

Introduction

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In Rabindranath Tagore's *Chandalika* the young untouchable girl asks her mother in despair and anger, "Why did you bring me into this world, where I am subjected to ignominy all my life? What crime have I committed?" (transliteration ours). Untouchability is not the sole example of discrimination, nor is India the only society where people have historically been denied their due. Structures of society across the globe have perpetuated hierarchies of power and privileges, which undermine the kind of liberal humanism espoused by Tagore.

"Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought", said John Rawls in *Theory of Justice*. Yet, at every step in our lives we see this principle, which should ensure dignity and equity to everyone, being violated in the most blatant manner. And even in this age of information, we protest but sporadically, going back quickly to our individual illusions of the pursuit of happiness in a world which is connected more through technology, than through empathy.

This volume of *Colloquium*, the journal of the Arts section of the Bhawanipur Education Society College, is devoted to the theme of 'marginalisation and basic human values'. It comes at a time when images of hunger, oppression, racism and misogyny are rampant. In an age of unprecedented accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a few, not many of us are willing to question if our social and economic fabric rests on a shaky foundation which is endangered by the continuing existence of the poor, the dispossessed and the marginalised, who in the words of Tagore, will drag down the mighty even as they themselves are trod down. Marginalisation is the greatest failure of our social values. It implies the failure of the very first virtue of social organisation enunciated by Rawls. The arbitrary and unjust denial of basic human rights like self-esteem and the benefits of community to a segment of a population arise out of entrenched stigmas, prejudices, the arrogance of power, and plain and simple greed. To those oppressed, it denies the right to self-actualisation through self-enhancement, social mobility or pleasure. For the oppressors, it becomes their failure to transcend the self and realise human being's noblest ethical potential for benevolence and justice. By condemning some to lifelong ignominy, the powerful themselves become slaves -to hedonism, egotism and paranoid fear of those they regard as their 'other'. The cultural and psychological aspects of altruistic or transcendental motives as against aggressive egoistic attitudes have recently been the subject of systematic research on basic human values. But, down the ages, prophets like Buddha and Christ, political philosophers and men of letters have given the call to embrace our fellowmen for the ultimate good of humanity. In India, the concept of *Sadharana dharma* which was prevalent since ancient times emphasised the pre-eminence of the general good as

opposed to individual interest. Such values served to check the unbridled march of narrow self-interest and group identities. Paradoxically, the galloping pace of globalisation in our present times has not seen a proportionate rise in universalism. In fact, it has been fuelled more by exploitative, monopolistic practices accompanied by a corresponding rise in right wing politics which use 'identity' not to empower, but to exclude.

The Humanities departments of academia, themselves fighting many battles to resist marginalisation, have a moral duty to be the conscience-keepers of society. It is from this conviction that the articles in this volume have been chosen for their reflections upon how literature has narrated the various forces operative in our understanding of the self by interpreting the ways in which texts deal with the problem of bringing those on the margins to the centre-stage of the readers' consciousness. We begin with an article which shows how the categories of the centre and the margin, the self and the other, the body and the part, are themselves rendered elusive in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In Gargi Talapatra's reading of the tale, titled "Negotiating Differences: The Fabular Fabric in *Alice in Wonderland*", Alice's childlike curiosity which is unhindered by adult definitions of cultural affiliation, offers freedom from the regressive bonds of rigid identities which give rise to strife and tragedy in the modern world. The subversive possibilities inherent in destabilising identities and established orders give rise to pleasure in the story, but it may lead also to paranoia. This idea is discussed in the following article, "The Marginalised Memories of Westeros and the Liminality of the White Walkers", written by Debojyoti Dan. In this fantasy saga, which is yet unfinished, the White walkers are potentially the discarded forms of memories, whose very language is outside the hegemonic sphere of the Anthropocene. Created by the Children of the Forest, out of natural phenomena, they are meant to protect the forest resources from the civilizing project of Westeros. Their bid to claim the centre of power is thus a frightening prospect for the people of Westeros, resulting in the creation of the myth of uncanny beings. In the present essay the plot is discussed through the lens of Jungian psychology as well as Deconstructionist discourse. The next essay by Sonal Kapur, deals with the quest for a centre of gravity for the self, which is depicted in Gita Hariharan's writing. In "Between the Margins and the Centres: the Liminal Self in Gita Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories*", Kapur analyses how the desire to escape a circumscribed identity plays out among the characters inhabiting Hariharan's novel. Contrasting the Buddhist notion of the self as a process of becoming, with the current theoretical approaches to selfhood, Kapur demonstrates how liminality itself offers a chance of freedom to be something other than what society might expect one to be; the chance to inhabit an intersectional space, a hybrid identity.

In the next two essays, "Does 'Dalit' include the Mangs: Contextualising Limbale's *The Outcaste*", and "Marginalisation, Human Rights and Literature: Exploring Three Marathi Dalit Stories", the authors, Saloni Walia and Saikat Guha take up the depiction in Marathi literature, of the inhuman treatment meted out to India's 'outcastes' by caste society as well as Dalit groups themselves. What emerges from both these essays is the way in which any conception of the 'Dalit' as a homogenous group empathising among themselves is presumptuous. The same prejudices regarding 'unclean' occupations and food habits which lie at the heart of untouchability, is replicated by the marginalised communities themselves, creating further divisions in Indian society and politics. Movements like the Dalit Panther movement therefore,

represent the interests of only a small percentage of the socially oppressed and the fissures within themselves sometimes result in further deprivation, which even a stalwart like Ambedkar is not entirely able to understand. In fact, in Walia's essay the discussion centres on how the call for abolition of Watan Inam which Ambedkar perceived as perpetuating the bonded labour of the Dalits, actually impoverished the Mang community even further. The essay calls for a closer look at the sub-categories among the Dalits and the problems unique to each one. Guha contextualises the rise of Dalit activism by dealing with examples in Marathi literature which reflect the plight of those to whom society has denied the basic human rights.

The article by Rimjhim Bhattacharjee titled "A Mirror that shames (?): Mahasweta Devi's 'Daini'", complicates the categories of marginalisation even further through an analysis of Mahasweta Devi's story. Bhattacharjee shows how Somri, the 'daini' of the story, is victimised through the multiple disadvantages of low caste/tribal identity, gender and disability. Her history challenges the overarching narrative of the Indian nation state and exposes the limits of our ideas of a nation. Interestingly, Bhattacharjee concludes the essay by drawing our attention to the impossibility of narrating the histories of those like Somri through a discussion of contrasting urban interfaces presented in the story. If the clichéd western depictions of caste and poverty deal only in stereotypes, genuine hardworking scholarship dwelling on the subaltern experiences, also fails to actually enter into the subaltern space. The centre, represented by Sharan Mathur, the well-meaning scholar is finally seen to be a domain which runs parallel to the one in which the 'daini' lives. The most disturbing question in the context of this volume, regarding the breach between academic researches and effecting real change is uttered in this essay.

The volume ends with an essay which reminds us of the possibilities which may lie in re-discovering the idea of 'Sadharana Dharma', or the principle of transcending narrow self-interests for the good of society in general. In "Understanding Universal Dharma through the Mahabharata", Nitin Malhotra reminds us of the distinction between Dharma and religion, and how the stories in the epic represent 'Dharma' as the values by which one lives. These include empathy, charity, co-operation, non-violence and love. In these violently competitive and combative times, it comes as a timely reminder that by upholding these principles in our daily lives we may recover a common humanity which connects high and low, weak and strong, rich and poor.

The fourth volume of *Colloquium* is the first one to be published online. As we attempt to reach out to the widest possible readership, our responsibilities have also increased immeasurably. We must thank the editorial team for their sustained efforts in making the journal a serious academic journal. For this volume, Rimjhim Bhattacharjee and Neetisha Jha, both teaching in the Department of English, have worked hard on copy editing the entire volume. A few deficiencies in formatting references have been due to circumstances beyond our control. However, we shall definitely persevere to minimise such lapses in future volumes.