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Structural Violence of Casteism

A Personal Narrative by an Adivasi University Teacher

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In West Bengal, the symbolic violence of caste is more intense than physical violence. A university teacher describes the everyday exclusionary experiences of adivasis in education spaces and the operation of caste-based glass-ceilings when they do find jobs.

On 16 August, 1992, to escape persistent caste-based discrimination, Chuni Kotal, the first ever graduate from the Lodha Sabar community of adivasis, committed suicide in Kharagpur, West Bengal. She was 27.

In 1990, Chuni Kotal had published an account of her life titled *Atmakatha: Amar Katha* (“My Life: My Story”) in the journal *Bartika* where she bitterly wondered about the “cursed”, “inauspicious” moment when children like her were born since their existence was considered socially worthless. It was as if “a low born” had been ordained by nature that she should suffer all the indignities that came her way.

At Vidyasagar University in Midnapore, West Bengal, where Kotal had been a student, a professor of anthropology would often taunt her during lectures and seminars as a member of a “criminal tribe”. Repeated complaints did not lead to redressal.

Yet, academic debates rage on “hyper invisibilisation of caste”, “West Bengal exceptionalism”, and the “absent-minded casteism” of the upper caste Bhadrakol Bengali. There is a mistaken belief that 34 years of Left Front rule in West Bengal had somehow abolished caste prejudices or caste-based discrimination in the state. Due to the pervasive dominance of the upper castes in the political, social, economic and cultural domains, political and academic discourses dismiss the idea of caste-based dominance as an illogical and irrelevant analytical category.

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Ironically enough, the very fact that such dismissive generalisations go unchallenged exposes how strong and pervasive the caste system is in practice. I am forced, as a member of the Santhal community, to bust the skilfully devised myth that caste does not exist in West Bengal.

The everyday treatment of the adivasis by the upper caste Bhadrakol betrays the tight hold of caste over Bengali society and culture. Discrimination, dismissal, injustice or contempt on account of caste disparity is a brutal everyday reality in West Bengal.

The practice of caste-based discrimination is a classic example of an entrenched naturalisation of difference as inferiority. Since the vocations, diet, manners, language or clothing practices of adivasis often enough differ considerably from those of the caste Hindus, the latter dismiss them as primitive or “savage” and continue to isolate them as backward or untouchable.

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Since Brahminism invests a good deal of enterprise in sustaining discrimination in social, religious and cultural spheres, degradation and discrimination too are naturalised.

I narrate here how the structural cruelty of Brahmanical Hindu society does not let adivasis live a life of dignity. I relate here the exclusionary experiences of adivasis in terms of cognitive blackouts in education spaces and the existence of caste-based glass-ceilings in public sector employment that stare at the adivasis even if they manage to gain access to empowering opportunities.

Recently, there was an uproar over [caste-based abuse](#) of the head of the Geography Department of Rabindra Bharati University, Dr Saraswati Kerketta. She was physically and emotionally harassed citing her caste, skin tone, birthplace and gender.

Sometime ago, an adivasi professor of a university in Kolkata informed me about the everyday practices of social discrimination she faced from her childhood. Every time members of her family carried harvested paddy over to the upper caste households, the yard would afterwards be cleansed with a paste made of cow dung and water. This was to remove the “pollution” caused by the entry of lower caste individuals into an upper caste household. As a standard five student, an upper caste classmate once ordered her to touch her feet since her “impure body” had accidentally come in contact with hers.

She complained about the discriminatory practice of adivasi students being singled out for cleaning the restrooms of the residential school where she studied. The authorities retorted: How can a poor adivasi girl dare challenge their style of operation? How audacious of an adivasi girl to even think of having the right to feel humiliated or possess a sense of honour and dignity?

According to convention, adivasis are allowed to enroll in colleges and universities only after the “general” candidates have done so and the adivasis are therefore assigned the last roll numbers. The professor from Kolkata had been told by an upper caste classmate of how, she herself, despite being a member of the upper castes, had befriended a student belonging to the last few roll numbers at college and shared the same table with them at lunch. She marvelled at her own generosity and progressiveness. Once, in the college hostel, the adivasi student turned off the water faucet seeing her classmate’s bucket overflowing. Her classmate overturned the bucket filled with water since it had been “defiled”. The mother of her roommate in the accommodation where she had once lived, nonchalantly addressed her as simply the “Santhal girl”. Obviously, Santhals are not entitled to possess an identity of their own. When she applied for her passport, the same roommate asked with profound amazement – “Even you are going abroad?”

Her appointment as an assistant professor in a university came with the disclosure from the head of her department that the students did not wish to be taught grammar and theoretical papers by her. Oh yes, these subjects are the ancestral professional preserves of the educated elites of our society.

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Like Rohith Vemula, I too have been struck by an “accident of birth” in that I was born to a Santhal family. My mother, a Hindu Bengali woman fell in love with her adivasi batchmate in university and married him. Neither the adivasi community nor Bengali Hindu society was willing to socially recognise the marriage. We were excommunicated. So, in my forlorn childhood, the feeling of insecurity was my sole companion. This was compounded by my existential crisis. I was made to understand early in my childhood that I was only a “marginal Other”. The Hindu Bengali Bhadrakok society neither granted me the right nor the permission to live as “a human being”, as an unmarked individual.

It is believed that identity-based mobilisation prepares the ground for divisive politics, but the very prejudice that predisposes the Bhadrakok to somehow tie me down to an essentialist paternal ethnicity fixes me up as an irreversible “Other” in societal perception.

Even as a child I would often be made to face my utterly marginal location, as if I was an exhibit in a museum of strange objects. This second-generation school-goer was made to stand up by the class teacher in the second standard and asked if she belonged to the “ST” category. I was struck dumb. My parents had never informed me that I was the holder and bearer of those two letters and what those stood for. An alert student otherwise, who promptly answered all questions, my silence on that occasion raised the eyebrows of my class teacher. I could not comprehend whether she was surprised or irritated, but I did realise that I was something that my classmates certainly were not. I was somehow fundamentally different from others.

Those two letters came back to haunt me again when I was in the eighth standard. There was turmoil at home on the issue of obtaining a “ST” certificate and getting photographed for it. My mother argued that since I was a good student, I need not apply for that certificate. But my father believed that it was a formal recognition of my ethnic identity, and therefore a highly desirable and affirmative exercise. It was after all an official recognition of my very existence as an adivasi. The disagreement ended and I became an officially certified member of the Scheduled Tribe community.

Thanks to my father Gurucharan Murmu’s service in government, we were a comfortable middle-class family. He could buy me quality education that ensured sufficient academic competence in my early years. This secured me a seat as an Honours graduate student of History in the most eminent undergraduate college in Kolkata of those times. But in this case, my lack of cultural capital needed to be taken into cognisance.

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Even after three years in that premier college, I had not heard of the world-famous social sciences university in Delhi, where I eventually went for my post-graduation. A classmate had perchance purchased two forms for the entrance test and passed on the spare one to me. I applied and I was selected.

I was later hurt when I came to know that my “ST” identity was the only benchmark for my friend and her family. I woke up to this reality when the father of this Brahmin batchmate called my mother, enquiring if she would be interested in a groom for me. The Scheduled Caste groom had made it to the hallowed Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and was therefore eminently eligible but was not good enough for the proud Brahmin family. Even the most prestigious government job in the country was not going to make him suitable enough for an upper caste match. Just like the spare admission form, the groom too was in excess.

Intriguingly enough, even at that famed bastion of progressive politics and pedagogy in Delhi where I did my post-graduation, my birth and ethnicity appeared as a negative influence and I was made to understand that I did not belong to the mainstream.

My formal training in vocal music for over a decade and a half prompted me to carry on research in the social history of the origin and development of the Bishnupur school of classical music in the second half of 18th century Bengal. But the chairperson of the centre asked: “Being a tribal you want to work on high culture? You are not even an insider.” Forever an outsider to classical high culture, it was as though my adivasi origin had permanently limited the range of what I was allowed to research. I then took up my research on the marginalised Other in “Renaissance” Bengal, the *Bhadramahila* writers or genteel women.

Subsequently, I returned to West Bengal to work. I had applied for a “general post” of a lecturer in a university in a district town not too far from Kolkata. All my life, I was made to hear that reserved category candidates were inferior in intellectual calibre, and that recruiting them always pushed the standards of academic excellence below the acceptable level. By that logic, my selection to the general post which had met the meritorious standards that they themselves had set, ought to have made the upper caste Bhadraklok happy. What did happen was the exact opposite. A Brahmin candidate had come second in the merit list. A Brahmin professor from the university where the candidate who came second reportedly said: “Maroona Murmu in a reserved post is fine, but Maroona Murmu in an open post is unacceptable”.

For the record, that outraged professor never taught me, nor heard me in any seminar, nor had the opportunity to test my calibre as a student or scholar. Thus, there remained only one factor that predisposed him to dismiss my worth, my adivasi surname Murmu. His outburst was, however, not limited to that particular episode. He turned down several requests to visit the university as an external expert while I was there and merrily resumed those visits as soon as I moved to the university where I now teach.

For several upper caste department heads in this university in Kolkata, the very idea of a competent Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe student appeared an impossibility.

The university where I now teach is well known as a nursery of protests and as a bastion of progressive politics. Yet, here too I have seen several instances of everyday casteism. Derogatory phrases like “*sonar chand*” or “*sonar tukro*” punning with the abbreviations of Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes, with the metaphorical connotation conveying “privileged ones” would be casually tossed around in departmental meetings. For several upper caste department heads in this university in Kolkata, the very idea of a competent Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe student appeared an impossibility. The mere mention of some surnames would be enough for them to deduce that those candidates were academically worthless.

I was once told that some students felt that they did not have much to learn from my classes, because I looked like an “African”. While taking a class on Modern Indian Political Thought, I even heard my female students admit that they would never marry a man who belonged to the “lower caste” or “Muslim community”. This is frightening as many of these students are now teachers in schools and will successfully carry forward the dreadful traditions of casteism and communalism. I have heard that many among them still believe that there should be separate cremation grounds for dalits and adivasis. It seems even in death, “impure” lower caste people do not lose their ability to pollute the upper castes.

The more genteel Bhadraklok society displays casteism through cultural aggression. A colleague once told me that I did not look like a typical Santhal. On being asked how a typical Santhal should look, the colleague offered a description that more or less matched with how Satyajit Ray had portrayed Duli the Santhal woman in his film *Aranyer Dinraatri*. Ray, a filmmaker who had otherwise acquired a worldwide reputation for his meticulous attention to detail, did not hesitate to transform a fair skinned Simi Garewal, with her pointed nose and large eyes, into a Santhal woman with a dab of soot on her body. The Santhals continue to bear the literary or cinematic burden of such cultural stereotypes.

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The approval of adivasi women professionals is hard to come by. Adivasi government bureaucrats have complained that however efficient they are in discharging their responsibilities, their superior officers, who invariably come from the upper castes, never consider them trustworthy enough. This pervasive air of suspicion and lack of confidence in their ability trickles down to the subordinates too. Their entire professional career appears like an ordeal by fire, in that they have to prove their worth every single day in office. Women adivasis professionals refer to a caste-based glass ceiling that halts their professional career, an invisible barrier against upward mobility that is unrelated to their actual performance.

Thus, in West Bengal, the intensity of symbolic violence is more powerful than physical violence. Soon after adivasis enter academic and professional spaces, the process of social exclusion begins so that the “discriminated” never assert their equal status. Due to “discriminatory inclusion”, the adivasis are made to understand that these particular spheres do not “belong” to them and they are an “inefficient” lot.

The magnitude of symbolic violence is so powerful that it curbs the very will for assertion and resistance. Domination by the upper castes is internalised to the extent that discrimination gets naturalised. Adivasis start believing that there is no scope of mobility for them. Gradually, contemptuous caste abuse, domination and discrimination are accepted as unchangeable and a deserving destiny. This also leads to the “voluntary elimination” from the space that they have got into.

An adivasi schoolteacher with over 25 years of experience related to me how mockery and taunts at his academic worth ever since his boyhood had impressed upon him a permanent sense of inferiority and diffidence.

|| Everyday discrimination of the community is so deeply rooted in the popular psyche that an adivasi professional cannot even start imagining its erasure as a possibility.

Since the schoolteacher was inevitably asked to clean his own utensils after dining at the houses of Hindu Bengali classmates, he gave up making friends with them. He continues to suffer regular slights by colleagues at office, presumably because he has been a beneficiary of the reservation policy. The contempt for the “lower caste” is conspicuously visible in the staff room. Brahmin colleagues still take great care to ensure that they never sit next to him during lunch for fear of food being defiled. His resilience comes from the socialisation that adivasis are “two-legged tolerant beings born to endure”. A lifetime of discriminatory behaviour has robbed him of the very thought of protest and resistance.

Everyday discrimination of the community is so deeply rooted in the popular psyche that an adivasi professional cannot even start imagining its erasure as a possibility.

Statistics bear out the fact that the higher education sector in West Bengal is particularly beset by caste-based discrimination. Too many positions reserved for the adivasis have been conveniently left vacant on the pretext that “no candidate is found suitable”. The trouble is these candidates can never become sufficiently suitable by the yardsticks of the Bhadraklok. There were 49,217 college or university professors in West Bengal, according to a report published in the *The Telegraph* on 1 February 2016. Out of those, only 3,037 (6.16%) belonged to the Scheduled Castes and 451 (0.91%) to the Scheduled Tribes.

Before I conclude, as an adivasi is perpetually shamed for enjoying the “privilege” of affirmative action, let me make some general observations about the policy of reservations. I often hear complaints that the reservation policy discriminates against upper caste candidates from poor economic backgrounds. Those who advocate reservations exclusively on the basis of economic or financial deprivation must understand that the logic of positive discrimination on the basis of caste that prevails in India is based on a constitutional guarantee.

While reservation is clearly not sufficient to abolish caste discrimination altogether, it is a necessary tool of empowerment for the adivasi communities. It was designed out of a commitment to bring social justice to communities subject to institutionalised oppression and discrimination over thousands of years. It is part of an initiative to restore to them at least part of the honour and dignity that is constitutionally their due. Reservation, we must understand, was not conceived as a policy instrument with which to remove economic disparity. It cannot be emphasised enough that reservations are always in direct proportion to the percentage of the Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the overall population. So, almost half of all government jobs or seats in educational institutions are practically reserved for general castes. Strangely enough, no question is ever raised against this unwritten rule.

Questions about reservation based on merit must wait, I suppose, until such times when upper caste candidates start topping various entrance tests without any help from expensive coaching institutes or when all aspirants have equal access to and can purchase “merit” from such expensive training schools. Let me make a submission to the advocates of meritocracy. Once sufficiently advanced training facilities and a healthy social environment are made available to the “backward” candidates, they will not take long to rise to “merit”.

Frankly, nothing short of a revolution in collective thinking is ever going to be effective enough to revise this history of social injustice or institutionalised discrimination against the adivasis, not even hundreds of years of constitutionally mandated reservations.

Contemporary India displays two contrary trends at the same time. More and more of upper caste Indian industrialists ride the global waves of the neoliberal economy and enter the exclusive club of the richest in the world. On the other hand, the indigenous population of the country, who traditionally made a living in the hills and forests, are increasingly displaced from their habitat and are deprived of their right to *jal*, *jangal* and *zameen* (water, forests and land).

If development must come at the expense of half of the population of a country, it cannot in all honesty deserve that name. It is never too late to ask some honest questions. Is it entirely impossible to think rationally and pull down the mental “reservation”, as it were, of the polarisation between the high born and low born, or between the “touchables” and the “untouchables”?

Frankly, nothing short of a revolution in collective thinking is ever going to be effective enough to revise this history of social injustice or institutionalised discrimination against the adivasis, not even hundreds of years of constitutionally mandated reservations. After all, it is a matter of fact that many among them have, for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, quietly learned to live with institutionalised injustice. It is true too that many upper caste individuals these days display a good deal of generosity and work for the restoration of the honour and dignity due to these groups. But that does not yet make for a just society.

My protest must continue until such a moment has dawned.

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