder. It's time the Asuras offered their version and reclaimed their places as icons of Dalit identity." Dalit occasions have been negated through the years. Festivals with an undertone of Hindutva such as Ganesh Chaturthi, Durga Puja, Holi, Onam and others have historically been produced as secular and national, while Dalit bahujan festivals and icons have been considered communal, sectarian and primitive. The Asura programme focussed on upholding practices and cultures that have been systemically denied respectability for centuries.

Sometime later, the then HRD Minister Smriti Irani's statements in the Parliament sparked nationwide outrage. Unfamiliar with the antecedents of 'Durga killing Mahishasura', she was enraged by the 'derogatory references' about Goddess Durga. She was condemned for disrespecting the Asura community. Her dialogues represented a definite ideological stand and hurt the statements of certain communities.

We would like to bring to your notice that certain tribes of Jharkand and West Bengal refer to themselves as Asuras. They mourn the killing of Mahishasura, their prince born of the union of

an Asura king and a female buffalo. It is noteworthy that in the early Vedic period Gods such as Indra and Agni, whom we know to be Suras, were actually described as 'Asura'. It was only later after the long war between the Sura (gods) and the Asuras, and it is only after the latter's defeat that the Asuras were described to be 'demonic'.

Both these episodes made us sit up and think that there are more ways of looking at the narratives we have grown up with. For example, there is a story of Mahishasura as a prince. He was not merely a demon who was slain by Durga. Durga is revered and worshipped by the majority of Hindus and Mahishasura is also revered by a number of communities about which we know nothing. Just because we are unaware of these, do the belief systems of such communities become insignificant?

Several such discourses have been pushed to the margins by the dominant discourse. It is important to look at the alternative narratives and question the prevalent hegemonic narratives of the majority in our country. It is important to see the world from the perspective of the 'other' who have been marginalized and have remained unnoticed.

We at the Department of Sociology, therefore, decided to engage with the following theme this year: Margins Speak - Disempowering the Mainstream. We will look at such perspectives, which make us question the foundations of beliefs and practices that we take for granted. For example, we did not think that Mahishasura would have a story to tell, that as we celebrate Navratri, and Goddess Durga's victory over the former, there are people who view his death as murder and mourn it. We do not notice that all gods

- Bhargavi Sinha, Yaniam Chukhu

and saintly figures are fair-skinned and the demons, dark-skinned.

Our current issue, therefore, focusses on the narratives of Dalits and lower castes.

We were shaken by the death of Rohit Vemula, a Dalit PhD student of Hyderabad University who was discriminated against due to his caste identity. A lynching is another case in point where caste related violence was inflicted upon seven members of a Dalit family because they had skinned a dead cow. Ironic as it may be, the occupation of Dalits revolves around skinning and tanning which are socially and religiously sanctioned. This event has deeper connotations and is yet another instance of suppression. In the occupation of manual scavenging, Dalits remove excreta from dry latrines. They are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, and are isolated and socially boycotted when they cease to perform their tasks.

Our motive is not to define what is right or wrong, only to question the mainstream discourse which pushes certain sections of people to the margins. We urge you to open your minds to alternate narratives, in this issue, the perspectives of Dalits. We believe that such narratives pose a counter point to culture. They challenge the mainstream.

It is time we let the margins speak.

It is time for us to listen carefully.

It is time to break the chains of regressive ideologies.

It is time to let our collective imagination run free.

In the words of CW Mills, 'Sociologue' invites you to this journey of 'sociological imagination'.

आओ बात करे

UNTOUCHABLE'S COMPLAINT

One of the early poems on Dalits was composed by Heera Dom. It was titled 'Achhut Kee Shikayat' (Untouchable's Complaint)

Day and night we are suffering,	Raised the mountain on finger tip.	
We will share our grief with the ruler.	Don't know where, now you sleep,	We won't beg like Brahmin begs
Even god is not listening to our problems	You have become heedless to our pain.	Won't stir lathi like Thakur stirs
Don't know how long will we suffer.	It appears you dislike our contact	Won't cheat like Sahu does while measuring
	As you know that we are Dom.	Won't steal cow like Ahir gets away with
We go to churchman's court and		Won't write poems like a bard
Become English after conversion.	We do labor day and night,	Won't go to Court wearing turban
Oh lord, conversion doesn't work	And earn two rupees for that.	We'll shed sweat to live our life,
How to show our face, we impious.	Thakurs have comfort sleep at their home,	Together at home we share our food.
	We plough fields then pay we get.	Our body is made of flesh and bone,
Broke the pillar and saved Prahlada,		Similar body the Brahmin has got.
Rescued Gajraj from the clutches of Graha.	The ruler's battalion is deployed and	He is worshipped in every house,
Where Duryodhna's brother pulled Sari,	We get caught to serve them unpaid.	As the whole region has become his host.
Appeared there and provided clothing.	Such job we do with closed mouth,	We do not go close to well,
Killed Ravan and supported Vibhishna,	To the government, this will be said.	We get drinking water from mud.

MAHISHASUR



It was not a religious war,

It had nothing to do with religion.

When Lord Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva heard of Mahishasur's cruelties, they sought to transform their fiery energies into a woman who was created for the sole purpose of slaying the God of the Asur community. Goddess Durga was armed with weapons to destroy Mahishasur who could not be killed by a man. On Durga Puja, we see the idol of the fair skinned Devi impaling dark skinned half naked Mahishasur with her trident and severing his head with her sword. Now the ideology suggests the depiction of good over evil through the battle between Goddess Durga and the "evil" king Mahishasur, however, the very narrative, if looked closely is problematic. There is an alternate narrative that has

come into light that the battle was fought because Mahishasur who caused a disturbance in the prevailing peaceful order. The grave mistake? He represented and fought for the Adivasis who were fighting back against the fair skinned intruders to reclaim their autonomy, as a result of their cultures being forcibly transformed, their community being displaced and their lands being taken away from them. Clearly, the most celebrated festival of India has dark power play underlying the folklore it is based out of.

Did you know the city Mysuru, now Mysore draws its name from the mythological character of the demon Mahishasura. This is probably because Mahishasura was viewed as a demon with good qualities.

However, the celebration of durga puja has a sentimental place in the traditions of eastern India's Asur tribe, for whom the festival is dark. The Asurs mourn Mahishasur's death during the period of durga puja symbolized though complete isolation. The Asurs who claim ancestry from Mahishasur himself have a different story:

'The Asurs believed that the Devi Mahatmya story of the Markandeya Purana, which describes the birth of Durga and her nine-day long battle with Mahishasura, is biased. According to the Asurs, the birth of Durga from the conjoined powers of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva was a "crooked conspiracy" hatched because their king Mahishasura was blessed with a boon by Brahma that no man or god could kill him.'

- Quatr India (subaltern stories).

गुड मॉर्निंग
गुड मॉर्निंग

जब आप यह पत्र पढ़ रहे होंगे तो मैं आपके बीच नहीं खुंगा। मेरे ऊपर गुस्सा ना हों आप। मैं जानता हूँ कि आपमें से कई लोगों ने मेरा सच में बहुत खयाल रखा है, प्यार किया है और मेरी हमेशा मदद की। मेरी किसी से भी कोई शिकायत नहीं है। मुझे हमेशा से खुद से सम्मस्या थी। मैं अपने शरीर और आत्मा के बीच बढ़ती दूरी को महसूस करता हूँ और मैं एक शैतान बन गया हूँ। मैं हमेशा से ही एक लेखक बनना चाहता था। विज्ञान का लेखक, कार्ल्स सेगन की तरह। लेकिन अंत में सिर्फ ये पत्र ही लिख पाया।

मैं विज्ञान, तारों, प्रकृति से बहुत प्यार करता था लेकिन इसके बाद मैंने लोगों से प्यार करना शुरू किया, बिना ये जाने कि लोगों ने प्रकृति से बहुत फले ही तलाक ले लिया है। हमारी भावनायें दोगम दर्जेकी हैं। हमारा प्रेम बनावटी है, हमारी मान्यताएं झूठी हैं, हमारी मौलिकता वैध है बस कृत्रिम कला के जरिए यह बेहद कठिन हो गया है कि हम प्रेम करें और दुखी न हों।

इंसान की उपयोगिता उसकी तत्कालीन पहचान तक सिमट कर रह गयी है और उसे नजदीकी संभावना तक ही ही सीमित कर दिया गया है। एक वोट तक, एक आदमी महज एक आंकड़ा बन गया है। महज एक वस्तु, आदमी को कभी भी उसके दिमाग के हिसाब से नहीं आंका गया। एक ऐसी चीज जो स्टार्टअप से बनी थी, हर क्षेत्र में, अध्ययन में, गलियों में, राजनीति में, मरने में और जीने में।

मैं इस तरह का पत्र पहली बार लिख रहा हूँ। पहली बार मैं आखिरी पत्र लिख रहा हूँ, मुझे माफ कर दीजिएगा अगर मेरी बातों का कोई मतलब नहीं निकले। मेरा जन्म एक घातक हादसा था, मैं अपनेबचपन के अन्तेपन से कभी भी बाहर नहीं निकल सका, अपने बचपन के छुद्रपन से। हो सकता है कि मैं गलत हूँ, पूरी तरह से, दुनिया को समझने में। प्यार, दर्द, जीवन, मृत्यु को समझने में। इसीकी कोई जल्दबाजी नहीं थी। लेकिन मैं हमेशा हड़बड़ी में था। जिंदगी को शुरू करने के लिए अतिसाहसिक। इन सबके बीच कुछ लोगों के लिए लिए जीवन एक अभिषाप था।

इस समय मैं आहत नहीं हूँ, मैं दुखी नहीं हूँ, मैं सिर्फ खाली हूँ। अपने बारे में बिल्कुल उदासीन। यह दयनीय है और इसलिए मैं ऐसा कर रहा हूँ। लोग मुझे कायर कह सकते हैं, स्वार्थी या पागल कह सकते हैं। जब मैं चला जाऊँ तो। लेकिन इस बात को लेकर मैं बिल्कुल भी चिंतित नहीं हूँ कि लोग मेरे जाने के बाद मुझे क्या कहेंगे। मैं मृत्यु के बाद की कहानियों में विश्वास नहीं करता, भूत और आत्मा। अगर कुछभी ऐसा है जिसपर मैं भरोसा करता हूँ, वह है कि मैं सितारों की सैर करूँगा और दूसरी दुनिया के बारे में जानूँगा। अगर आप जो इस पत्र को पढ़ रहे हैं मेरे लिए कुछ भी कर सकते हैं तो मुझे 7 महीने की फेलोशिप मिलनी है। एक लाख पच्चीस हजार रुपए। कृपया इसे देखें और इसे मेरे परिवार को दिल्वा दें। मुझे रामजी को भी 40 हजार रुपए देने हैं। उसने कभी इस पैसे को वापस नहीं मांगा लेकिन कृपया उसे ये जरूर फेलोशिप के पैसों में से दे दें। मेरे अंतिम संस्कार को शांतिपूर्वक होने दें। ऐसा व्यवहार करें जैसे मैं आया और चला गया। मेरे लिए आंसू नहीं बहायो। इस बात को समझने की कोशिश करिये कि मैं जीने से ज्यादा मरने में खुश हूँ।

तारों की छांव से

उमा अन्ना, इस काम के लिए तुम्हारा कम्परा चुनने के लिए माफी चाहता हूँ। अब्बेकर स्टुडेंट एसोसिएशन परिवार, माफी चाहता हूँ आप सबको निराश करने के लिए। अपने मुझे बहुत प्यार दिया। मैं आपके बेहतर भविष्य की कामना करता हूँ।

एक और आखिरी बार

जय भीम

मैं औपचारिकतायें लिखना भूल गया। मेरी आत्महत्या के लिए कोई भी जिम्मेदार नहीं है। किसी ने मुझे इसके लिए उकसाया नहीं है, ना ही किसी कृत्य या शब्द से। यह मेरा फैसला है और इसके लिए सिर्फ मैं जिम्मेदार हूँ। मेरे दोस्तों और दुश्मनों को इसके लिए पेशान नहीं किया जाए जब मैं चला जाऊँ तो।

A letter by Rohit Vermula



The marginalization of Dalits remains one of the gravest human rights violations India struggles with today.
- Human Rights Watch

Model: Mrinal Yadav
Photographers: Bayar Jain ; Aastha

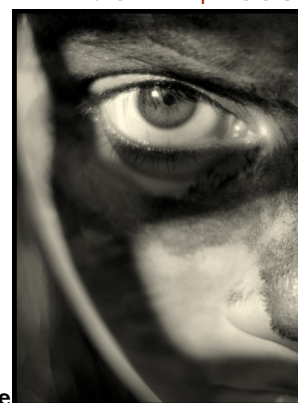


At last our eyes are advancing

Never in our country,
the gate of the sun was kept open for us
through generations the black paste of the dark
was smeared on our eyes. On each eyelash the dream for life
was shattered on the tiptoe of
expectation
never in our country
the birds were unchained and free



Now a dense
black stream gushes from our eyes
brimful of black the receptacle signals
danger
the door posts wait to be washed away
the palace walls are collapsing
yes, we are late...
but, at least our eyes are advancing.



Editors' Choice

Shambuka's Abortive Tapasya

One day when Rama was ruling in Ayodhya, a Brahmana boy died. This was regarded as untimely: no Brahmana boy could die in the reign of a just king, said the learned in Ayodhya. The father of the boy came to the palace gates and lamented the boy's death exclaiming, 'Surely there is some great sin in Rama's rule.' When Rama consulted his brahmana advisers, he was told that the boy's untimely death indicated that a sudra was performing tapasya which was highly sinful. The Brahmanas also advised Rama to ferret out the sinful sudra and punish him.

Rama then went out in search of the 'deviant' sudra who did not stick to his avowed occupation of serving the higher varnas and finally found an ascetic performing a great penance in the northern part of his realm. Rama then addressed him thus: 'I am Rama, the son of Dasharatha. Out of curiosity I ask of this question: tell me truthfully in which caste you have been born, Shambuka the sudra said quite truthfully, 'O king I am born of the Sudra caste. I want to attain divinity by such penance.' As soon as the ascetic said these words Rama drew forth his sword and cut off Shambuka's head, and as soon as he did so the Gods uttered praise of Rama and offered him a boon. Rama asked that the brahmana boy should be restored to life and it was thus the dead brahmana boy came back to life: he had been restored to life the moment Shambuka the sudra ascetic was killed—merely for seeking divinity like the brahmanas. Continued monopoly of knowledge remained in the hands of the brahmanas. The symbolism of the brahmana boy—the next generation of the learned—dying when the sudra Shambuka acquire knowledge and then being revived and the cutting off the head, the seat of knowledge, of the sudra Shambuka, is striking.

**“ No Brahmana
boy could die in
the reign of a
just king”, said
the learned in
Ayodhya.**

Joothan : A metaphor of Poverty, Pollution and Humiliation

Valmiki goes on to give a detailed description of preserving and eating the joothan after reprocessing it, during the 'hard days of the rainy season'. The memories of his childhood associated with joothan, often come back to haunt him and cause him renewed pain and humiliation. At the first blush, the passage seems to be giving a glimpse of the scale of poverty and suffering due to hunger in Valmiki's community. However, on closer reading, another aspect of this deprivation comes to the fore. The passage highlights the association of the Dalits with the notion of pollution. Consider the following lines from Limbale's book Akkarmashi.

The teacher asked the high-caste boys and girls to collect the leftovers on a piece of paper and give it to us. I and Parshya carried the bundle of the leftover food on the way back. The high caste boys and girls were laughing and joking, but our whole attention was on the bundle. Mallya carried a bundle of bhakri on his head and we, the Mahar (the author's caste) boys, followed him excitedly like hungry vultures. At last we gathered in Girmalya's farm and opened the bundle. It contained crumbs of different kinds of food and their spicy smell filled the air. We squatted in a circle and stuffed ourselves greedily. We had never tasted food like that before. We were all really gluttonous. Our stomachs were greedy as a beggar's sack. When I got home I told my mother all about this. Like the victim of a famine she said, 'why didn't you get at least a small portion of it for me? Leftover food is nectar'.

The similarity in themes in the two excerpts is striking. What I

find more striking and what is more critical to my purpose here is the 'naturalness' of the teacher's asking the 'high-caste' students to collect the leftover food and give them to the Mahar students. Once again, along with suggesting poverty and hunger, the passage signifies the Mahars as deemed polluted. Although class-based issues come up in both the narratives, especially Akkarmashi, where pain is experienced as hunger, both the authors interpret their accepting leftover food in the context of their caste identity. As mentioned earlier, joothan or leftover food carries the connotation of ritual pollution, when used in relation to anyone other than the original eater. It is this association with ritual pollution, and the stigma and discrimination resulting thereof, that sets apart the Dalits from the other deprived groups or 'have-nots' in the Indian society. And it is this association with ritual pollution that is invoked to explain and justify the infra-human status assigned to the Dalits by the caste system.

Another aspect of this association with pollution is the Dalit's engagement with the so-called 'unclean' occupations. Certain occupations — mostly associated with death and human bodily waste — are regarded as unclean and degraded and therefore assigned to those considered to be outside the pale of humanity. In fact, the link between the Dalit as embodying pollution and the polluting occupations follows a circular logic: Why are the jobs polluting? Because they are performed by Dalits. Why are the Dalits polluting? Because they perform polluting jobs.

What needs to be stressed is that the idea of pollution here does

not refer to lack of hygiene. Tasks such as announcing the news of death or epidemic, or beating of drums at weddings, funerals and festivals are considered polluting as these involve inauspicious events like death and contact with animal hide. One confronts this irony in the logic of pollution, along with Limbale in the following lines.

I used clean clothes, bathed everyday and washed myself clean with soap, and brushed my teeth with toothpaste. There was nothing unclean about me. Then in what sense was I untouchable? A high caste who is dirty was still considered touchable!

One comes across a host of themes and emotions in these lines. One, there is a sense of anguish in being subjected to a set of rules, that defy any reason or logic. Two, the sarcasm at one level entails a critique of religion, rituals and caste; however at another level, it also captures a sense of helplessness in realizing one's inability to break the vicious circle of pollution and caste despite bodily cleanliness. The following two epigraphs portray the same sentiment:

All I knew was that I did not want to go into the line of work that my ancestors had been doing for thousands of years. I had written to Pitaji, informing him of my decision to leave college and learn this technical work in a government factory. He was delighted. He kept saying repeatedly, 'At last you have escaped "caste"! But what he didn't know till the date he died is that 'caste' follows one right up to one's death.

In the news

For any queries or feedback, contact us imagination.edboard@gmail.com

Department

Updates

(July-December, 2016)

- * 24th August- The Department participated in SHRAMDAN –the annual cleanliness drive held in the college.
- * 26th August- Department Elections were held.
- * 21st September- Student-Teacher interaction of the department of sociology.
- * 30th September- An interactive workshop on Research Methods.
- * 5th October- A talk by professor Savyasaachi on the marginalization of nature.
- * 12th October to 17th October - Outstation fieldwork research to Dalhousie and Khajjiar

Upliftment of Dalit's top on State's Priority list ,says TDP government

Tamil Nadu Dalit families kept out of temples plan to convert to Islam

Subnationalism Might be the Key to Social Development in India

'Purification' ceremony conducted in Udipi temple after Dalit meeting

Casteism in universities breaking Dalit hearts

Freedom for Dalit's a far cry due to intertwined nature of Indian Society

Dropping surnames will not empower Dalits; protecting their rights will

A survey of 50,000 companies found that a majority of top jobs were held by non-dalits

Renowned Dalit thinker Chandra Bhan Prasad says- free market are more beneficial to the Upliftment of Dalit's than the reservation system

Atrocities an excuse; reservation the key issue in rally war between Marathas and Dalits

Gujarat: Dalits refuse to dispose cattle carcasses in protest against rising atrocities

Material issues are at the heart of Dalit politics, says Jignesh Mewani

Rs 35 Lakhs subsidy for Dalit entrepreneurs under 'Stand up India'

Recommendations

Must watch:

- * Sujata (Tamil)
- * Sadgati (Hindi)
- * Aarakshan (Hindi)
- * Maleficent (English)

Must read:

- * Koogali the Owl- a book by Co Dhaman.
- * Unseen: The Truth About India's Manual Scavengers- Bhasha Singh.
- * Thunder-Storm- Dalit stories by Ratan Kumar Sambharia.
- * Joothan - Omprakash Valmiki
- * Karukki—Bama

Do you have any narratives from the margins that you would like to share? Send them to us and the best one would be published and awarded in the upcoming issue .

Yours Sociologically

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Movie Review : Sadgati

The movie Sadgati, meaning 'Salvation in Death', is based on the story written by Munshi Premchand. The protagonist of the story is Dukhiya, a poor and helpless 'Chamaar' (considered an occupational sub-caste). He and his wife intend to get their young daughter married and for this purpose he goes to the house of the village 'Pandit' (also called 'Maharaja'). Upon requesting the Pandit to visit his house for the 'Sagai' ceremony, the Pandit asks for free labor in return. Dukhi, not wanting to offend him, agrees to the work. The next set of events turn the table against the Pandit, making him experience the very kind of oppression which was inflicted on Dukhi.

The movie is a social commentary, not attempting to get into actual commentary. It is a strong representation of the adverse effects of the rigid caste system in our

society. It shows the stark outline in the position of a Brahmin and an untouchable. Social reality is emphasized through the use of gestures and actions of the characters. Some of them include- the daily sacred rituals carried out by the Pandit, manner of greetings offered to the Pandit by Dukhi, the behavior of Pandit's wife towards Dukhi when he asks for fire to light his cigarette and so on. This movie shows the grim realities that are still prevalent in our society with the notion of purity and pollution and how the untouchables have a certain mind-set when it comes to looking at the Brahmin, who are at the top of the hierarchy. The notion of purity and pollution of the caste system is maintained throughout the movie: Dukhi's wife is seen taking multiple precautions to avoid her contact with the pandit's item lest she pollutes it. Superiority of the higher caste

and disparity among the lives of the two men speaking the same language, having the same blood- showcased the outmoded rules passed down from the by-gone eras. It was evident that neither of the two questioned this current scenario and accepted their circumstances as fate. They subconsciously became willing participants in the cycle of caste hierarchy. In the end, Dukhi malnourished and exhausted due to working under the scorching sun, is brought face to face with his worst fate, causing a stark turn of events.

Sadgati reveals the inhumane practices of humans which they follow in the name of caste and hopes to shed light on these petrifying policies yielding fuel to enact a social change. This story is an example of how movie and literature (media) can be used as powerful tools by people in the margins to speak up, thus giving us a glimpse of how the caste system affects their social reality.

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