



Resistance Through Living: Reviewing “India Untouched” by Stalin K

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Abstract: The following paper comprises reviewing and analyzing the documentary “India Untouched” by Stalin K through a critical lens, with an emphasis on creating new meanings around the theme of resistance. I align myself here

with the critical school, rooted through psychoanalytic and cultural understandings. This documentary is a significant contribution towards our understanding of caste; to engage with it psychologically is an attempt to bring to the fore a nuanced interdisciplinary discussion on a relevant social issue which mainstream disciplines of prefer to keep at an arm’s length. To conduct my analysis, I primarily make use of writings by award winning author and psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, and critical Psychologist Ashis Nandy.

Keywords: Film Review, Caste, Untouchability, Resistance, Humiliation, Culture.

Locating “India Untouched”

The documentary “India Untouched” by Stalin K (2007) is a unique work on the caste system in India, set apart from other works in the same domain due to the lens chosen to depict the contents. This one hour and fifty minutes of a dive into different parts of the country (eight states), across 4 major religions (Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and Sikhism) can be seen as a collection of individual stories vastly different from each other, sharing a common ground of the lived experiences of being called a Dalit. Stalin, the director of the documentary, adds to the relevance of the work by letting these stories reach the audience without his commentary; leaving one to decide for themselves what they should do with their feeling of disbelief and discomfort seeing that caste is not ancient, but a prevalent system of oppression. Further, through the use of film instead of text, Stalin attempts to reach a wider audience that will analyze each account they see through their own life experiences, personal moments of humiliation, shame and rage.

Amid all possibilities, why resistance?

Through this review I look at this documentary with an aim of finding moments of resistance. This aim is a deliberate choice, and my effort to resist dominant frameworks that limit the experience of untouchability to helplessness. Through locating resistance in these accounts, I attempt to point towards the resistance each individual in this documentary is already demonstrating by the way they navigate their daily interactions.

As a viewer, and a reader of psychological literature I locate resistance in the act of speech, acknowledgment, personal rebellion and (un)conscious awareness of political power and its use. This view is not only created by analytical readings, but by positions of philosophers such as Derrida (2002) who located the primary attribute that differentiates living beings from non living beings as “the capacity to suffer.” Nandy (2009), goes further stating that the humiliation that haunts the Indian experience of caste is not merely a Dalit’s passive reception, or “social death” by being numbed to feeling anything towards a daily abuse, it is in fact a dynamic play of power; the Dalit holds within herself the capacity to invert the social structure by turning back and polluting those who center their lives on the fear of being polluted (elaborated later).

The Birth of Agency: Individual Stories and Analysis

The priest, placed strategically throughout the documentary serving as a reminder of the orthodox upper caste, towards the end voices his palpable fear of a situation where our feet might one day rebel against our heads due to the weight they bear, then what would we look like, with our feet on our heads? Here feet are taken to represent individuals belonging to castes regarded as untouchable, and the head refers to the

fearful Brahmin. And it is this image that we see in moments of resistance. The couple shown in the documentary highlight this, as a woman who calls herself as a double Dalit (oppressed by both gender and caste) takes Stalin to the garden to show him their green chili plant, which articulated their personal idiom by growing upwards, opening into the world, defying gravity (symbolic for the caste system). Here, in suffering, and in repeated humiliation a creative capacity for personal elaboration through objects (the plant) was born. Nandy (2009) speaks of creativity birthed in humiliation and suffering as a sign of self esteem. One needs self esteem to be humiliated, one needs ego strength to stand up to humiliation (in their own language).

Another moment of feet being placed on one's head takes place in Stalin's filming of a lower caste child who is asked to clean the toilet in a school as a price for education in addition to the fees; instead of grappling with the teacher only to face repeated humiliation, he simply and strongly refuses to go to school. This moment can be viewed as a failure of modern education and our faith in it (which it is) but also as a refusal of the strict occupational role which is expected. Nandy (2009) clarifies that the upper caste(s) do not humiliate the Dalits to annihilate them, but to make sure they survive to bear the brunt of their role as the servicemen of India. In this humiliation there is an implicit need for them to pick up human excretion, be ugly, be vile, and be scavengers. If a Dalit chooses to take up an alternate identity, the caste system forces him to do so only *in addition not instead of* his predetermined role. Furthermore Nandy (2012) elaborates that human filth and other such 'nasty' realities are dispelled from the conscious of the upper caste; they do not believe they can create a mess, and in this primary dissociation of a part of themselves (“the anti self”), the Dalits come to bear the responsibility to look after those who attempt to stamp out their life. Kakar (2007) in a detailed analysis of Indian fantasies around the caste system also says the upper caste

cannot imagine digesting their food, they can only imagine eating. Digestion implies generation of waste, and we project this “disgusting” phenomenon far outside ourselves, and onto the Dalit. He states this to be the primary reason most caste-based conduct centers around who can eat together, and who cleans after whom. In refusing to go to school, the child unknowingly shows the power to refute ingrained expectations, thus turning a part of the society (feet) on its head. Such moments were also echoed by the child in the documentary who refused to attend caste segregated midday meals. Moments of laughter by girls in the scenes that followed, who are asked to make tea, also register as resistance. In an attempt of the upper caste to humiliate, here, the Dalit is rebelling by not being humiliated. How much can such sadism survive, if it is not met by masochism on the other side? At this moment, humiliation ceases to exist.

Another instance of resistance towards the latter half of the documentary is the moment where Dalits are required to take up the role of piecing together and cleaning dead bodies through physical contact. Although they do not find a way out of this role, their response to it is of anger. ‘Why are *we* asked to do this, and then we smell, and they keep a distance from us? If we do not, who will do this?’ This rage takes capacity and awareness to register. A folk song used by the film captures this meaningful moment with the lyrics, “we clear your garbage, while you roam well groomed. For the crime of cleaning, you named me scavenger.” Another set of resounding lyrics are, “For every word we speak they keep us at a distance, is your blood boiling? Mine is boiling in anger.” Music here becomes a cradled creation of culture, sensitivity, stories and rage. Sudhir Kakar, a renowned fiction writer and psychoanalyst in most of his works mentions the Indian capacity to feel via storytelling, myth, folklore and music. Anger is preserved in folk songs, celebrated by Stalin in his recording, and curiously registered by the viewers of this film

who are left with these vivid tunes even when the words lie forgotten.

The songs Stalin showcases, pledging to Ambedkar and being enraged, demonstrates the ability to play and create which Winnicott (1971) deems a result of maturational development. Thus, the common belief that the Dalit is the lesser (intelligent) mortal is unfounded. Furthermore, the incapacity of priests and oblivious segments of the population to tolerate a questioning of their scripture and position (their reality) shows a rigidity that could in some frameworks be called a lack of maturation due to the absence of creativity and rhythm.

Other moments of shock in the documentary, such as mentioning that a Sikh got his skull cracked due to entering from an upper caste door, a woman being beaten up and her husband killed for not being able to keep her water stream separate, another woman swearing revenge on the upper caste man who raped her, a child finally drinking water from his Dalit friend’s house, Stalin and school children skillfully exposing their covertly casteist teacher, are moments of undeniable resistance that originate in pain, suffering and humiliation. Often involving a consequence of physical harm, these moments contest what social sciences view as an oppressed Dalit. The Dalit and the upper castes cannot be confined to categories of oppressor and oppressed, instead both have to be seen as active agents of a cultural and historic practice. Open to an eye willing to see, the Dalits here are drawing power from a pool of community strength to launch an attack, this pool consists of knowledge systems, language, gods, cuisine, legends and a unique being-in-the-world (Nandy, 2009). Illaiah (1996), also paints a vivid picture of this pool through his memories of experiencing a lifestyle that was clearly away from mainstream Indian education of Hindi and Hindu myths, taking us through the richness of languages, family systems and myths he grew up with. Dalits

are not the mere anti self of the Upper Castes but selves in them self. The girls who fill their buckets from the village well, are not only standing up to norms that marginalize them, but using the power of being called ‘polluting’, as if to say, “I have now used your well, watch as I unfold, and chase your purity down the drain from the pollution you vested in me.” It is this power that Nandy (2009) speaks of as the dynamism of humiliation, as it’s direction can be switched.

The Director’s Gaze: Crafting a film to reach the viewer

The last point I would like to make here is acknowledging Stalin’s documentary itself as resistance. The use of words like, “chamar,” “bhangi,” “dalit,” “parayas” etc are not discarded but showcased, not only to visiblise ill-treatment but (in my viewing) to (re)claim these words as an autobiography. Derrida (2002) speaks of naming something/someone as the first act of violence, because we limit their life by assuming them to be passive receivers (psychic deadness). In staking a claim to these words, the Dalit assumes the right to create new identifications with it. These descriptions will not surrender to the global discourse of forgetting oppression by forgetting a term lined with humiliation, instead it will be spoken again and again to remind the minority in power of the abuse they have dished out for centuries. It will ring loud against Manu, and hopefully will not in the near future fall prey to the acultural Modern education. Stalin in the last fifteen minutes of his work has also carefully lined narratives of resistance and anger with a cultural dance of force, and of female power through folk dance, that will perhaps serve as a reservoir of strength during resistance. The last person he interviewed, a female who is raped by the upper castes, but branded untouchable, houses a rage that escapes words and makes itself known in her restless movement as she speaks of revenge. She is perhaps a

representation of the somatic agitation Stalin tries to share with his viewers where we realize that words are too small and cannot hold the depth and complexity that one faces in such circumstances.

Looking Inward: Is Caste Really Outside of Us?

Stalin invites the viewer through a presentation of raw and real narratives that do not preach but simply exist. He only comes in through some questions, but we know of him through his choice of placement of narratives, picking of music, and his playfulness with his participants. As I said in the beginning, Stalin has perhaps seen each speaking participant as a moment of resistance in the act of speech itself. My own experience of watching this documentary encouraged a glance inwards to ask myself, “is there a violence you are unaware of that you are dispelling on to others?”, “are you othering individuals?”, “are you taking up their space to use their voice?” and “do you actively do enough to engage with the discourse of purity and pollution that is so visible around you in micro-aggressions?” I feel that these questions will leave me with new openings to view the cracked mirror of Modern education and my self-experience. As Nandy (2012) rightly points out, we should not engage with cultures different from ours to empower them (they do not need us for that) but to empower ourselves with awareness and sensitivity to encourage a dialogue that grants dignity to the other by acknowledging one’s self and one’s active role in society.

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