

Unmuting Sculptors Voices: Stifling Narratives

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Abstract

The paper tries to explore the line of subdued narration of sculptors in Indian context. Although they have their own stories to narrate but seldom they succeed in speaking out. Their voices were muted and had been snubbed by the dominant class in Hindu society. The question is whose voice was muted? And how it happened? And when did it happen? Why the voices were muted? And who are perpetrators responsible for this anomaly? And what was their narrative?

In this paper I would like to address the questions raised and discuss Dalit sculptors' response against the oppressive society through the lenses of their narratives. Through this the objective is to introduce the saga of Dalit endeavours. As a result of their struggle and quest for social justice they challenged their suppressors by carving their best works and enriched the world with their unique contributions. To illustrate this argument life of Dhananjaya Shilpi, a Dalit sculptor shall be discussed.

Keywords: Casteism, Victimization, Mute Narratives, Creativity, Art, Sculptors.

Introduction

This paper proposes to throw light on the aspects of the subaltern narratives in Indian context. The aim is to comprehend the narratives of Dalit sculptors. Their voice was suppressed. Unmuting the muted voice is a daunting task. But it's possible as the Dalit sculptors have weathered the storm of discrimination, humiliation, discouragement, intimidation, insults and exploitation in their life. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to understand the workings of subaltern narratives in the context of Dalit sculptors.

The paper attempts to throw light on the aspects of the subaltern narratives in India. Oratory is a weapon in the hands of opportunistic and biased society. But there are other people who lack this precious gift of the gab. They are reticent recluse in the society. They are creative people like artists, painters, sculptors, musicians, writers, etc. The aim of this paper is to comprehend the narratives of these talented achievers. But this task becomes even more difficult if these gifted artists happen to be from downtrodden class. Unmuting the voices of Dalit sculptors is an achievement in itself. Because, they were not given any kind of help to develop proficiency in their field of work. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to comprehend the workings of subaltern narratives in the context of Dalit sculptors. Their outcry was not heeded for centuries in India. They were kept out of the mainstream society. They were meted out with the harshest of punishments for being born as Dalits. Nevertheless, what the Castiest society could not suppress was the creative spirit of Dalits which was lying like ember covered with ash. Their engagements in creative enterprise manifested in their art, dance, music, culture, literature etc. Art, in fact, was the way of life for most of these indigenous people.

The objective of this paper is to throw light on the aspects of the Voices which have been muted by other group of powerful people. After saying that I do clarify that we are not talking about the atrocities committed elsewhere in any distant place, country or culture. We are very much discussing about the bruised psyche of Dalits in general and Dalit artists and sculptors in particular.

Unlike in other countries in India social stratification is not based on rich and poor, religion, faith, or colour. It is based on the factor called 'Caste'. Even though they profess same faith and worship same Gods and follow same religion, that is Hindu religion, but still they are treated less than the animals by caste Hindus. Banished in the place of their birth where they do not even belong. Though they are born and brought up in

the same place but they cannot claim the place to be their own. They are displaced, exploited for centuries. They were called as the 'Untouchables'. In such circumstances it's difficult for Dalit sculptors to think about creativity and fine arts. Yet it is to the credit of these indomitable and gutsy Dalit sculptors who carved a niche for themselves in the world of Art, an area, which was deprived for them for centuries. These sculptors by doing this have given new identity to the Dalit community. In order to establish my hypothesis I would illustrate briefly the life and works of Dhananjaya Shilpi, a Dalit sculptor.

Vibrant Native Art

"Nature doesn't need knowledge, because nature is knowledge, knowledge manifest."

— Martin Pretchel

As the fragrance cannot be separated from the flowers, likewise, the creativity and imagination of the suppressed class of people cannot be separated. Though Dalits and Tribals lived outside Hindu society deprived of everything from Hindu orthodox society but they didn't lag behind anybody as far as the art is concerned. From the beginning they had their own way of living. Their culture was rich with art, music, dance and native knowledge. Their life was dedicated to nature. They were the children of nature in its true meaning.

Muted and Marginalized

The discourse on Subaltern issues doesn't end with the Untouchables or 'Dalits', as they are called now with wider subscriptions. The word 'Dalit' is derived from Marathi language, which means the petal of flower which was crushed and trampled. So in this new umbrella of terminology and its many diverse entities and groups found a new identity. Widows even of high caste, marginalized, victimized, suppressed, exploited irrespective of caste, creed, color, gender came under the domain of Dalit.

Dalits and tribals, unfortunately in India, are being exploited even today. The Dalit was an 'Outcaste' in India. In the Indian 'varnashrama' system there are four varnas. They are Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. We can call it as the column of superiority. The top one in the column of hierarchy, is of course, Brahmana, then in the descending order are Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. The Shudra was the last in the bottom of this hierarchical order. He was supposed to serve all other superior class of people in the varnashrama. But there existed another group of people who were kept outside of this varnashrama and they were untouchables. The job which the Shudras could not do was expected to be carried out by these untouchables. These untouchables, the outcastes, living outside the village towns did all the dirty jobs of high caste people. And on the other hand the tribals who were the indigenous people basically lived in the forest had their own unique customs, traditions, rituals, culture and identity also suffered discrimination from the high caste Hindu society.

Mute Outcry

'Suppressed grief suffocates, it rages within the breast, and is forced to multiply its strength'.

-Ovid

As rightly observed by Ovid, (43 BC -17 AD) the Roman poet, the suppression cannot last long. Those who were suppressed forcibly shall break the shackles of bondage with the power that nobody can dare to stop. The voices suppressed for centuries will always try to find their own muted voices once again. The forgotten voices languishing in the depth of the unknown darkness cried aloud sounded strange and unheard of to their own ears.

Narratives of Dhananjaya Shilpi

'Man cannot remake himself without suffering, for he is both the marble and the sculptor'.

Alexis Carrel

Dhananjaya Shilpi's life begins with struggle and ends with struggle. Alexis Carrel's remark 'Man cannot remake himself without suffering, for he is both the marble and the sculptor' is apt to describe Dhananjaya Shilpi's life.

Born to a Dalit family Dhananjaya Shilpi rose to distinguished places in the world of culture and art. He was the recipient of prestigious 'Jakanachari' Award, the highest award given by Government of Karnataka in the field of sculpture. He was a student in one of the prestigious colleges in India Sir J.J. School of Arts Bombay. During the time he was pursuing his studies he won many Gold Medals and prestigious awards for his sculptures. As a result of his brilliance he was promoted to next classes. Soon after completion of his studies he joined the Department of Sculpture in Sir J.J. School of Arts Bombay as a Professor. Dhananjaya Shilpi was instrumental in opening the Department of Carving in Sir J.J. School of Arts Bombay. He was the lone sculptor who had an expertise in stone carving. And he carried the responsibilities of the Department of Carving on his shoulder.

But before that when he was a new entrant in Sir J.J. School of Arts Bombay he had to face antagonism from few local Maharashtrians at work place. They used to look at him as an outsider in the campus, a "Kannadi" for Kannadiga. But Dhananjaya Shilpi was not perturbed and always remained composed and focused on his work. Already he was prepared mentally to undergo any sort of difficulties when he pursues his study. Difficulties and hardships were not something new to him. He was born, lived and grown with adversity.

Before his tryst with Bombay, back home soon after his education he had a brief stint as an Official in Social Welfare Department at Koppal. There he met a young lady official. She was Smt Jayavanthibai. They liked each other and in spite of great opposition from both families they tied the nuptial knot. It was an inter caste marriage. Both the husband and wife were educated and progressive thinkers. However, it's another testing time then for both of them. By this time the couple was having a daughter and a son. But as he had a great passion for painting and sculptures he was not happy in continuing in the Government job. He always dreamt of becoming a sculptor. And his wife knew the latent hidden talent in her husband and motivated him to take up 'chisel and hammer' of sculptor to fashion his dreams into speaking sculptures. She gave him

tremendous amount of encouragement. In fact it was Smt Jayavanthi Bai who was a pillar of support for him and courageously sent him to pursue his dream at Bombay. She took responsibility of taking care of the family as well as all the expenses of Dhananjaya Shilpi at Bombay.

When he took his train to Bombay he was aware of the reception he might be getting in that big, unknown and vast city of Bombay.

Today Dhananjaya Shilpi is well remembered for his extra ordinary sculptures that he sculpted during his life time. But, sadly he is also remembered for what he did not sculpt during his life time. He could have achieved many more mile stones in his long journey as a sculptor. Dhananjaya Shilpi was a versatile genius. He was immensely gifted and was born with the natural talent to sculpt, paint, write poetry, play musical instruments, singing, polyglot, great chef, philosophical, educator and with a flair for wrestling. It means that he was blessed with all-round ability. He would try his hand and succeed even if it is new to him.

Dhananjaya Shilpi was born on 20th of January 1934 at Athani, Dist Belgaum in Karnataka state. His mother was Smt Manikabai and father Sri Shivabasappa.

Shilpi was lucky to be noticed by talent searching eyes of the teacher at Sardar High school Athani in Belgaum District, Karnataka.

Shri Karadagi, the Drawing Teacher, at Sardar High School Athani was instrumental in creating an interest in the "forms and shapes". Shri Karadagi, who saw the creative artist in Dhananjaya, encouraged young Dhananjaya to improve his drawing skills that later on helped him to win many prizes in the drawing and painting competitions.

Versatile Genius

Dhananjaya Shilpi was a versatile genius. He knew many things. He had the attributes of Wrestler, Painter, Sculptor, Musician, Writer, Thinker, Polyglot and Chef. He was an avid reader of literature, history, mythologies, vedopanishats and Ambedkar's writings.

Shilpi was well built like the muscular iconic sculptures of Michelangelo he admired. Shilpi in his formative years grew up listening to the great feats of the local legendary wrestlers who exhibited their great physical strength, power and wrestling skills at the village fair.

Inspired to achieve same physical prowess Shilpi used to do those strenuous exercises early morning which used to put his pals into a kind of amazement. Nadoja recipient and a well known artist Sri JS Khande Rao recalls that when Dhananjaya Shilpi used to come to Gulbarga from Bombay to be with his family. He used to come by train. When he alighted from the train people on the platform and road used to look at him as if he is some famous celebrity from tinsel town. He had a dynamic personality. He was tall and handsome with well sculpted body. He carried a certain amount of magnetic aura around himself. Truly Dhananjaya Shilpi commanded respect from every sort of people. Ordinary people treated him as sahib. Artists and art

connoisseurs considered him as the master of the trade.

When Dhananjaya Shilpi was drawn into the discussion on any topic under the sky and beyond he was comfortable in giving the entire history of that topic as well as his deep insights about them. It was really a great experience to talk with Dhananjaya Shilpi. Almost all the people who happened to talk to Dhananjaya Shilpi used to be amazed at the length, girth, width and depth of understanding Dhananjaya Shilpi possessed about the subjects.

Returning to Gulbarga was a tough decision. Bombay, now Mumbai, was the center of all Art activities. Bombay was to India what Paris is to France the hub of world's art activities.

Works and Contribution

Dhananjaya Shilpi was a complete master in its truest sense. During his illustrious career spanning over fifty years he contributed immensely to enrich the art and culture of Karnataka and India. Till his last breath he continued creating art works. He painted a lot even when he was hospitalized. Just lying down on the hospital bed far removed from his favorite passion painting, sculpting etc was unthought of. During the time of hospitalization where he was recuperating from illness sketches were his companions and sources of happiness. He did lot of sketches so that he can later develop the concept in the painting. His mind was filled with new ideas and concepts for creating new works.

Dhananjaya Shilpi was known for carving busts' in Italian Marble. He had an expertise in bringing in the uncanny resemblance of the person he was sculpting. He used to capture the personality traits and the essence of character of his models. This ability and skill of Dhananjaya Shilpi was almost unparalleled during his life time.

The list of the works of Dhananjaya Shilpi is really long and awe-inspiring. He had to his credit the life size bronze statue of renowned educationist, philanthropist, and parliamentarian Shri Mahadevappa Rampure, in standing position in the precinct of MRMC Medical College, Gulbarga.

Bust of Poojya Doddappa Appa of Shri Sharanabasaveshwara Samsthana Gulbarga, in Italian marble.

The Two headed deity Shri Sharana Basava's sculpture in black stone is installed in the sanctum sanctorum of Shri Sharanabasaveshwara temple in Gorebal. The idol in the sanctum sanctorum is being worshipped by millions of ardent devotees across the country.

Recognition and Achievements

In Gulbarga people are religious and have their own age old traditions and culture. This place is known for the freedom of faith. The place boasts of being the cradle of different religions and harmony. The region has got two prominent Saints' mausoleums. One is the temple of Shri Sharanabasaveshwara and the other one is Khwaja Bandenawaz Dargha. The devotees of these two sects have been spread all over the world.

Dhananjaya Shilpi carved the Bust of Poojya Doddappa Appa of Shri Sharanabasaveshwara

Samsthana Gulbarga, in Italian marble. Sculpting the bust of a living person in the stone requires a lot of hard work and dexterity. Dhananjaya Shilpi had such a fineness of bringing life to the sculptures. Poojya Doddappa Appa's bust looked so real and lifelike. People now also become emotional to view the bust of their revered saint. This bust is housed in the campus of Sharanbasava University, Gulbarga.

Bereavement of Wife

Dhananjaya Shilpi became a sculptor because of the continuous inspiration by the beloved wife Smt Jayavanthibai, whom he used to call as 'Jenni' which meant nectar or honey. She was a pillar for his entire world. When she passed away on 1st of September 1988, it was not an ordinary shock for him. May be it was a new life for him which he began again without the person who was the source of his energy and strength. With Jayavanthibai around him he was like a commander in his full strength. But now without her the life seemed meaningless and hostile. The children were in great shock. Because, it was 'amma', all the way, for the children. The children had great attachment with their mother therefore, both the children as well as husband felt like orphans.

Last Days

Although, Dhananjaya Shilpi passed away peacefully in his sleep, on 1st of February 2004, in a rental house in the outskirts of Gulbarga city, but, he was disillusioned about the turn of events at the fag end of his life. His health was failing because of lack of care and treatment. His leg was amputated because of gangrene. At this juncture, no help was around either from Government or from the society. He was struggling to get fund for his treatment. His son Sunil, who had been polio affected and handicap was working as clerk in Government office was struggling to take care of the Shilpi family and father's medicines. Sunil's job was giving space for breathing for ailing Dhananjaya Shilpi. After the death of Smt Jayavanthibai, who was serving as the Principal of Govt High School Kalgi, in Gulbarga Dist. her son Sunil got the job on compensatory grounds.

Legacy of Shilpi

Apart from his vast number of sculptures, paintings and sketches he left behind many students he groomed who became national and international sculptors. He never believed in keeping the knowledge for himself. Whoever came to his door never returned empty handed. Other than family hospitality they carried with them the knowledge and intricacies of sculpture mastered by Dhananjaya Shilpi. In the midst of people who hide their tricks of the trade with others. And never share the process, techniques and secrets of making sculptures. He was always ready to impart the treasure of his knowledge with everybody. His sons Sanjay, Sunil, Bharat, Shivakumar, and Milind too had an opportunity of learning the nuances of sculpting by assisting their father in the 'Shilpalaya Studio'. Apart from his five sons especially Sanjay Shilpi and Bharat Shilpi he has produced and guided innumerable students. There are Babu rao Nadoni, Jagannath Jakkepalli, Earanna Kambar, Manayya Badiger, Swamy, Rathod, Gujjar and others in Karnataka, Maharashtra and abroad.

Conclusion

This paper proposed to throw light on the aspects of the subaltern narratives in Indian context. The paper tried to paint the life and works of Dalit artists, painters, and sculptors. The aim of this paper was to comprehend the narratives of these talented achievers. Unmuting the voices of Dalit sculptors is an achievement in itself. Dalit sculptors' path was filled with discrimination, humiliation, discouragement, intimidation, insults and exploitation. In spite of all these injustice they could contribute to the heritage of India. The objective of this paper was to understand the workings of subaltern narratives in the context of Dalit sculptors. Therefore, I took up the study of Dhananjaya Shilpi, a Dalit sculptor who fought discrimination with his steadfastness towards the higher forms of art that is sculpture. He unmuting the solid rocks with his caring and kind loving hands by patting the stones gently he made them speak, he made them sing. Yes stones do speak. They narrate their stories to compassionate and discerning viewers.

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