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Writers, Literatures, and Lessons from the Margins

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Conversations between writers across India reveal similar processes of marginalisation spanning multiple communities. These insights offer ways for mutually empathetic relationships between people of the periphery and the mainland.

As I was leaving Shimla on 18 June after attending Unmesha, the International Literature Festival organised by the Ministry of Culture and Sahitya Akademi, my friend, the writer and activist Chaitanya Pingali, was visibly upset. Like so many places across the country, her home state, Telangana, was burning. Protests against the Agnipath scheme of the government had turned violent and some of her friends were injured or arrested. “But you in the North East already know what it is like,” she said.

And I realised that we did indeed. We in the North East knew what it was like to be marginalised, brutalised, and made to live ad hoc lives. We have known it since the North East became a part of the Indian Union. Marginalised constituencies on the mainland could learn from our long history of conflictual association with the Indian state. It is especially crucial now because, across the country, conversations about existing processes of 'otherisation' and lack of representation are breaking through despite efforts to suppress them. And this, at a time when policies that promote hypermasculinised violences — both direct and systemic — that act as tools of such suppression are introduced, used, and abused.

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The Agnipath scheme, for instance, reminded me of the state arming civilians to fight insurgents in Assam and Manipur. Special police officers were recruited and trained to use weapons to fight insurgents locally. They were left armed, mostly unsupervised, free to use violence against insurgents — actual or suspected — thus licensing them to engage in violence unrelated to insurgency as well. They had no job security, and promises of eventual absorption into the state police forces were never kept. They remained armed men, trained to do violence but not experienced enough to use that training in civilian jobs. As a result, there was rampant criminalisation and a legitimisation of violence in society. Security experts and sociologists have already predicted a similar scenario all over the country when the four-year-term of the Agniveers is over and they return into society with no job security or employable skills.

But more than anything, we in the North East also know what it is like for peaceful demands by marginalised peoples — like the Mizos affected by famine in the 1960s or today’s helpless youth seeking secure jobs in India’s defence forces — to fall on deaf ears. After decades of political violence to demand our legitimate rights and human dignity as equal citizens of the Indian Union, we have come to realise the futility of armed resistance against the powerful Indian state. The barbarism with which the armed political movements were crushed in the periphery is part of our historical records.

It is recent history, but one that is being rapidly forgotten amidst a proliferation of benignly paternal gestures of conciliation and appeasement: like the prime minister’s reference to the eight North East states as the Ashta Lakshmi and the entire region as India’s auspicious *Ishan Kon* that needs to be "taken care of."A collective amnesia about the conflict years is being facilitated within the periphery by such feminisation and infantilisation.

Not only is the barbarism of the State forgotten, but people are also habituated to the different kinds of interconnected violences — collective and interpersonal, public and intimate — that such barbarism inspired and aggravated (Goswami, forthcoming 2023). A critical understanding of these interconnected violences and the processes which legitimised them is important not just for the people of the North East to emerge from conflict-habituation, but also for the marginalised constituencies of the mainland.

This is particularly urgent now in view of the rapidly changing nature of the Indian State which no longer reserves its hypermasculinist approach to dealing with the North East (or Kashmir) but is extending it to the marginal spaces and pockets of resistance within the mainland as well. The mainland’s marginalised entities need to heed the experiences of the periphery’s marginalised inhabitants because these experiences hold lessons for them. By critically reflecting on these lessons, the people of the periphery and the mainland can move towards less conflictual, mutually empathetic relationships.

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My friend Chaitanya's words drove this conviction home to me again. I also realised why, like me, so many of my fellow writers had walked out of the inaugural session, discomfited. We were writers from all the states of the Indian Union representing its many languages. The Sahitya Akademi works with writers of 24 languages, besides several others that do not yet have official recognition. But one of the guests of honour, a religious guru and scholar, began by saying, "Since this is the Sahitya Akademi, I will speak in Hindi." All of us who walked out felt equally marginalised, otherised, and alienated; something we, the people of the North East, have felt throughout our post-Independence association with the mainland.

The most dynamic session of that first day of the literature festival, held later the same day on the same stage as the inaugural session, was on the challenges confronting LGBTQ+ writers. One of the speakers referred to the Constitution of India and the rights it guarantees equally to *We, the People of India*. "Which is why I can speak to you from this platform today," she said. Marginalised, persecuted, and unrepresented until about five years ago when the Sahitya Akademi started creating spaces for LGBTQ+ writers in its Festival of Letters, the writers at Shimla spoke vocally, emotionally, conveying the burden of centuries of repression. This is how we writers from the North East also feel when we are allowed representation on the 'national' stage. We have so much to say, so many emotions to relive, so much angst to relieve.

In another powerful session, a Dalit Christian writer spoke out about the 'institutional murder' of Rohith Vemula. That critiques and voices of dissent were raised and heard during a state-sponsored festival attests to the unique power that writers and literatures possess to resist the forces that marginalise, otherise, brutalise, and silence.

I used to dismiss literary festivals as jamborees or tamashas. Being at Unmesha changed my mind. Conversing on the sidelines with writers representing multiple communities across India, I realised how similar processes of marginalisation were at work between many groups at multiple levels. While Sindhi writers felt constrained to speak amongst themselves in the dominant language in the presence of a Gujarati or Hindi speaker, I was left wishing I knew Karbi or Bodo rather than have the writers from those communities of Assam speak in Assamese in my presence.

These experiences shared during such meets bind writers together and universalise the experiences that inform their writing. Meanwhile, 'national' institutions like the Sahitya Akademi continue to yield to the writers, artists, thinkers, doers, and makers (whom they recognise, nurture, and accommodate) a space to challenge and advance their definitions of the state and the 'nation'.

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