This article was written some years back, and was presented as a paper in a seminar at the IGNCA, New Delhi. A lot more information has come up since, and a number of literary works, too, have been published. However, the point that it wants to stress, that of interdisciplinary understanding, still stands valid, especially with respect to the Denotified & Nomadic Communities.

Notes towards Notification and the Expression of Negation

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In this Seminar we have a session on ‘the Nomadic tribes and Imagination,’ and the concept note mentions the Criminal Tribes declared by the British Government. This means that an interest is arising towards understanding the imaginative aspects of the nomadic communities in India, a portion of whom were legislated as criminals by the colonial rule through a ‘notification’, and later ‘de-notified’ by the Government of independent India. And indeed, a body of literature is coming out as representative of these communities’ creative expression and we have to have a closer look at it as well as the background from which this expression emerges. In this paper, I propose, firstly, to briefly introduce a few works from the little body of literature of the de-notified and nomadic communities that is available to us today, secondly, to discuss the predominant aspects of this expression, and thirdly, to trace its origin and explanation, with the references from some major literary documents, in the historical processes which may not be confined to the colonial legislations but go centuries backward into the native history.

In the eighties, the Marathi literature saw an autobiography titled UPARA (Granthali, 1980) by Laxman Mane who hailed from the Kaikadi community – an itinerant community of basket weavers. This can be said to be the first piece of conscious literature from a person of a DNT. It traces the life full of strife of the boy who is the first one ever to go to a school in his community, his maturing into a politically aware social worker and his inter-caste marriage that evokes a lot of uproar and agony for both the communities. However, it doesn’t carry a specific DNT identity with it; under the influence of the Dalit literature of the day and also classified as a prominent work among that, it centres upon the agony of caste system and the horrible paradoxes therein. The autobiography ends on the note of despair: “the very caste brand that I had been trying to wipe off had now become even more deep and permanent!”

Immediately afterwards, in the nineties Laxman Gaikwad of the Pardhi or Bhamta community came out with Uchalya (Shrividya 1987), which won the immediate attention of readers as also an award for its excellence by the Sahitya Akademi. This autobiography changes the tone of narration from that of terrorised agony to one of a more matter-of-fact and even bitterly playful description of the professional and societal details within the community. Its playful description of the procedures and processes of thieving shows a questioning attitude toward the very value-system that the society takes for granted.

Both these autobiographies were received with quite a lot of interest and enthusiasm, as was the next important title, again an autobiography, this time by a writer who was the son of an itinerant dancer. Kolhatyache Por by Kishor Shantabai Kale was the life narrative of a child who spent the entire childhood as a rejected child whom the mother herself wouldn’t want to be with for the security of a settled life, one who struggles through the very early years as an unwanted existence everywhere and yet determined to sail through the negations and bitterness to become an independent entity one day.
I must say all these titles, and many others, too, were accepted by the Marathi readership quite enthusiastically, but the focus of this enthusiasm was the sway of Dalit movement literature at the time, if not simply a curiosity toward an entirely different, ragged and vulgar life-pattern. The agony of the protagonists was attributed to the caste system or the social system and not many attempts were undertaken for understanding the more specific background of this agony, which was quite different from the peculiar Dalit, or untouchable agony. It must be noted that the authors were also associating themselves with the Dalit strand of Marathi literature and did not exhibit a consciously specific DNT sensibility though there are occasional references to the category of De-notified and Nomadic Communities in the sections pertaining to the social work of the authors.

This conscious nomadism is spoken of in the autobiography of Atmaram Rathod of the Banjara community, titled Tanda, which was published after a social movement gathered strength under the initiative of the moment called “DNT-RAG” (Denotified Tribes Rights Action Group), and the communities’ identity and rights issues were taken up publicly. After this, there have come up a number of plays very consciously speaking out their DNT identity, this time mainly in Hindi though from the state of Gujarat, which are partly published. These short plays by a group of activists-actors from the Chhara de-notified community are extremely outspoken, though a bit crudely, about not only their agony but about their persecution by the law and the police as well as by the society at large, and are questioning the processes of jurisdiction and demanding rights with an outcry. They can clearly be termed as a protest movement literature.

These are a few samples from the major modern literary works by some of the members of the de-notified and nomadic communities that have been available to us, which give us a glimpse of their sensibility and their perception of the world. It can be noted that each one of these works has come from a different community, having different intra-community dynamics and different inter-community social exchanges. The Banjara Tanda does not cry out in the same pitch about the social atrocity as the Kaikadi Upara does, and Upara in turn does not exhibit the cleverly attitude to the jumble-trap that the world is as the Uchalya does. And the Chhara outcry against police atrocities is not so very much a part of the sensibility of Kisrya in Kolhatyache Por, which speaks more of the individual victimisation and dehumanisation in the particular community. As we can see, the works discussed are quite heterogeneous in their genre, in their exposure of human pain and agony, and in their attitude to that pain. Yet, what binds these works together is the experience of negation and the forced degradation of life that follows. The predominant sentiment in these works is that of forsakenness, of dejectedness, of having been denied rights! Even the high-pitched outcry in the Chhara plays against the atrocities and injustice carries a lining of the constantly hammering question – ‘Why are we thus simply dismissed by the society? Why are we not recognised and accepted as dignified human beings?’ And the individual experience of rejection in the autobiographies gets transformed into a larger hovering sense throughout the texts. Thus, it is not just the child Kisrya who finds himself unwanted unless being directly useful to his mother, his grandparents, his adopted father and so on, or it is not just Kisrya’s mother’s insecurity and trauma of being dejected even after being used for long; it is perhaps a collective conscious that speaks here in terms of individual experience. Similarly, in Tanda, the experience of being deceived and forsaken by Rati grows so much in proportion that it surfaces even at the most unexpected moments elsewhere in the life story.

One also notices in this sense an underlying demand for and a presumed right to social recognition and acceptance in the larger society. It would be worthwhile to compare this with the Adivasi sensibility, which shows an utter disconcern toward the mainstream socio-economic systems so long as their collective dignity in their own surrounding is intact. This absolute demand and urgent need for a social place felt in the DNT literature is perhaps
comparable to the Adivasi’s sense of a natural right to land and forest, which leads one to presume that these communities must have had at some time very close socio-economic relations with the remaining sections of the society at large which have now been denied to them, which is very hard for them to digest or accept.

I would like to propose that this sentiment of having been deceived, dejected, discarded is perhaps the central and predominant aspect of this entire body of literature, which gets clubbed together with the individual’s or the particular community’s agonising experience and hovers over the entire frame of the work as a universal theme whatever particular form and tone the author might have chosen for his expression. And thus it may perhaps even be said to form the collective unconscious that predominates the imaginative faculties of these communities.

It is also noteworthy that the traditional literature of these people shows a marked difference of attitude as compared to the modern writing. We have very little, almost no body of the traditional literature from these communities available to us apart from a yet unpublished work on the Banjara’s literature and society by Atmaram Rathod, which is supposed to be published under the title Gorwat (now published by the Sahitya Akademi, 2006) that I will use for the sake of reference here. The traditional songs of various kinds and sung at different occasions exhibit a recognisably relaxed tone. They speak of a very self-assured and autonomous community, which is proud in its profession and keeps no bounds in revelry and playfulness.

Thus, the feeling of disgrace and indignity that marks the consciousness of the entire modern writing of these communities shows perhaps a disjuncture in the sensibility, a very hard blow that breaks it into two radically different parts or phases. It would be worthwhile to make an effort to understand the processes that went into the formation and development of this fissure in the sensibility, by looking at the historical background of these people.

The most obvious historical event is, of course, the colonial legislations starting from the one in 1871 that declared in each colonial province in India certain communities as habitually or even born criminals and made extremely restrictive and disgraceful regulations for these communities, simultaneously providing the police departments with one-sided authorities and clear instructions to regulate and curb the communities by force. The detailed accounts of this entire process have been given by all the writing that has appeared on the issue of DNTs, such as Dr. Meena Radhakrishna’s Dishonoured By History, Dilip D’Souza’s Branded By Law, all the issues of the DNT-RAG newsletter Budhan, and the stray articles by DNT activists. Yet the entire discourse on the issue has been revolving round the notification and the de-notification, as if history started in 1871. D’Souza actually notes this fact in his book, “So significant a year is 1871 that DNT activists today will often tell you that a denotified tribal has two birthdates : his own and 1871. / But for all its undoubted effect through the subsequent century and more, the Criminal Tribes Act was a product of the climate and the attitudes that had prevailed for years before. Many of these communities had been seen as criminal for a long time. In some ways, the Act was just a formalisation of that view, those attitudes.” But, to understand the sense of being deceived and negated, I would like to go much beyond this immediate background into history, which would also explain the self-assured tone of the traditional literature that we have seen.

It has been a well-known fact that in India for centuries trade was carried out on backs of bullock-packs by communities who carried this task out as a profession. Other communities also were involved in this kind of trade on a smaller scale with the help of horses, ponies or donkeys though we do not get the names of such communities. The vast body of literature about the stone or rock-cut architecture in western India gives innumerable references of the trading, banking and donating activities that were related to the sociology of this architecture and sculpture. Dr. V.V. Mirashi in his Marathi book on the Satavahana
and Kshatrap period gives the lists of the kinds of Shrenis, or guilds of trades and entrepreneurs, which includes among other traders the stone-cutters, the sailors, the bamboo workers, etc. who were equally respectable traders as were the ones involved in grain or garments trade. At other places there are references of these traders, with no categorisation or gradation among them, having even sponsored some of these cave architectures. We find innumerable references of these traders’ regular interaction in not only economic but even socio-religious terms with the settlements or states. In fact these traders having trade relations into the interiors of the country as well as with far off countries were very much an integral part of the society as it was visualised in the times.

Not only these Sarthavaha or transporters and Shresthis or masters at the shrenis but even the groups of artisans who engineered these cave houses and who sculpted the enormous sculptures, which the Indian society seeks its pride in, have to be given a thought here. We know there were different shrenis of artisans from different parts of the country and from different schools of the art that contributed in the making of these wonders. I am grateful to Prof. Deepak Kannal of the sculpture and art history dept. of M.S. University of Baroda to enlighten me about the making of Ajanta and Ellora. According to him, these caves show a continuous line of the rock engineering activity by artisan communities from Telangana, Maharashtra and some other parts, which suddenly stops at a particular date, and the date collides with the beginning of the erection of the Aurangabad fort adjacent to these caves, the first one to be erected in this area. His argument is that the same groups of artisans must have been ordered to start the work at the fort the making of which exhibits similar skills. It is from this date on that the fort-building activity starts in the western Deccan, which is so famous for forts and other rock architecture. Does this account refer to the emergence of the Vaddar community that is spread in precisely these regions with different names? And then, wouldn’t this be an exposure to what extent the community was in demand and had respectable economic relations?

Also, the art that we take pride in, couldn’t its creation be traced to these communities that were lost in later times in indescribable misery? Even if history forgot to carry their changing nomenclatures to our times, who would these traders, engineers, sculptors, and also the itinerant mendicants singers and dancers depicted in the sculptures be? Though the names are lost, the people certainly have survived along with the skills they so elaborately practised.

Gorwat by Atmaram Rathod enlists several references in the traditional lore of the Banjaras toward their acquaintance with a large geographical span. It also gives references of the processes in the trading activity on which the book is actually titled. This speaks of the continuance of the relations between the transporting itinerant communities and the settled society from the Satavahana period to a few centuries back. Further, Atmaram enlists the peculiar names that the community has for the different regions on the trade route for their intra-community conversation. It enlists Karnataka, Telangana and Andhra, Varhad part of Maharashtra, Malwa, the Sabar ghati of Gujarat, Delhi and Lahore; and most startlingly, it refers to Pune and the region of the Peshwas as Gadi-Takhat – the throne. Very clearly this shows a regular, though perhaps contractual, trading commitment to the Peshwas; simultaneously, dates and places this linguistic evidence in the course of factual history. And it also gives the evidence of the continuous thread of contractual relations till the late Maratha period when they became more powerful even than “Dali-Lahor” for the ever roaming and therefore politically acutely aware Banjaras.

I will now turn to some well-known literary documents from this late Maratha period some of which have been included in the creative literature of Marathi due to their literary and linguistic merits. The Maratha Daftars – administrative orders and other documents – often refer to the prevalence of eighteen Karkhanas and twelve Mahals as separate
administrative departments and units. A number of these are pertaining to the community skills that we have been discussing so far. Who were the people with whom these department worked? A very important document throwing light upon several administrative systems, the Ajnapatra of Ramchanda Pandit Amatya, which dates in the year 1715, enlists among other things the precautions and the standing preparations at every fort. It refers to the constant maintenance required for the arms as well as guns and ammunition and insists that the staff for these tasks has to be attentive all the time. Who were these maintenance people, experts in arms and ammunition works?

One comes across innumerable references in historical and history-based literatures and other arts like paintings, towards the communities specifically employed for certain risky tasks or tasks requiring specific expertise, towards the communities who moved along with the militaries for the upkeep of horses, carts and arms, for the treatment and various entertainment of the soldiers as well as of their masters and commanders, and of course for the supplies of rations and all other requirements. These accompanying communities were a common feature of almost all the militaries of the time and were recognised as a non-party presence by the combating armies. In Gorwat, Atmaram Rathod, too, refers to this phenomenon - the Banjaras camping right in the midst of the Maratha and the Mughal armies, untouched by both. One comes across so many references to Ramoshis, Gosais, Siddis, Naiks, Nats, Vaghya-Murlis, Bhtags, Pindaris and Lamans as well as several accessory professions and jobs in the literatures pertaining to these times.

However, because of this acceptance at the enemy’s camp, quite often members of such communities were also utilised for spying, treachery and sabotage. Moreover, there was also the system of having temporarily hired armies, and gangs of militant communities were employed by different rulers in addition to their regular standing armies. Even when the regular armies were paid salaries or provided other fixed income sources, the gangs temporarily hired were given the permission, or even command to plunder and loot the regions raided, to get their wages, or rewards, for their work.

The intention of speaking about all these details is to stress that the seemingly itinerant communities were regularly employed or contracted with for the benefit of the settlements and even more of the armies that were almost equally itinerant in these times of political turmoil. As they were needed at every stage their presence was welcome, however, they must have never been seen as a part and parcel of either the settlements or of the militaries. For the settled villagers they were people who were to render their temporary services or finish their contractual exchanges and go away; for a period they were welcome, but their permanent company or neighbourhood seen as an unnecessary, unwanted suspicious presence that should be denied or at least restricted. For the militaries these were people who had attached themselves with the bands of soldiers but the military had no responsibility towards them. Moreover, they were suspicious because they also rendered similar services for the adversaries.

This increasing disconcern, suspicion and intolerance towards these communities even as the militaries depended so largely upon them can be seen in the term the Bakhar literature – the body of literary documentation of historical events – uses to denote such professionals attached to the army. They are termed as Bajar Bunage and the Bakhar of Panipat describes the vast paraphernalia of such Bajar Bunage that travelled with the huge armies of the Maratha confederation. The Panipat war III took place in 1761, where the Marathas had to face a decisive defeat and the Bakhar written after a few years describes the loss in the famous quote in Marathi literature: “Two pearls were lost, several muhars spent, and the khurda (change) that was dispersed had no count.” And yet, the Bunage could not make a part even of this ‘change’. In this war, once the leaders were killed, the army was so badly dispersed that even the commanders like Holkar and Gaikwad themselves had run
away with their bare minimum accompanying soldiers; what could happen to the simply attached ones? Where did they all go? In Bakhar literature itself, there are references to the Bunages and the Bhois (carrying palanquins) taking up arms in self-defence as well as for protection of their masters, especially the ladies and the injured ones.

The war of Panipat took place in 1761 and the last Indian state of the Peshwas fell to British hegemony in 1818. Percival Spear in the History of India gives a description of these times: “Thus the aftermath of Panipat left India like a swirling sea at high tide, angry and tumultuous but divided and lacking direction.”

The tumultuous political situation and the never-ending warfare must have left the communities dependent on the military hook-up with no particular or fixed master or lord to work for; they must have had to disperse on all sides to earn scattered wages and fend for themselves using their skills and professions. And these ‘foreign’ professionals wandering in large numbers in already prevailing turmoil must have added to the suspicions held towards them by the local people. It is noteworthy that the political rulers and lords, while submitting to the British, took enough care to get their own incomes or pensions secured. The regular subsidiaries and servants might have been absorbed or compensated in some manner by the new rule. But the merely ‘attached’ ones were simply forgotten and forsaken. When their bands were persecuted by the new rulers or the alienated society, the lords for whom they had been working for long years simply discarded them as trash, to survive, if at all, at the mercy of the local communities and the colonial police, which was not a very familiar concept in India.

The frustration, desperation and anger toward the whole situation did result in conflict and was duly suppressed by the British using force. Once again, their traditional lords sought only their own safety and sometimes even encouraged this persecution of the communities that were once useful to them. But now there were no wars and these were not people useful in civil administration.

It can be seen that the settled upper class had already got tired of the prevailing anarchy and continuous warfare joined with plunder and slaughter; at the same time it was already allured to the western knowledge and administration which provided a new dimension towards prosperous life along with peace. Thus, right in the late 18th century, the first Marathi essaywriter ……Deshmukh alias Lokahitawadi was praising the new rule that was God-sent to our land only for the Kalyan of our people; that in Saheb’s rule one could just tie his gold openly to a stick and move from Kashi to Rameshwar without fear.

All these attitudes together created, to use Dilip D’Souza’s term, ‘A Climate For An Act.’ The once useful, why, necessarily required communities were by now already criminalized after being turned into a rejected trash and discarded by the society as well as by the lords and masters. Deceived and forsaken, and left to themselves and looked at as an unwanted burden to get rid of, “criminal tribes were convenient targets, scapegoats. What could be more satisfying to a populace searching for security than to be told that the police were acting firmly against groups that everyone knew, that a consensus proclaimed, were criminal? More powerful and vocal social groups could not easily be treated the same way.”

It is notable that the Criminal Tribes Act was first enforced in the Northwest Province where the decisive war of Panipat had taken place and it had never been known where the people had disintegrated. In other provinces the Act came in turn, and was even opposed by the Police and administration of the Madras Presidency, as Meena Radhakrishna puts it, “the Madras administration recognised the usefulness of the trading communities. They were practically the only means of trade within the interior, given the conditions of the roads at the time.” Yet, what this implied was that the ones not useful any more were good only to be “disposed of”!
I suppose that this whole account of the centuries old interdependent relationship between the itinerant communities and the settled society and its rulers, and the rather sudden reversal of it into that of dejection, deceit, suspicion, harassment and persecution, may provide an insight into the imaginative world of today’s DNTs. The earlier accounts of the notification of these people that I have mentioned here certainly explain the agony and pain that one witnesses in these works. I have tried to trace through the literary works and documents the origin of the disjuncture that I found troublesome between this new literature and the fascinating traditional expression showing continuity from the sculptures on the western ghat up to the mischievously playful poetry of the Banjaras. And I suppose that more explorations into their ancient and medieval history, as well as more exposures of their traditional literature and the Arts will lead us to a better understanding of their conscious as well as of their contribution to the world of art.

References

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