

Caste Spaces in Pakistan

Subjects: Anthropology

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This study is an attempt to understand the appropriation of spaces of Dalits by Sindhi progressive activists and short story writers in Pakistan as they construct or rather undermine caste at the anvil of religion and gender to reframe their own religio-political agenda premised on political Sufism or Sufi nationalism. I specifically discuss the narratives emergent of the three popular short stories that are reframed as having exceptional emancipatory potential for the Dalits. Assessing the emancipatory limits of Sindhi progressive narrative, I argue while that the short stories purport to give fuller expression to religious, gender-based and class dimension of the problematic, it elides the problem of casteism and the subsequent existential demand of Dalit emancipation. Given the hegemonic influence of local Ashrafia class, the internal caste frictions are glossed over through political Sufism or Sindhi nationalism. This gloss of politicised Sufism hampers Dalit agency and rather facilitates the appropriation of Dalit spaces by Ashrafia class. This leads to conclude that the seemingly progressive literary-political narratives framed in religio-political idiom may offer to the oppressed not more than a token sympathy, compassion, self-pity and false pride in legends. Instead, they allow the appropriation of spaces and events of the oppressed, and the objectification of oppressed bodies by the oppressor.

Keywords: Casteism ; Ashrafia-Savarna ; Patriarchy ; Sindh ; Pakistan ; Short sotries ; Everday Politics ; Progressive Literature

1. Introduction

Sindhi (1) society and its rural culture is predominantly Sammat (*sammāt*) in its values. Sammat is the group of castes that share local political economy with Baloch castes (see Hussain, 2019a; Hussain, 2019b). At the periphery of this Sammat-Baloch nexus (mostly Muslims) live Dalit (2) communities (mostly Hindus in culture if not in religion). The construction and appropriation of local semi-historical narratives is one of the ways this discriminatory structural imbalance is regulated by Sammat, Baloch and Sayed elite. This Muslim caste elite is generically referred to as Ashrafia (*ashrāfiyyā*) (3), and in case of 'upper caste' Hindus as Savarnas. In Sindh, the province of Pakistan, the Ashrafia elite frames and presents its narrative through Sindhi (4), the dominant language of the province (5). The supposedly progressive section of Ashrafia elite frames its ideology in Sufi-nationalist idiom that I call political Sufism, ideology that asserts Hindu-Muslim harmony without necessarily confronting the issue of casteism and Dalit exclusion (see Hussain, 2019a; Hussain, 2019b). Inspired by the international modern progressive movement in politics and literature during the 1950s and 1960s, the Ashrafia (also Sindhi Savarna) writers identified themselves as 'Taraqqi-Passand' (progressives) (see Malkani, 1993; Hussain, 1997; Memon, 2002; Siraj, 2009; Paleejo, 2012; Paleejo, 2016; Chandio, 2016). 'Progressiveness' is explained by Dr. Ghafoor Memon, a Sindhi literary critic, as 'an attitude, perspective and the movement that has been there in every era' Memon, 2002, p.279). He explains it by giving example progressive rational movements that emerged against fanaticism, religiosity in Europe during Greek period, and against feudalism during the 18th and 20th century in France and Russia respectively (Memon, 2002, p.279). Irrespective of seemingly egalitarian modernist impulses, the postcolonial religio-political terrain seems to have led the progressives to produce the literature that undermines the Dalit question and the by the religiously sanctified hegemony of Ashrafia-Savarna classes.

2. Fieldwork in 2016

It gradually became evident to me during my fieldwork in 2016 in lower Sindh that Dalit issues were greatly influenced and impressed by the popular literature produced by that progressive class. It convinced me not only the level of 'hegemonic' (see Gramsci, 1971; Hussain, 2019b) influence of Ashrafia (6) -Savarna class over Dalits, but also the epistemic freedom of the Ashrafia class to construct the narrative of their choice to relativise Dalit subordination and influence the Dalit's self-perception. For instance, I observed that when the 'Dalit' question was invoked using the 'Dalit' and the 'Scheduled Castes' identity markers by the Dalit activists, the Sindhi nationalists and most of the contemporary Sindhi progressive writers and their followers attempted to reject Dalit activists' re-identification and their claims. They discouraged the Dalit activists from problematizing Dalit exclusion beyond a certain threshold.

This neglect or rather the denial of casteism and Dalit exclusion was primarily legitimized through Political Sufism based on Hindu-Muslim harmony as against the two-nation theory of Pakistan based on Hindu-Muslim binaries (see Hussain, 2019a; Hussain, 2019b). Consequently, the progressives did not consider casteism as the major problem, and did not make Dalit exclusion the subject of political debate or critical enquiry. Notwithstanding that, the progressives did indulge in Dalit spaces on occasion and particularly when Dalit agency compelled them. In this article, I contend that this occasional intervention into Dalit spaces by the progressives has been counter-productive for Dalits as it hampers Dalit agency and rather appropriates it. One of the potent ways to counter or legitimize narratives and thus dissipate dissonance is to use literary medium, such as short stories to render the narrative accessible to the common people. I specifically critique the casteist aspects of the progressive literary-political terrain as it manifests from the presentation of short stories in everyday politics by the progressives, by the Ashrafia elite and by Dalits to create space for the Dalit. Despite occasional anti-caste and anti-patriarchal narration in a few short stories, the progressives primarily frame these issues in a manner that makes them correspond with their agenda of 'political Sufism' and facilitate the appropriation of the spaces and histories of Dalits. I interrogate this appropriation of Dalit spaces and Dalit identities as it is reflected in those Short stories considered as having emancipatory potential for the Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular. To that end, I discuss three Sindhi short stories as the typical cases of the narrativisation by the progressives', who construct and publicize and represent the intersectionality of caste, gender, religion and nation.

Assessing the emancipatory limits of Sindhi progressive narrative, I argue while that the short stories purport to give fuller expression to religious, gender-based and class dimension of the problematic, it elides the problem of casteism and the subsequent existential demand of Dalit emancipation. Given the hegemonic influence of local Ashrafia class, the internal caste frictions are glossed over through political Sufism or Sindhi nationalism. This gloss of politicised Sufism hampers Dalit agency and rather facilitates the appropriation of Dalit spaces by Ashrafia class. This leads to conclude that the seemingly progressive literary-political narratives framed in religio-political idiom may offer to the oppressed not more than a token sympathy, compassion, self-pity and false pride in legends. Instead, they allow the appropriation of spaces and events of the oppressed, and the objectification of oppressed bodies by the oppressor.^{[1][2]}

3. Some Tips

(1) Sindh is a province of Pakistan having about 47.89 million population (Source: Bureau of Census Pakistan), and is located at 25.8943° N, 68.5247° E coordinates on the world map.

(2) Also locally known as 'Darawar' (*darāwar*) and Scheduled Castes, there live estimated 2-6 million Dalits. Kolhi, Bheel, Meghwar are three major Dalit castes that live in Sindh (see Hussain, 2019).

(3) Ashrafia class (i.e. Sayeds or the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, and the castes claiming to be of Arab and Central Asian descent. (see Hussain, 2019; Ahmad, 2003; Kazuo, 2004; Buehler, 2012).

(4) The bulk of the Sindhi literature is published in the form of books, magazines, newspapers. To have an idea of the literature being produced in Sindhi language, see the following online libraries and Publishing houses:

Sindhi Salamat.URL: <https://books.sindhssalamat.com/>. (accessed on June 6, 2019)

Sindhi Adabi Borad. URL: <http://www.sindhadabiboard.org/Index.html> (accessed June 6, 2019).

Sindhi Language Authority. URL: <http://www.library.sindhila.org/home>.(accessed on June 6, 2019).

Roshini Publications.URL: <https://www.roshnipublication.com/>

Sindhika Academy. URL: <http://www.sindhica.net/English.htm>. (accessed on June 6, 2019).

(5) Dalit worldview and their fundamental conceptions of self and society are essentially framed, for instance, in Gujarati or Parakari, Dhatki or Rajasathani and Marvari or Kacchi languages. Therefore, they cannot express their deepest emotions and experiences in Sindhi language which they have adopted as the medium of communication under the 'hegemonic' influence of Ashrafia-Savarna culture.

(6) Ashrafia class (i.e. Sayeds or the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, and the castes claiming to be of Arab and Central Asian descent. (see Hussain, 2019; Ahmad, 2003; Kazuo, 2004).

References

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