

Caste and Gender: Generalities of Experience

Anirban Das

“... we might have to admit that it [caste] is not one thing but many”

--Anikat Jaware, *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching*, 190

Introduction

This essay wants to talk about the possibility and the need to think of generalities beyond the singularity of experience. It wants to talk about certain attempts, from within and out of the so-called western *epistemes*, to think theory and experience together.

In a way, this is a response to two very important books: one of these is written by Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (Guru and Sarukkai 2012) on the necessity of speaking in terms beyond the pale of European concepts appearing as universals; the other is Aniket Jaware's important intervention (Jaware 2019) on, as the title itself proclaims, touching and not touching as immanent practices that constitute caste. The first book centrally brings up the problem of addressing local experiences in terms of concepts produced in other spaces. Remaining sympathetic to the concern and largely sharing the resistance to a power-laden universalizing of the European particular, I try, nevertheless, to think of certain non-dominant strands originating in the West which may resonate with this disquiet. I speak of some feminist responses to the dominant western *epistemes*. Such a reading might open up new ways of connecting resisting moves originating in disparate spaces. It may also render problematic the notion of a secure definition of the Indian and the 'us' with which there is a discomfort.

Caste and gender are two categories denoting identity, both premised on the body of the person. Certain essentialized notions of the body are at work here. These notions work through the exclusion, in various forms, of certain categories and the dominance, yet also in myriad ways, of others. The Dalit and the Brahman, the woman and the man, the homosexual and the normative heterosexual, are related to each other in complex, power-laden ways. The politics of caste and the politics of gender have to work against these in nuanced and complicated modes.

In the case of gender, the categories are essentialized through certain organs, and the function that these organs have in society, that of reproduction. Reproductive heteronormativity is the normalizing of heterosexism through its function of reproduction of human beings in society. In the case of caste, the essentialization, whereby the categories are given a permanence, occurs through birth.¹ The central role of endogamy in fixing the structure of caste has been pointed out forcefully by Ambedkar. This control of birth, through endogamy, is again linked intimately to the essentializations acting through processes of gender. The control over women's bodies remains central in both the processes.

The ways in which the hegemony of the hierarchies of the caste structure are produced and continued are different from the ways in which the hegemony of man over woman is replicated in reproductive heteronormativity. The exclusion of the Dalit and the exclusion of the woman and the non-normative sexualities work through different structural grids. Yet they intersect at certain spaces. The body of the woman is one very important place where this intersection occurs. Of course, these are logical and phenomenological processes at work at an abstract level. And definitely, these are not the only processes at work. The

present paper focuses on, yet one more time, the woman's body as the site where processes of caste and gender intersect. In the process, it addresses the question of the phenomenologies of untouchability and womanhood.

The problem of theorizing on the avowed base of the experiences of women has been articulated in feminist theory for quite some time. Elizabeth Grosz had articulated this as the problem of being feminist and being theory at the same moment. For being feminist points at its involvement with and its situation in the politics of feminism, a bias from which it has to speak. Being theory would involve a commitment to being applicable across the board universally. Grosz, in that particular essay, had talked of a deconstructive move of holding on to both ends of the particular and the universal.

... the dilemma facing feminists involves a conflict between the goals of intellectual rigour (avoidance of the conceptual errors of essentialism and universalism) and feminist political struggles (struggles that are directed towards the liberation of women as women). But is this really a choice feminists must face? Is it a matter of preference for one goal over the other? Or can the linkages between theory and political practice be understood differently so that the criteria of intellectual evaluation are more "politicised" and the goals of political struggle are more "theoretised"? (Grosz 95-96)

The politics against caste discriminations can set up a productive dialogue with these feminist attempts. The question becomes that of the generalities acting in 'experience'. The binary that operates in the dominant of the Western thought is between the generality of ideology and the particularity of experience. The point that these feminist attempts try to raise is that, there is a generality, a sharing across the event, in experience.

Is Dalit politics reducible to the domain of experience? Is there something which remains beyond – something communicable across the identity categories, the experience of the Dalit that speaks beyond the Dalit?

The question is, not whether experience needs the experiencer. That has already been addressed in certain ways in the notion of standpoint theories.² The question is, can experience speak beyond the experiencer? Can the Dalit speak to the non-Dalit? And in the reverse, the non-Dalit to the Dalit? The parallel in feminism is, can a man be a feminist? This essay speaks of an articulation that works across experience: the experience of humiliation. It also speaks of a failure of that connection – the gaping space separating the experiences of the higher and the lower, a break that persists even in the constitution of the general.

The question addressed here is, is there a need for the general? Is it still necessary to think of the generality of caste beyond the terms of a socio-structural description? The multiplicity and the heterogeneity notwithstanding, is it possible to think of the dynamics of caste in terms of the general that works across the immanence of moments? I speak first of the feminist literature on standpoint theories and my own attempt to address the problem in a mode, which avoids the ambiguities in the resolution of that literature. The essay ends by speaking on a moment in a story in Bangla that, for me, presents a hint of the probable ethical and political predicaments spoken of.

Generalities and Dissipated Standpoints

Standpoint theories, being enunciated from the vantage points of feminism on the one hand and science studies on the other, are crucial resources for the criticism of universal claims in

social theory. In some of the variants, like the later works of Sandra Harding, standpoint theories have tried to address the necessity of working with epistemologies from the south. The idea of a “rainbow coalition” among possible standpoints has been active in this attempt. While differentiating them from the attempt to accommodate particularities within a universalist frame (positional objectivity), this essay tries to unravel the tension between the ontological claims of standpoint theories regarding the positionality of objectivity and their political aim of producing a “rainbow coalition”. It also tries to think of a form of embodied knowledges that might avoid some of these difficulties.

In the prevailing literature, the standpoint of the oppressed is defined, ‘in the last instance’, through the experience (be that of being, of becoming, or of struggle) of the oppressed. In this literature, in spite of contrary assertions, experience is treated as something accessible without mediation. Hence it is made to repeat the mediation of the hegemonic. In other efforts to think of mediations operative inexperience, when the constitutive role of language or history is stressed upon, most often, linguistic or historical grounds are used to authenticate the primacy of experience. I quote a relevant critique –

My view of *experience* is an attempt to come out of the duality of the question – is experience an *immediate* presence or is it *mediated* by discourses and histories. An answer that gravitates to the latter is the easy solution of unexamined culturalism. It focuses its attention on the cultural construction of experience, builds systemic structures based on the elements under scrutiny at the moment of the particular theoretical enunciation, and rests assured about the inevitable exclusions perpetrated on other elements (not deemed ‘relevant’ to the particular discussion in question), complacent with the inevitability of choosing a moment to start. The element of the unanticipatable remains untheorized, not taken cognizance of within the blanket term of immediacy. (Das *Toward a Politics of the (Im)Possible*, 149)

A search for secure grounds behind mediation continues this problem, one may add.

It becomes necessary to point at the radical undecidability that haunts experience as well as struggle, to be aware of the inherent plurality in the immanence of experience. At the same moment, one cannot let go of the unity and the anticipated modes of construction (through discourse, power, history) of the event. This is an attempt to bring in ‘contingency, unpredictability and chance’ into the calculable world of experience and struggle without choosing the former in place of the latter. One need not valorize contingency as something opposed to generality in order to interrogate the surety of the universal.

The question of standpoints in theory, or of situatedness in knowledges, points one more time at the implication of being with doing, of ontology with ethics:

Think experience as an event, the *gift* of an event beyond an economy of expectation. The unanticipatability and surprise of the gift is built into the singularity of the event. The experience of the impossible thus enacts the ontological link between the self and the other. And this link calls for a responsibility to the other in the very being of the self – ethic as not something to be added on to ontology but as an inalienable constitution of ontology itself. (Das, *Towards a Politics* 149)

When one continues to think in these terms, through the notion of the standpoint, contrary to what a facile reading of those theories might indicate, any politics based on certain identity-categories opens itself up to relations with the politics of the others. Standpoints are not only to produce fixed vantage points from which to think, know and act. Standpoints point at the shifting character of identities, opening up to the unanticipatability of situations in which one becomes and acts. Standpoints enable multiplicities to work in and through singularities of events. But, what then, are these singularities?

Singularities are not fully present at any spatial or temporal moment. These remain continuously in flux, always and already in the motion of change, and thus haunted by absences of other singularities. One very important instance of thinking in these terms is the Althusserian notion of overdetermination. One may also refer to Deleuze or Spivak in some of their texts. Manuel Delanda has arrived at this notion in terms of a Mathematical manifold. The moot point is that this way of thinking, on the one hand, lets one think of the specificity of an event or a thing (both in their everyday commonsensical sense) without ignoring the generalities which go on to constitute that singularity and, on the other, does not exhaust the singularity by the enumeration of any number of such generalities. It thus can keep the chance of the unanticipatable changes occurring, while giving meticulous accounts of the singularities.

We thus posit (following a number of important theoretical strands) a generality that remains open to singularities not derivable from that general. The structure of iterability – within which the ontologies of standpoint politics work – calls for a horizon of im/possible politics within and beyond hegemonies. A certain shift in the structures of violence that inhabit our beings accompany this im/possible horizon. The question that animates this shift is: how to relate to the other, responsibly. In the context of a politics against caste oppressions and discriminations, how does a gendered caste optic look?³

In a perceptive essay-length discussion on *The Cracked Mirror* (Guru and Sarukkai), V. Sanil talks about an implicit, yet very important argument in the book. The book talks about the importance of experience in theory. It is instructive that the discussion between the two authors that comprises the book enters the conversation through the problem of theoretical Brahminism in social theory. It raises the problem, rampant in the social sciences in India, of a hierarchy, almost explicit, between theory and empirics. The question of caste, of Dalit politics, is approached through this problem and not vice versa. The theory/empirics divide is not a theme brought in to discuss caste. Of course, questions of caste, gender and phenomenologies of touch and untouchability pervade the book. In that sense, I see this as an exercise in analysing how metonymies of caste travel in other domains, or rather, how the being of caste is already and always a becoming in all domains of existence and society. For the moment, we use here common sense given notions of ‘existence’ and ‘society’, both of which the literature we refer to deeply interrogate.

As Sanil brings out, behind the question of the hierarchy between theory and empirics lies the relationship between ethics and the social sciences. For Sanil the importance of Guru and Sarukkai’s intervention is in a major shift that it tries to implement in the relations between ethics and theory. Does a critique of theoreticism consist in bringing in ethics to theory, thus working on the assumption of an implicit separation between the two? Sanil describes how, this call for a critique means many things –

To bring ethics to theory means to accept the primacy of practical reason over theoretical reason. This move derives support from a critique of the epistemological

separation between the knower and the known. This also questions the distinction between fact and value and demands recognition of difference and otherness. (408)

Yet, he also demonstrates, following Michel Foucault, in western philosophy this becomes impossible in spite of a primacy of practical reason at least since Kant – “They [the social sciences] are made possible by that which in modern thought makes the formulation of ethics impossible. (410)” At this point, he posits the intervention of the book – “*The Cracked Mirror* comes closest to an ethics of theory when it asserts that the task of theory is not merely to explain or interpret but to intensify experience.” (410) The notion of intensification articulated here is quasi-Deleuzian-- “Intensification is this explosion of particular experiences into a unified oppositional consciousness through theorization. Theoretical concepts give unity and continuity to experience.” (411)

To remember, the book itself does not articulate the argument in these terms. It tries to address the problem by thinking of the relation of experience and its subject in terms of the question of whether one owns or authors one’s experience. We follow here Sanil’s point because for us, it puts the problem in a more succinct manner and brings out the import of the book in articulating its implicit theoretical thrust. As Sen Chaudhuri surmises – “... the debate arrives at the ethicality of the very work of theory. And in the ethics of theory experience turns out to be a significant moment of arbitration.” (6) What Sanil is talking of is the role of theory in the organization of experience in a particular mode and hence the ethics of theorizing. Here, theory, experience, ethics – all these terms are articulated in ways which are different from, yet related to, their common sense usages.

The problem with Sanil’s excellent essay seems to be the way in which it posits a binary opposition between the social sciences and the philosophical and takes almost a side for the latter. I do not have problem in a taking of sides but I want to question the way in which it is done. An unexamined, rather unexaminable, access to truth qua Gandhi can hardly be posited as an ethics that the Dalit might aspire for. Yet his call for a philosophical examination of the questions involved in the articulation of caste is necessary and important. His articulation of the problem of the social scientific mode of understanding remains insightful –

They [the social sciences] dispatch us to the subjective conditions under which we have representations of caste. Here we have sociological accounts of purity and pollution, hierarchy and Sanskritization. ... Untouchability then becomes a matter for social policy. (415)

Sanil ends with a caution to select the objects of philosophy. Touch is a philosophical issue. Is untouchability more a sociological rather than philosophical problem? His answer, advising us to be careful that “[n]ot all ideas that find popularity in the media, everyday cultural conversations, or social science discourse need to gain the status of philosophical concepts” (415), is for philosophy to tread with care in these matters. In this context, Aniket Jaware’s intervention (2019) seems to bear some significance.

Jaware shares with Sanil the discomfort with what he calls “the socioanthropological way of thinking about caste” (153). At the operative level, this means, for him, - “... we have to move away from kinship systems, from purity/pollution, and above all, from the predication of caste onto birth.” (153) In a moment we will see what this means to him in a conceptual register. Before that, let us remember, for Jaware, this implies a focus on the practices of untouchability – the plurality of practices is important here – “as the markers of

caste practice” (153). Infinitely careful as the text is, it goes on to distinguish the category of ‘markers’ from ‘marks’: whereas the former always bear specific meanings, the latter may be arbitrary.

For Jaware, the abhorrence of the socioanthropological is not the result of a disciplinary feud. It is premised upon a conceptual stress on the immanent multiplicity of practices rather than a unified structural approach to understanding. He would not let go of the infinite displacements in the practices of caste. He would, rather, think of how the multiple enunciations of the phenomenon grouped under the name caste permeates the social as an intrinsic process – “It becomes possible to imagine a way of seeing how these inscribe sociality with discrimination and inequality.” (153) For him, untouchability is a marker, not the essence, of these practices. Caste practices are not reducible to a social structure where untouchability is the core element. The stress on the work of the mark, of signification, lets one think of the possibility of a unity which is non-contiguous and shifting. Does this not then, following the same logical sequence, open up the possibilities of thinking the other familiar tropes of caste in the same non-sociological manner? Does this not let us think of the metonymies of kinship systems, of purity/pollution or of birth acting in the practices of caste? We can probably extend Jaware’s argument to these categories, multiplying thereby the number of available ‘markers’.

It might help us to remember at this juncture that Jaware’s move here goes purportedly against Ambedkar’s,⁴ which forcefully proposes the structural role of endogamy in the social production of caste. Ambedkar would hardly feel the need to act against the sociological understanding. Yet, his politics maintains the force of utopianism. The problem with Jaware’s understanding, in spite of his brilliant and extreme insight into the limits of “the already saturated sociological discourse of caste” (Guru 24), is the way he separates the socioanthropological and the literary-philosophical. He views Ambedkar’s politics in the light of a reinstitutionalization of the Dalit. This reinstitutionalization is the mark of a radical modernity that many of us still hope for. (Jaware 158)

Yet, the imaginative utopianism of the performative of the re-escapes him. The im/possibilities of the deconstructive gesture in his own words – “radical modernity” – elude his argument.⁵For him, the politics has to be articulated in terms of the irreducible traces of the ‘body’ not accessible through Ambedkar’s move –

It seems to me that the traces we leave – even as markers of self-presence – are random, and much more stubborn and recalcitrant and obdurate toward any attempt at institutionalization than concepts of this or that kind of identity, that are usually predicated onto birth, inherited privilege, and other equivalents, including symbolic and economic capital. (158)

For him, thus, the traces are irreducible to structuring while the structures, even when re-done, are repetitive. The contrary moves larking behind in both the entities, the traces and the structures, are not what he remembers.

Yet, Jaware’s book makes extremely important and fundamental moves. The current impasse in political thinking about caste definitely derives largely from the repetitions inherent in structural logic. My point is not to think about this in absolute terms. I want to retain the goods of both sociological and philosophical. Opening up the discourse on caste to Jaware’s interventions is vital. Contemporary thought is too much implicated in sociologism.

Yet, the renowned baby has to be retained when one throws away the bathwater. One needs to move through the sociologies and anthropologies of societal structures in order to attend to the proliferation of meanings and power around the practices. If we go back to our discussions on standpoint theories, we have to think of the singularities of the immanent moments along with the generalities of the structures operative which make them happen, and vice versa.

To bring the interventions of *Practicing Caste* into our discussion, we raise the question – What does standpoint mean if not thought of in terms of identities? We need to work through and with the non-contiguous unities of dissipated standpoints, generalities made possible through the performative of shifting practices. Yet, retain the standpoints, diffuse and scattered. Taking a standpoint of the Dalit and the woman would then imply reading into the metonymic slides of the caste and gender markers into related spaces of the social (a dissipated and impossible category again) and the ways these constitute these spaces. In the following section, trying to keep alive such an impossible gesture, we read a story.

Metonymies and Standpoints

Kamal Kumar Majumdar's (1914-1979) story "Motilal Padri" was published in the Bangla literary magazine *Desh* in 1958. Majumdar, though not a popular figure in terms of quantity in readership, has been canonical in, not only for the avant-garde of Bengali literature, but his posthumous volumes of collected stories and collected novels were edited by the then doyen of popular literature, Sunil Gangopadhyay. Even now, four decades after he has been dead, little magazines continue to publish special issues on his work. In a novel like *Antarjali Jatra*, (1999, originally published in 1964), he has spoken of the outcaste *chandal* man, Baiju, "the miscegenated Brahman" (Das *Toward a Politics*, 130) defeated yet heroic in his bid to dismantle the Brahminic socius. Baiju touched the wife of the dying Brahman intimately, but could not save her life from the machinations of caste-marked patriarchy.⁶ This essay speaks of another story, short and evocative, which talks not directly of caste but of pollution and the workings of a quiet violence – "The *sal*-made cross of Hnasdoya can be seen from a long distance. ... Due to the reason that, the church is located at a height from the low ploughed land." (Majumdar 66) [All Translations are by the author]

The story begins with a seemingly simple description of the church and the terrain where the events unfold. Kamal Kumar's prose, as is well known among the Bengali audience, is almost never straight forward. Its tortuous, stumbling movement resists an easy read. On the contrary, it continuously attracts attention away from the progress of the narrative to the art of the prose, to the nuances of writing. In short, it is modernist with a curiously Bengali idiom. The distance of the church from the ground below, yet its links – though distant – with the land, the neatly patterned greenery of the church gardens with the backdrop of a rough hilly landscape, the geometric patterns through which a Christian sacredness appears in a local soil, is set up at a slow pace.

The elevated land of the church is segregated in a strange manner. To quote in Bangla

এখানে লোকে সন্তর্পণে পা দিত। পাছে পাপ হয় তাই সভয়ে বিচলিত পদে, কাপড় সামলে গির্জায় আসত। মতিলাল সত্যিই বড় পুণ্যের স্থান করে রেখেছেন। (66)

Here, people treaded with care. Lest they sin that fear made them come to the church with faltering steps, carefully managing the clothes. Truly, Motilal has maintained this a holy place. [Translation]

Though we use the words “sin” and “holy”, the Bangla words used, “paap” and “punya” are not really equivalent. The barely commensurate ways of thinking and being, that of the monotheist Christian and the non-monotheist Indic, mark these two sets of words.⁷Not going into the details of this vast discursive territory, I point at the peculiar coming together of a sanitized cleanliness and the notion of “punya” or holiness in the description above. I want to draw attention to the confluence of a casteist sacred purity and a notion of hygienic cleanliness, the anxiety to avoid pollution in the indigenous Christian akin to the Brahmanical hatred of the untouchable that probably runs through the story. But, let us not anticipate the argument.

It is probable, on the evidence of the name, that Motilal the *padri* – the ‘father’, the priest – is a local convert to Christianity, may be in one or two generations. His only goal, the text underlines at the very beginning, is to be a ‘true Christian’ –

There was nothing that Motilal could aspire for, not peace, not something else. He didn’t, at all, have the fear of Judgement. Only one hope, [to be] a complete [*purango*] Christian. (67)

Putting a finer nuance to the statement, the text explains this hope in terms of a deep affection (“*bohu puraton premer onubhab*”, “the feeling of a very old love”, 67) not through a sense of guilt (“*onutapnoy*”, 67). A picturesque account of the corporeal features of the man and his surroundings leads on to the present in the narrative – the coming of rain, torrential rains. Thick monsoon rains flooding the dark night, illuminated repeatedly by the lightning, seems “to create a sea within the space of the embrace of erotic desire” - “কামাসক্ত আলিঙ্গনের মধ্যেও দুস্তর পারাবার সৃষ্টি হয়েছে।” (67) This trope of an unbridgeable distance within the intimacy of the yearning hold is important.

Something happens amid the rains in this holy land. It is difficult, if not impossible, to do justice to the text without going into the minute details of the moment by moment account of what happens. Written in a thick, slow, sensuous, language that is the signature of Kamal Kumar – the surprise of the sudden appearance of a huge woman in the floor of the rain bathed church (how did she reach there?), the convulsions of the body that was far from death, evident even to the impossibly innocent priest (the locals did not think of him as nothing but an overgrown boy, 72) to be something else (“একঅন্য” 68) constituted the expression of a mystery that was material (“জড়তারগূঢ়রহস্যব্যক্তহয়েছিল” 68). One can write a volume on this. Yet I try to not do just that. Instead I paraphrase the narrative line, almost trampling upon the intricacies of the text.

The woman, “Santal-like”, large, was giving birth. The process of birth, as readers of Marx will undoubtedly recall, is, like revolution, a messy affair. Does it thus, in its bloody excrescence, defile the secluded purity of the church? For the moment, that was not the question that troubled Motilal. He had gone to fetch Phulal, the helping hand and together they went on to call the local *dai*, midwife Beena. This is followed by almost a clinical description of the birth of the child by Beena, the throwing away of the placenta in a ritual manner, and the gradual waking up in Motilal of a realization of the events –

In this cloudburst night, the people fearful of lightening, the earth cave-like, the forests ravished, defeated and mad with anger – in a time like this, who is born here in this poor wretched church hall?(70)
Of all places, in this church hall! (70)

A boy is born, a large cherubic boy. Beena's comment that now she has brought a god to the house leads him on – "He is reminded of that someone else, with his own bones who brought greenness to the heart of man." (71) The inevitable other question at last comes from Beena – "Where does the child bearing wench belong? Says, she doesn't have anyone." (72)

Motilal is not affected by the query. The hint of doubt goads him on to further iterations of the faith. He prays. He prays in the incessant rain, drenched to the bone. He is overjoyed with his newfound access to the complete Christian-hood.

Here one may think of a Christianity in continuation with the universal humanism of the secular. As if a faith that transcends the petty divisions of the pure and the impure, the sacred and the profane, where the sacred is so universal it almost excludes the profane, where almost nothing can any more be profane. Not even the messy birth of the boy whose genealogy is not known, the untouchable Beena doing her job on the woman of unknown origin. It seems almost to hark back to the chaotic and un-clean origins of Christianity, to the birth of its originary figure. And yet, nothing is as simple. A struggle remains hidden, appearing on occasions, through minor events, through half-articulate gestures and unuttered gossips, playfully hovering around the naïve ignorance of the child-like holiness of the priest. The fear of being touched by the impure body of the loose woman lurks behind the purity of non-knowledge. Ironically, a converse acceptance, a happy (though guilty) enjoyment of the looseness of the woman remains in the caste-marked everydayness of the indigene. Of course, it is marked by patriarchy, the heterosexist celebration of a certain mode of sexuality. Yet there is an assimilation, guilty of a different hierarchy. None of the sides is innocent.

As days passed, people visited the church and its new object of display – the child and the mother, Bhamor. Badan 'hijre', Jodu, Potaki, persons from the neighbouring Christian community, everyone, each with their particular mindset, began to form opinions. The story describes how, stray comments, half-noticed gestures and casual insinuations add up to build an atmosphere of suspicion around the woman. Unbeknown to the oblivious priest, people around him had been making up, reproducing, and developing upon the theme of the fallen woman with the unwanted child. Contrary to this, Motilal 'padri' blissfully continued with his happy moments with his God incarnate, experiencing for the first time the infinite joy of becoming the Christian true to the name. Not that Motilal did not know about the rumours. He preferred to stick to his happiness and his faith – "Many people were discussing many things. One day Phulol came and asked, "Father you tell us, what do we say in response." The calm Father priest put his hand on Phulol's head and said, "God is there"" (77). The tensions between the two sensibilities escalate to an unbearable degree, slowly and inexorably to the final moment of crisis.

Interestingly, the two thought-worlds shared the same concerns with purity and pollution. Both clearly separated the pure and the polluted and seemed to agree that the latter can easily contaminate the former. The laity believed pollution always happens, had already happened in the case of Bhamor, the woman of unknown origin giving birth to the child of unknown paternity. The priest, on the other hand, supposed the reverse, that the purity of the child is immaculate; the question of birth unnecessary, for the mother, whatever be her

antecedents, is now untouched by sin by virtue of her giving birth to the holy son. The body of the woman, by giving birth to the Godly son, signalled by the circumstances around the event, has been cleansed of the probable sins that led to that birth. Her body does no more pollute the church, nor does her presence the church-goers. It is just that, for Motilal 'padri', not everybody is aware of this fact. So, he tells Bhamor when she breaks down at his feet - "With repentance, people get new life. You have repented much so you have got this new life - recognize the one who is born - Oh! a great saint he is - he will preach His name." (78)

The tale ends with the inevitable yet sudden break-down of this near utopic faith. Doubts were possibly gathering up gradually. The final push needed a candid act of seeing. One day, as he was going to Nimda, he approached a forest clearing of little *sal* and *mohua*. Earlier, he had seen known folks, Jadu, Jahar, Badan hijre, Bhola paik, Potaki, assembled there for an afternoon revelry with drinks and food. There had been a tacit acceptance of his authority when they made gestures of hiding the liquor. It was an open secret. Now, when he returned to the spot, someone tried to save the situation with a loud proclamation that the priest was coming. As he drew near, the scene struck -

... in the shadow of leaves the moonlight shone, a few people lying with their mouth to the ground, bottles are rolling, dogs licking *kolsi*, as he came close the beautiful huge body of a woman became clear to the vision, her mouth pushed to the ground as if thrown down. Naked, unashamed, unclothed. The hair playfully moving in the air. And the confused *titir* feathers blowing around....

With all her effort Bhamor raised her head and asked, "Father, what will happen to me?" (80)

Motilal was not ready for this hideousness. His own words mocked him back. He was terribly afflicted by an insult - "The body immobile, only the beards moving in the air, someone has as if kicked the spine and it broke." (80)

With tears of grief and anger he entered the church. But the feeling was inconsolable. The text rings poetic, from this point on, in the best sense of the word. It follows the minutiae of Motilal's emotions in their evocative details. How he moves from the church to his room, roams about, disconsolate, in and around; the bone-breaking sorrow, the sense of being deceived, the fearful abyss of the loss of faith gaping its mouth, and the all-encompassing rage that goaded him on. His identity, his dream of attaining pure complete Christianity seemed to elude him at last. His sobs were echoed by the sound of the crying child. Motilal as if woke up to the presence of his source of insult. He acted swiftly. Taking the child in his familiar cradling embrace, he rushed forward to the forest.

He walked, at times losing his balance, losing the path, reclaiming strictness, quick and breathless, sweaty, with a stony face. The night rolled by. The sky became clearer, "like the pearl" (81). Motilal refused becoming back the 'padri'. He reached a clearing in the forest. The early morning water drops from the leaves might remind him of the repentant lips in the church. Motilal resisted. He was about to give the child his toy *jhumjhum*. The priest fumbled and threw it away - "The child slowly moved forward, like an elephant, to pick it up from that place where the leaves were trembling like weak animals." (82)

Again the text follows every small motion of the priest, the child, the forest, of the leaves and the bushes around. Motilal ran like escaping a snake, went down a muddy pit,

muddied himself, the sound of the child crying still in his ears. He peeped like a thief. The child, losing the known hold, searching for the priest's dress with his hands, crawled over the rough land, stood up unsteadily, one or two pebbles stuck to his knee, and blood. He cried, and walked forward – “The sound of his crying penetrated the light. Birds fly, leaves fly and fall and a few *sal* flowers sway and drop like feathers. The boy is coming with an unsteady gait.” (82)

The priest jumped and ran forward to the child. “Softly rubbing the knees of the child with his face, washing it away with his tears, he said, “I am truly no more a Christian o *baap*.”⁸(83)

While reading the story, should we focus on the resolution? Does the most important narrative element in the story consist of how Motilal breaks through his un-Christian inhuman bondage to his obsession about being a true Christian? Is the story about coming out of the bounds of those petty separations between the pure and the polluted, of the fear of profanations, toward a universal humanity that is the domain of the really true Christian? Our point is to follow more of the struggle. The dynamic of caste that pervades the immanent social works here not only in the sense of hidden dimensions of caste operative even in the Christian social. I want to point at the implicit ways in which purity and pollution, touch and un-touch-ability continue in insidious ways to flood the grounds of existence, even in its most Universalist humanist forms. Whatever be the resolution, it remains crucially important to address the implicitly gendered ways in which pollution and touch remain operative in the notions of selfhood. The working of the caste-gender system is structurally marked by the dynamic of endogamy but is not reducible to that. The co-implications of these two works in myriad complicated ways.

To recall, to think in terms of caste is not to think solely about caste. It is also to interrogate how the dynamic of caste in terms of touch, pollution or birth (to name three important markers) vitiates other forms of hierarchies. Multiple enunciations of caste appear as singularities, each in its uniqueness, yet implicated with the generalities of the particular form. It remains imperative to think of, speak of and work against the metonymies of caste in the articulations and constructions of sociability in its many singularities if one wants to get rid of even the very specific and well-defined caste atrocities. The annihilation of caste is also an understanding of the impossible social from the standpoint of caste.

Notes

¹ Of course, this is a reductive generalization. Neither gender nor caste is reducible only to the bodily dynamic. Both involve complex socio-historical processes which act through relations of power and meaning production (not that the ‘body’ is devoid of these processes). My point here is to speak of the elementaries which are not the essences yet may act as markers of difference between the operations of caste and gender relations. Later in the essay, I try to discuss more with reference to caste in the context of important issues raised by Anikat Jaware’s (2019) recent book. In this context, see also Guru and Sarukkai (2012) and specially Sen Chaudhuri (2016).

² There is now a vast existing literature on this. For a brief overview, see Harding’s *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*.

³ For a detailed enunciation of what she calls the caste-gender system to make a significant intervention in this question, see Sen Chaudhuri 2016.

⁴ For an extremely well-known and much discussed example, of course one is reminded of “Castes in India” (Ambedkar 2013). Anupama Rao in her introduction to Jaware’s book (2019) and Gopal Guru in his short review (Guru 2019) have both articulated this in different ways.

⁵Kalyan Kumar Das in “Subaltern Historiography to Dalit Historiography” retains the hint of such a possibility in Dalit politics. The essay speaks of the practices implicit in Dalit writings – to tell something else than what appears.

⁶ For a detailed account, see Das, *Toward a Politics* 127-132.

⁷ This, again, is a huge field. For two contemporary accounts of the problem of translation across the Christian and Indic, see Spivak’s “Moving Devi” and Anirban Das’s “Sexual Difference in a Different Religiosity”.

⁸*Baap*: literal meaning father, but is used, especially in this context, as an affectionate address for a boy child, something like a son. Of course, one should also not forget the associations with ‘father’.

Works Cited

Ambedkar, B. R. (originally published in 1917). “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development.” *Against the Madness of Manu: B. R. Ambedkar’s Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*. Selected and introduced by Sharmila Rege. New Delhi: Navayana, 2013. 77-107. Print.

Das, Anirban. *Toward a Politics of the (Im)Possible: The Body in Third World Feminisms*. London, New York, New Delhi: Anthem Press, 2010. Print.

_____. “Sexual Difference in a Different Religiosity: Writing the Nation in “My life”.” in *Philosophia* 7.1 (2017). 23-44. Print.

Das, Kalyan Kumar. “Subaltern Historiography to Dalit Historiography: Tracing Heterogeneity in Dalit ‘Subalternity’.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, L (7) (14thFebruary, 2015). 60-65. Print.

Grosz, Elizabeth. “Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism.” *from the Margins* (February 2002). 86-97. Print.

Guru, Gopal. “Aesthetics of a Text.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 54.28(13th July 2019).23-24. Print.

_____, and Sundar Sarukkai. *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012. Print.

Harding, Sandra (ed.). *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Jaware, Aniket. *Practising Caste: On Touching and Not Touching*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2019. Print.

Majumdar, Kamal Kumar. “Motilal Padri.” *Golpo Somogro*. Ed. Sunil Gangopadhyay, Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1990. 66-83. Print.

Nagaraj, D. R. *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays: The Dalit Movement in India*. Ranikhet: Permanent black, 2010. Print.

Rao, Anupama. "Introduction." *Practising Caste: On Touching and Not Touching*. Aniket Jaware. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2019. Print.

Sanil, V. 2013. "Ethics or Social Sciences?" *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 33.3 (2013). 408-416. Print.

Sen Chaudhuri, Ritu. "The Caste Gender System: A Necessary Analytic of Experience?" *TISS Working Paper* No. 9 (2016). 1-13. Web.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2001. "Moving Devi" in *Cultural Critique* 47 (2001). 120-163. Print.

Anirban Das

Associate Professor
Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Kolkata, India

anirban@cssscal.org

© Anirban Das 2019