

Of Reigning Silences and Quivering Words:

Kumher Kaand of 1992

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to revisit an event that was barely given any space in public memory – the Kumher Dalit Massacre of 1992. The pogrom in question is one of the most brutal instances of choreographed violence against Dalits, and its narrativization, or the lack of it, is a story of oppression sustained through the act of silencing that is chilling, multifarious and complex. Official documentation on the incident is ridiculously scanty and presents an interesting picture when weighed against oral histories and personal interviews. The paper therefore also legitimizes oral narratives as valid or worthy perspectives that mostly reveal much more than the ‘official’ word. I attempt to situate the event within the larger context of caste politics in India in general and the rapidly increasing instances of caste-based violence in the fiercely casteist state of Rajasthan.

Keywords

Dalit, massacre, Kumher, caste, pogrom.

“How do you lose a word? Does it vanish into your memory, like an old toy in the cupboard, and lie hidden in the cobwebs and dust, waiting to be cleaned out or rediscovered?”

Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*

Memory has always been credited as being a weapon, a tool for resurrection; resurrection of events that died because they shrieked endlessly only to meet convenient indifference, of episodes that were drowned in collective amnesia and of stories that were cloaked in absolute silences or bearable euphemisms. Memory is therefore resistance.

This paper is an attempt to revisit an event that was barely given any space in public memory – the Kumher Dalit Massacre of 1992. The pogrom in question is one of the most brutal instances of choreographed violence against the Dalits, and its narrativization, or the lack of it, is a story of oppression sustained through the act of silencing that is chilling, multifarious and complex. Official documentation on the incident is ridiculously scanty and presents an interesting picture when weighed against oral histories and personal interviews. The paper therefore also legitimizes oral narratives as valid or worthy perspectives that mostly reveal much more than the ‘official’ word. I attempt to situate the event within the larger context of caste politics in India in general and the rapidly increasing instances of caste-based violence in the fiercely casteist state of Rajasthan.

The ‘Kumher Kaand’ of 1992 still haunts the Jatavs (a community of scheduled castes) of Kumher as the first and worst Dalit carnage in Rajasthan. Though the pogrom extended for two days, from June 5 to June 7, 1992, it has created permanent psychological scars and will perhaps continue to be etched out in their mental landscape as the darkest point in their lives till justice is

delivered. As per official records, the massacre left 17 dead and hundreds seriously injured and hospitalized with extensive damage to property, cattle and stored grain. It is however believed that the number of lives lost and the magnitude of damage caused is far more than what official numbers have to say.

Kumher lies in Bharatpur district which falls on the south eastern fringe of Rajasthan, borders with the states of Uttar Pradesh in the east, Madhya Pradesh in the south and Haryana in the north. It comprises the erstwhile princely states of Bharatpur and Dholpur, both of which were ruled by Jat families. Apart from the fact that Jats have a numerical majority in the region, “a claim to mixed Rajput lineage forms part of the high status staked by the erstwhile ruling Sinsinwar Jat family. Community pride of the Sinsinwar Jats dominant in the Pengore region, draws upon this lineage. The erstwhile ruling family continues to wield enormous power, social and political in the post-independence period” (PUDR Report, 2009; 3). Furthermore, a large number of Jat families own vast amounts of land. It is because of these reasons that Jats have a social and political hold in the region. The other important castes are Brahmins and Jatavs. While the former are usually engaged in independent business or money lending, the latter are employed as skilled/unskilled labour or are marginal landholders. As per the fact finding mission report of PWESCR (Programme on Women’s Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), the Jatavs who are mostly small-scale farmers and agriculture labourers, have also been on their path to becoming “vocal and assertive about their rights” for quite some time now. This coincides with the visible improvement in their living conditions. Some are teachers in government schools and some even own small shops. These factors hint at a decline in their dependence on the village elite. It is this will of the Jatavs to stand up for their own rights and thus move towards some kind of social escalation that has often invited the wrath of the Jat community.

A considerable chunk of the narratives that I describe in this paper comes from my telephonic interactions with Prof. Raja Ram who teaches at the Government Girls College in Rajasthan and is also associated with the Amblinking Foundation (a trust named after Ambedkar, Abraham Lincoln and King Martin Luther) that works for the upliftment of residents of the Bharatpur area in general and the Jatavs in particular. Set up by a group of Jatavs, the trust carries out charitable works which include relief to the poor, rural development, medical relief etc for the community. Prof. Raja Ram was a second year student settled in Bharatpur at the time of the massacre who witnessed it closely and continues to be in touch with the families of the affected.

With a curious combination of reluctance and uninhibiting confidence, he said, "*Takleef iss baat se hoti hai ki chahe koi aadmi kitna bhi guni ho, kitna bhi accha insaan ho, uske gun uska saath sirf tab tak denge jab tak koi uski neechi jati ke baare me nahi janta. Jaise he ye pata chale ki wo aadmi pichdi jaati ka hai, uske acche vichaar, uski saari acchaiton ka koi arth nahi rehta.*" ("What causes unmatched pain is the fact that no matter how credible or good an individual is, his qualities are kept in mind only till nobody knows of his 'low' caste. The minute that knowledge is obtained, his ideas and all his goodness lose meaning"). Dwelling on the relationship between the Jats and Jatavs in Bharatpur district, he said, "*Jat aur Jatav ke beech kuch na kuch toh chalta rehta hai, roz ki baat hai. Lekin uska daam Jatav ko hi bharna padta hai. Aaj bhi jab koi Jatav uss kuen se paani peeke jisse Jat peeta hai, toh usse poocha jata hai, 'dubara Kumher Kaand karwaoge kya?'*" ("Tension between the Jats and Jatavs is a matter of the everyday but it is the Jatavs who always pay the price for it. Even today, if a Jatav dares to drink water from the same well as a Jat's, he is asked, 'do you want Kumher to happen all over again?')") What is interesting is the way in which the Brahmins have tacitly consented to the Jat dominance in the area. Though not 'upper' castes in the conventional sense of the word, the Jats

enjoy a hegemonic status that goes absolutely unchallenged by the ‘real upper’ castes. This was best evident when the Brahmins chose to be silent spectators to the violence that the Jatavs were subjected to at the hands of the Jats in Kumher. This is another demonstration of a villainous silence that approves of violence and by extension, participates in it, and in effect silences the victims to the degree that the violence inflicted on them becomes a mundane, regular phenomenon, a “matter of the everyday”.

According to the PUDR report (based on its visit to the affected villages on June 24) on June 1, four Jatavs including both men and women, went to watch a film at a cinema hall Sanjay Talkies with an already notorious reputation owing to its brash Jat employees. What ensued has two versions. According to the PUDR Report (PUDR, 2009; 6), the Jatavs were asked to sit on the floor. When they exhibited the ‘temerity’ to refuse, the Jat employees, Prem Singh and Mohan Singh beat them up. The second version derives from a widely held belief, as is confirmed by accounts of Raja Ram and Shiva. As Shiva, a Kumher resident recalled, “*Cinema me kuch Baniyon aur Jaton ne ek Jatav ladki ke saath battameezi ki. Jatav ladkon ne unhe rokne ki koshish ki, unka saamna kiya. Yahi kaafi tha Jaaton ko gussa dilaane ke liye.*” (“In the hall, a group of Jat and Baniya men behaved inappropriately with a Jatav girl. The Jatav boys tried to resist, and this was enough to invite the wrath of the Jats”).

Interesting deductions can be made from each of the versions- the first is premised on the sheer outrage that the Jatavs’ ‘audacity’ can invoke, leading to instances of large-scale violence like the one in question and certain others that shall be briefly discussed later. At any point in history, when Dalits have tried to assert even the most minimally basic rights, they have been attacked for having ‘dared’ to do so, equating their act to the worst of sins. What is one caste’s right is nothing short of a violation, if exercised by a ‘low’ caste. In other words, anything apart from the

Dalits' conformity to their state of utter dehumanization is unacceptable to the dominant caste groups. The second version ties up with the age-old idea of women's purity as guarding a community's 'honour'. It recurs in the series of events that led to the massacre, and shall be discussed in detail.

Whichever version is to be believed, it culminated in a scuffle between the two communities. On June 3, four Jatav masons were attacked by a hundred strong Jat mob. While one managed to escape, three were tied to a tree and badly beaten. The PUDR team spoke to Bhajan Lal, one of the attacked, who told them that the mob included the cinema hall employees. They also took away his work implements along with all the money he had. Furthermore, the police refused to file a complaint against those involved in the attack. The Jatavs, to make their voice heard, blocked the main road in Kumher. A bus and a jeep were stopped and stoned after which the crowd dispersed. On June 4, a woman's clothes were found near the bus stand on the main road. The news that a Jat woman from the bus had been raped and that her breasts had been cut off by the Jatavs was soon doing the rounds. This was vehemently denied by the Jatavs. There are no clear ways to verify the veracity of this event but the role of exaggerated stories and rumours to arouse sentiments of extreme hatred and animosity has often been central to instances of massive violence. However, the idea of offending an entire community by infringing upon the 'honour' of its women has a peculiar politics of its own. It is disconcerting yet incredibly interesting to note how such a rationale is rooted in the very idea or moral code of safeguarding women's 'purity' which supposedly is intrinsically linked with the community's 'honour'. Implicit in this notion of protection of the women's chastity and men as its self-proclaimed guardians, is another act of silencing- a silencing of women's voice, a complete denial of their own agency to see what 'honour' really means to them. Is it honourable, for example, to a woman, that she be made to act

as per the directions of her father, husband or brother for her whole life? As the PUDR Report aptly put it “The society which provides the moral legitimacy to kill in such cases is informed by the same logic which binds women to the four walls of the house, namely, total patriarchal authority over the sexuality and chastity of women of the community” (PUDR, 2009; 6). Therefore, we see here the intersection of an already complex discourse of caste with that of gender and patriarchy. The matter becomes particularly layered when seen in the context of the condition of Dalit women who are marginalized on multiple levels- they are women, Dalit and economically backward. The ‘Kumher Kaand’ is therefore a story of a series of erasures, each being more violent than the other.

On the evening of June 5, the Jatavs of Kuma village, which is 5 kms from Kumher, were attacked. On June 6, a Panchayat meeting involving around 6000-10,000 Jats at Chamanda Devi Temple, around 4 kms east of Kumher was held. The PUDR Report cites a Jat member of the panchayat, saying that the meeting addressed the need to take stringent action against the Jatavs. It is believed that the attack was planned in this meeting. Only one Jatav, Nathi Singh was a part of the meeting; he was killed and his blood was smeared on the foreheads of the organizers of the meeting, as accounts of Prof.Raja Ram and Shiva revealed to me.

The mob then moved towards Kumher. The Serh Mohalla was attacked on entering Kumher. Along the state highway, passing through Kumher, towards the north of the town is the colony called Deeg Gate. Here, two Jatavs were killed and forty houses were burnt. Accounts reveal that the police was in the immediate vicinity but offered no help. Apart from being passive spectators, the police allegedly participated in fuelling the attack. The attack on Bada Mohalla, a predominantly Jatav Colony, was led by Addl. SP, Mohan Singh. It was in this area that two young girls, Anju and Sunita were raped allegedly by Naresh and Bhagat. But no action was

taken against the two despite knowing their whereabouts. A 12 year old girl, Bobby, who was a Polio victim could not run to save herself and was beaten to death by the Jats. P.Sainath (1999) in his graphic account of the pogrom writes, “Kesar watched in agony from her hiding spot as they dragged her husband from behind the bushes. Hubbal Ramji’s attackers broke his hands, smashed his ribs and face with rods as he begged for water. Then they burnt him alive.” Residents’ accounts reveal that the police arrested 400 Jatavs on the pretext that arms had been stored in their houses; such were the inverted terms of ‘justice’.

The mob then made its way into Naharganj where farm lands and food grains were burnt. Angoori Devi (35) was stripped, beaten and all the jewelry she was wearing was taken. On June 6, one hour before midnight, a curfew was imposed in Kumher, which was relaxed on June 14 and removed completely only on June 24. Many victims were therefore not able to reach hospitals before June 14 (PUDR, 2009; 4).

The pogrom left the Jatavs scarred. They had always known and experienced the ‘plight’ of being born into a ‘low’ caste but such violence, systematically planned and sanctioned, jolted them to the degree that some of them broke away from Hinduism, a religion that has never anyway embraced them. As Sainath (1999) writes, Purshottam Das, now Purshottam Nand Singh who used to regularly visit the Hanuman Mandir and even helped maintain it, lost complete faith in the religion when the Jats burnt the very same temple while attacking the Jatav neighbourhoods. “They were Hindus. But that didn’t stop them. That’s when I broke with this religion.” He wished to convert to a ‘swadeshi dharma’ (hence the rejection of Islam and Christianity), having lost his faith in the ‘Hindu gods’.

Sattu Ram, one of the accused for having stopped and ‘looted’ the bus, an incident that has already been mentioned, said with a mix of despair, uncertainty and amusement, looking through his thick glasses, “Look at me, I wore the same spectacles then. I would have a hard time sighting the bus, let alone looting it. But we were hauled up all the same.”

As if the deafening silence of the local authorities and the state while the attacks were going on did not suffice to explain the general apathy, even after the incident, an unapologetic policy of discrimination prevailed. The court for cases against the Jatavs was in Jaipur, which meant a minimum of Rs.500 for each trip and inconvenience; but the court for cases against the Jats was in Bharatpur. Judicial inquiry was ordered by the government, to be conducted by Retd. Justice of Rajasthan High Court, Mr. Lodha. The report of the Lodha commission however was not made public until 2005 when the CDR Convenor, Mimroth filed a writ petition in the High Court.

An interesting view which does not make its way into any kind of official records of the event but is largely held by the Jatavs of Kumher is that a major role in the pogrom was played by the Baniya community. As Prof. Raja Ram mentioned, the Baniyas instigated the Jats and convinced them to take action against the Jatavs, or else the honour of their women would be at stake. In fact, an all-Baniya meeting was held at Pengore before the violence commenced. It was predictably not difficult for the Baniyas to prove to the Jats, the ‘morally degraded’ character of the Jatavs.

A noteworthy observation that can be made from the incident pertains to the idea of ‘collective guilt’ of the community. This is in fact is the most naked example of the sheer irrationality on

which any riot, pogrom or act of violence is hinged. The event is generally triggered off by an act, committed by a few individuals, that outrages the sensibilities of another group (regardless of whether it is morally 'right' or 'wrong'). Very often, unfortunately, the group then launches a violent attack on the entire community, as an act of revenge. The 1984 Sikh carnage of Delhi that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination, immediately comes to mind as an example. While the Prime Minister was killed by two of her body guards, it was the entire Sikh Community of Delhi that had to bear the brunt of the act. This transference of the crime from the individual to an entire community is not explicable, atleast by any rational mode. It seems ridiculous then that a number of innocent people are killed to cater to certain sections' frivolously twisted idea of 'justice'.

Another aspect crucial to many episodes of caste violence in general and the Kumher massacre in particular is the idea of 'audacity' or 'temerity'. As mentioned earlier, the event began with the refusal of the Jatavs to sit on the floor and it was this exhibition of uninhibited temerity that angered the Jatavs. Such a 'rationale' has formed the premise of many acts of mass violence in the past. And what really qualifies as 'temerity'? Basically, any attempt of the marginalised groups to assert themselves, to escalate their position in the social ladder is deemed inappropriate and outrageous. Special provisions for 'lower' caste have also "bred upper caste resentment". In the case of this incident too, the Jats have expressed the view that the Jatavs were to blame for the violence since the latter's attempt to raise their voice against the Jats had provoked their ire (PUDR, 2009; 7).

In June 1990, two years before the Kumher massacre, Panwari, Akola and Bhandai villages in Agra were sites of brutal violence between Jats and Jatavs. The cause was a Jatav marriage

procession that had the ‘temerity’ to wend its way through a part of the ‘Jat patti’ - a chain of Jat dominated villages.

Some Jats have specifically objected to the law that “a Harijan can conveniently file an FIR against anybody just for being called a Chamar.” Prof. Raja Ram presented an even more disturbing picture when he said, “*Kuch hone par agar koi Dalit police ke pas bhi jata hai, toh sunne ko milta hai- kya ho gaya agar tumhe ‘Chamar’ bol diya? Chamar ko chamar hi toh bolenge?*” (Even if a Dalit goes to the police to file a complaint, he is told-so what if you were called a ‘chamar’? A chamar will be called a chamar only.)

In Nangla Bhai village in Bharatpur district, a Jatav woman was killed and another one was injured in a violent attack by a group of men belonging to the Jat community. Once again, the violence was sparked off by a seemingly trivial incident, where a Jat boy riding a bicycle hit the eight year old daughter of Lajja Jatav and injured her. When scolded by her, he threatened to kill her and ran away. After some time, four Jat men attacked Lajja and her relative, Girraji Jatav with lathis and sharp-edged weapons for having shown the ‘temerity’ to scold a Jat boy. While Lajja was majorly injured, Girraji could not survive the attack. This information of the PUDR (6) was also confirmed by Prof. Raja Ram.

Bidwai (2002) described Chakwara, a village barely 50 kms from Jaipur, as the centre of “entrenched discrimination against Dalits” which is legitimized by religion. Contrary to the popular opinion that at least visible forms of discrimination have completely been eradicated, he points out that Dalits in the village still experience untouchability and have been barred from using the village pond. Two Dalits, Babulal and Radheshyam who showed the ‘audacity’ to take a dip in the pond were subjected to “vile abuse and social boycott”. Furthermore, the police made

the Dalits sign a 'compromise' which erased their right to the pond. When the Dalits attempted to protest by deciding to collectively bathe in the pond, a mob of 10-15,000 caste Hindus armed with lathis threatened them to terminate the plan and they had to surrender.

In Mouroli village, a Jatav named Amar Singh became the sarpanch. This was enough to trigger off an attack by a mob of Jats which left around 16 houses burnt and 22 people hurt. 43 Jats and 1 Jatav were arrested to be later released on bail after a 'settlement' was made between the two communities.

In Bansroli village, a Jatav couple was prevented from riding a horse by the Jats during a wedding ceremony. In the ensuing fight, the groom's father was killed. In Saidpura village, the Jatavs dared to go to the 'upper-caste well' to get water. They were beaten and their pots were smashed by the Jats.

At the expense of what seems to be dry enumeration, I list these incidents one after the other, without respite, to put forth a sense of how unabashedly casteist the society in general and the state of Rajasthan in particular is. It has a shameful annual average of 5024 crimes against Dalits which includes 46 killings, 134 rapes and 93 cases of major injury (Bidwai, 2002).

The Hindu, in 2009, reported, "Dalits living in panic in Bharatpur village...Jat residents of Ballabgarh village in Bharatpur district assaulted and insulted the Dalit woman sarpanch of the village panchayat and her son for her refusal to part with the muster rolls of labourers engaged and records of public works executed during her tenure". Incidents like these are a venomous reality and it is in this context that the Kumher violence needs to be viewed. A certain kind of 'logic' informs all of these- one that is directed at the erasure of any possibility of equality. In other words, the dominant castes wish to preserve the status-quo which undeniably favours their

position and therefore crush any attempt that has the potential to change the existing social configurations.

In none of the instances mentioned above, including the Kumher Massacre, was a single person punished. At best, a few people were arrested and later let out on bail. It is a matter of immeasurable shame that not only the victims await justice twenty years after the event, but also any attempt to re-visit or reconstruct ‘bitter’ episodes of the past are relegated to the domain of atavistic emotion.

With the backdrop of caste-based oppression as a living reality in our social fabric today, if we were to look at the common notion as well as an oft-stated academic argument of caste as being pre-modern, we would get our own answers; answers that are not quick to dismiss the idea of ‘caste’ as archaic but to understand its complex modes of working in modern times. Similar would be an answer to those who argue for reservations based on income as opposed to caste. Prof.Raja Ram put it in simple terms,” *Zaroorat hai vichar dhara ko badalne ki. Jab tak wo nahi badlegi, kuch bahi badlega.*”(“There is a need to change the mindset. Nothing shall change till that remains unchanged.”)

And then, he apologetically said he would have to disrupt his conversation with me. He had just received news of a Jatav’s hand having been cut off by a Jat.

Bio-note

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