

## EDITORIAL

Until recently, mainstream scholarship would often turn a “blind eye” to minoritarian and marginalised subjects of all kinds: territorial marginality, linguistic, sexual, gender, caste and disability related marginality. Far from being sensitive towards subjects of diverse kinds of otherness, everyday life appeared to be supportive of oppressive and discriminatory regimes. Academic disciplines continued to be indifferent towards such discrimination and exploitation. Whereas matters related to social justice were considered as belonging to practical politics, writers and artists continued the age-old practice of representing the subjects in conformity with the everyday practices. Literary studies were accordingly unconcerned with these matters. Of course, a writer with a liberal humanist orientation would offer “sympathetic” portrayals of many an “other.” But these latter would be “marginal” to their principal concerns: the heteronormative, upper caste, patriarchy, the healthily heroic, or—in the context of the West—WASP. Otherwise, the order of the day was to portray the black, blind, one-eyed people, *hijras*, bisexuals, flat-nosed races either in demonized form, as subjects of ridicule or as source of humour as the case may be. Also, there was a time when one could freely use such idioms as “turning a blind eye to” or metaphors such as the “limping hero,” “Tribe,” “lower caste,” “negro” with impunity. In contrast, thanks to the frequent claims for rights among the marginalized groups and their identarian politics, we are nowadays more likely to question ourselves before deploying such terms, as indeed I have done above while punning on the idiom by putting it within quotation marks.

“Minorities” do not pre-exist; but are created through law: be it *Manusmriti* or be it the Indian Constitution or simply the new and ever-growing number of ancillary laws. Whereas the Constitution is a stable document with clear guidelines (even though judges are sometimes called upon to interpret words and clauses in it), the ancient Sanskrit text is unstable as it has numerous versions. Many readers of it trust the English version after the European scholars tried to fix it in terms of textuality. The text that Ambedkar set fire to may not have been the text that Gandhi had read and supported in part.<sup>1</sup> Scholars who read the original version/s suggest that

different versions are contradictory. Manusmriti offers an internally inconsistent and conflicting perspective on women's rights.<sup>2</sup> It is a fact that the text has been mis/used in phases of Indian history to redefine and exploit as well as discriminate against certain castes. It is only when the colonial law makers fixed the text and made it the source of their Hindu law that the text was treated as the villain of the piece. Thus, when independent India decided to form its constitution and Ambedkar was entrusted with the scripting that justice and equality became his key points of reference. The constitution guarantees equality for all irrespective of caste, creed, religion etc. But in a nation state known for its cultural, ethnic and topographical diversity, otherness keeps proliferating. As a conceptual category, "minority" is of recent origin, a product of modernity. After all, it was only when modern democracy was institutionalized in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that majoritarian government came into being and then the question of numerical minority arose. Our concern and sensitivity towards various minorities and their exploitation and suffering has also been mediated by colonial modernity. Attention to disability and the more recent discipline of disability studies is also of Western provenance.

The term "minority" is mostly deployed in its common sense, no doubt. But as a piece of postmodern academic jargon it is used as a philosophical concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In these texts, they criticize the concept of "majority". For Deleuze and Guattari the "minor" does not refer to minority groups as described in ordinary language. For them, minority groups are defined by identities that are "molar configurations" belonging to the majoritarian State Machine. Deleuze and Guattari argued that the concept of a "people," when invoked by subordinate groups or those aligned with them, always refers to a minority, whatever its numerical power might be. There is a connection between "minorities" and the conception of the minor as per Deleuze and Guattari's formulations. The past practice of apartheid in South Africa or the caste system in India provides an illustration of how the concept of "minority" is used by Deleuze-Guattari. While, numerically, there may be more blacks or Dalits than whites or upper caste people, white men and upper caste men still constitute the majority whereas Black men or Dalits formed a minority. It is possible that the State and its apparatuses need to address the needs of these minorities to start making them believe that they are treated as equals and equal stake holders in the national enterprise.

This special issue of *SHSS* explores the question of minorities from different disciplinary perspectives by engaging with different

minority identities in India. It focuses on such minorities as the Thankul Nagas, people with disability, Dalits, and migrants. How are minorities identified, defined, and categorized by legal and institutional processes? It is not unusual for a group to which more than one category can be applied. So, such categorizations become the basis for the struggle for rights. The essays here question the relationship of minority and majority. As editor, I am proud to say that almost all the contributors to the issue belong to the groups and identities they write about. Three are actively involved in issues of transgender rights and the use of effective pedagogy among learners with cognitive disability. Anil Aneja's essay is about Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPwDA) which advocates inclusive education. His analysis addresses the salient provisions under the RPwDA (2016) which can directly or indirectly impact development and practices of inclusive education in India. In three specific sections he outlines the philosophical basis, the historical perspectives to policy formation and the provisions of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act with reference to inclusive education. He concludes by arguing that in order to realize desirable outcomes of the present provisions concerning inclusion, it becomes mandatory to negotiate through many of the concerns he raises. Provisions under the Act should have considered the possible challenges and complications and subsequently the guidelines for a feasible mechanism would have added strength to the RPwDA. R. Lalitha Raja's essay "Implications of cognition on language learning in children with dyslexia," highlights the language problems of Tamil children with dyslexia both in learning Tamil and English in all aspects of language relating it to their cognitive processes. Researchers estimate that dyslexia is the most common reading problem that affects nearly 10 to 30 per cent of the population.

Akhilesh Kumar's study is also about disability; but his concerns are more about their literary representations. Going back in time he analyzes works by two Bangla writers: Bankim and Tagore. In a patriarchal set-up, he argues, being female is in itself a disability. Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) in his novel *Rajani* (1877) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) in his short story "Subha" (1918) seem to be thinking along these lines. Akhilesh Kumar tries to explore the struggle of the visually impaired protagonist of *Rajani* in a male-dominated society, and shows similarities and contrasts between *Rajani* and other characters in the novel. By juxtaposing the characters in Bankim and Tagore he looks at the literary representations of disability by focusing on the individual formulations of the disabled subject in their works.

Kuhu Chanana moves to the domain of popular culture and her primary focus is on the consumption of the trans-cinema by the non-static spectator who participates and reorients the meaning of the trans-identity. She argues that the mobile and fluid meaning of the term 'trans' needs to be understood in that light as well. Secondly, she argues that to catalogue trans not as a monolithic and linear term but as a circular and protean in nature is all the more desirable. Though *hijras* at one level are quite different from the global trans identities (due to the very distant cultural codes) there are multiple overlaps because of the ever dynamic and multi-layered interpretation of certain others. Ahona Roy, similarly, writes about gay life in Mumbai.

Yuimirin Kapai's paper tries to problematize the socio-political changes from the colonial to the postcolonial transition by bringing in other factors such as the beginning of print culture, introduction of money and the tension between tradition and modernity. The thrust of the paper is, however, not so much an attempt to analyse the changes as to set down the contextual and conceptual frameworks. He identifies the contact with the outside world as an important catalyst in the process of "disembedding." Till as late as the end of nineteenth century, each village constituted the centre of the world. By the middle of the twentieth century, groups of villages had started to identify themselves as a tribe and later on groups of tribes as Nagas. Besides, disembedding also implies disengagement of individuals from community. The paper also looks at the production of spaces, and concludes by drawing our attention to the movement from "darkness to light" or "head-hunting to soul-hunting." These terms were not merely metaphors but a reality. This shift was "a necessity to attain the life of eternity in the heaven."

Three essays in this issue are pertaining to Tribal and Dalit identities. First, Raj Kumar begins with the general proposition that the Indian society has for centuries been one of the most hierarchical among known civilizations with a clear gradation in the exercise of power and privilege. But, he says, the literatures of this country, until very recently, have never focused on this problem of inequality as "the pen has by and large been in the hands of those who wielded power, and those outside the grid of authority and agency have generally been rendered invisible in the canonized literary texts of India." Raj Kumar offers a cogent analysis of the term, "Tribe." Then he proceeds to study the literary representation of ethnic oppression through a close reading of Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*. He alludes to the controversy in sociological and anthropological thinking on tribal people about the degree to which their cultural autonomy

can remain intact in today's world. He concludes by saying that the "unspoken message of Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* is that the intrusion of outside forces can only bring in ruin and devastation to these children of nature." But he says such a position is scientifically untenable. It is emotive rather than rational. Narender Kumar takes up the work of the Panjabi Dalit writer Gurdial Singh. He complicates the caste and women question and says, "In a caste society like India, the question of gender equality becomes more complicated because caste determines one's socio-economic position in the society. And a woman's position determines her subjection in the male dominant society." He asks how do in Gurdial's works women of both categories (landlord and peasant) get exploited by men? How do Dalit women get exploited by the upper caste landlords as well as by Dalit men? How does patriarchy work among the Dalits? He argues "The nexus between the upper caste landlords, government and police reveals that the whole state is under the control of landlords. The landholding castes determine which political party will make the government. Being economically sound, the landholding caste, directly or indirectly, controls government and government machinery to some extent. So, the nexus of landholding caste, government and government machinery always suppress the voice of the marginalized groups. Such use of the government machinery by the dominant caste raises the question about the function of democracy." In her fascinating and comprehensive account of indentured labour in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Judith Misrahi-Barak delves deep into the migrations in the context of indentureship, caste and crossing of the *Kala Pani*, focusing on the communication that took place then, across lands and oceans. In the second half of her paper, she offers a hypothesis about the epistolary exchanges that happened at the time of indentureship from India to the Caribbean. Finally, she points out how, "just like the addresser, we are confronted by the ghostly text of the addressee who does not respond, who cannot respond, or chooses not to respond. Through the disengagement one can also see a form of agency and empowerment." She concludes by saying that crossing the *Kala Pani* and "shedding one's caste meant suffering. But it was also, for many, an act of emancipation, of social equalizing, looking forward to the annihilation of caste."

I am sorry that the issue could not carry articles on certain other marginal categories such as the nomads. This lacuna could have been addressed if only we had enough time at our disposal. Before signing off, however, I wish to thank the former Director, Professor Chetan Singh who entrusted me with the responsibility of editing three issues of SHSS which were part of a huge backlog. I am happy

to have cleared these. I am especially grateful to the IAS that I was entrusted with the editorial responsibility of this special issue. I am also grateful to the current Chairman, Professor Kapil Kapoor and the Director Makarand Paranjape for allowing me to carry out the responsibility given me by the preceding team.

### Notes

1. Gandhi had said, "I hold Manusmriti as part of Shastras. But that does not mean that I swear by every verse that is printed in the book described as Manusmriti. There are so many contradictions in the printed volume that, if you accept one part, you are bound to reject those parts that are wholly inconsistent with it. (...) Nobody is in possession of the original text."
2. Patrick Olivelle (2005), *Manu's Code of Law*, Oxford University Press.