

Living in the Dead- Voices from Nimtola Burning Ghat, Kolkata

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Abstract

This research specifically traces the history of Nimtola Mahasman (a Bengali terminology of burning ghat- a hindu cremation ground), its inhabitants, its workers and their life. The paper also deals with the skills and rituals of burning dead bodies. Here the verb form 'burning' is used in two ways- one is the burning dead body in pyre or in the furnace and another is the burning glazed body of the dom (a Bengali terminology of 'corpse-burner) who is burning the dead bodies. This exploratory research is done by conducting an ethnography at Nimtola burning ghat through observational study, which involves conversational, in-depth interview mainly with the doms by using semi-structured interview schedule and with other local inhabitants (security guard of burning ghat, shoe-keepers of nearby temples, small shopkeeper and local chaiwala). This paper also posits the caste identity of the burner (dom) in the convenient form of modern life and the meaning of doms life. It focuses on the interplay of different social categories (class, caste, economy and politics) which are coming to enliven and keep living the life of smasan.

KEYWORDS: Nimtola Mahasman, Dom, Burning, Habit, Dead bodies, Pyre, Untouchability, Caste

Introduction

This paper tries to explore the lives of doms (corpse-burner) of Nimtola burning ghat, whose life and living are engrossed within the work of burning dead bodies. It will also expose the politics and economy of burning ghat in the sphere of doms work life. Nimtola Burning Ghat, located in North Kolkata, is populated by continuously arriving dead bodies, which are the only source of repetition of the meaninglessness of life and living. Everyday corpses keep the intact flow of business in the cremation ground. The mundane ethics of survival gets rotated by daily schedules of work and rest: which are opposite in nature. Work can be synonymous to life and rest as death. This work and rest cycle is seen in almost every being and amongst the 'doms' who are not unusual from others. 'Dom' is the only community who burns human dead bodies and earns their daily subsistence for a living. Doms, through their hereditary caste identity and work schedule, have acquired the skill of burning, which others lack to possess.

The *smasan* (burning ghat or cremation ground) encompasses an idea of hopelessness amongst the doms and to peoples who go there. In Bengali fiction, Raater Kolkata, Hemendrakumar Ray (2016) has drawn a pictorial description of Nimtola burning ghat at night and showed how death exposes the irony and satire of human life instead of playing a melancholy connotation of bereavement. At one side of the cremation ground, dead bodies are burning in pyre and in another side, both the people who brings dead bodies and who burns dead bodies, gather to gossip at late

night. Their discussion and arguments range from football, cricket to daily news of politics and social welfare policy. Hemendrakumar Ray accepted the hindu notion of impermanence of human life, so there is no validity to concentrate on death as a fact. Because death is the only permanent and inevitable truth of human life. *Smasan* is another normal, ordinary and secular (temporal and profane) space for *doms* where they engage themselves in an unusual body of work of burning corpses. *Doms*' work of burning dead bodies demands a lot of emotional labour. As the *doms* said they are devoid of the universal and rational approach of emotion as well as the place (burning ghat) where mourning rooms are separated from the rational sphere of cremating dead bodies. Across cultures and time, death has been woven into the fabric of life. As Huntington and Metcalf (1979) observed in *Celebrations of Death*, "life becomes transparent against the background of death". Life cannot exist without death, and vice versa; therefore, death can be understood as an indicator of life. In Huntington and Metcalf's materialist kind of analysis, I argue that people of lower class has materialist understanding of death, and so the *doms*. They objectify the dead body as *lash (corpse)* because they cannot objectify life as a flow of meaningful events. In another bengali fiction 'BichitroParamparaBichitroPesha', Nabakumar Bhattacharya mentioned the *doms* as 'smashaner adishwar' (King of crematorium), which goes against the Hindu mythology. The Hindu mythology situates lord Shiva as the king of *smasan*. So, bringing these two radical perspectives together, the *doms* become the representative figure of lord Shiva. The burning pyre in cremation ground is the mode of subsistence of the *dom's* life which has repeatedly taken an innumerable number of bodies (dead bodies).

In British period there was a process of origination of various regions in terms of same occupational group and were termed as '*para*' or '*tola*' and '*tuli*'. This orientalist framework is essentially casteist in nature. The local areas of the '*smasan*' where the *doms* live in are known as '*dompara*'. *Nimtolahamasman* is close to Ahiritola launch ghat, in the opposite of *doms* quarter, built by local corporation. *Nimtola* burning ghat is accompanied by a lord Shiva temple (*baba bhuteshwarmandir*) and other small temples followed by it. The big corporation vat accumulates the waste of both the *smasan* and the *mandir*. These entire localities have many small shops at one side of the road which sells flower, sandel wood, sweets, garland to both the people who come to the *smasan* and to the *mandir*. *Nimtola* has a smell and sound of its own: the smell comes from the flower, sandel wood, agaru (only given to dead bodies to replace rotten smells), the smell of burnt blood and muscles, the smell of burning wood in high flames. This exploratory research is done by conducting an ethnography at *Nimtola* burning ghat through observational study, which involves conversational, in-depth interview mainly with the *doms* by using semi-structured interview schedule and with other local inhabitants (security guard of burning ghat, shoe-keepers of nearby temples, small shopkeeper and local chaiwala).

The conceptual question of this research is about the *doms* body and the relationship of *dom's* body with the burning dead bodies. Through this, it searches the vision of death of a person, whose life, work and leisure are continuously engaged with death. It tries to explore the status of that individual's (*dom*) own body in that schema of death, given the imagination that he is only burning dead bodies. Working on the ideas of *doms* body relating to the burning dead bodies, two abstract categories of 'living' and 'dead' have been formulated.

Materials and Methods:

This work primarily traces the history of Nimtola burning ghat, its inhabitants, its workers and their life. In modern life of the city, Hindus burn their dead bodies according to their religious ritual and culture in a separate place called burning ghat. Previously there was a practice of throwing dead bodies (both men and animals) into the river. After consultation with the elite Bengali babus' of that period, the British inhabitants of India concluded that prohibition to throw dead bodies into the river, was regarded as an interference with the religious observance of the natives. Hence the idea of stopping this practice was consequently abandoned. The government was obliged to content itself with employing an establishment of boats and body-sweepers (Murdahfarrash), under the commissioner of police, for sinking as many bodies as they could find floating on the Hoogly river, opposite Calcutta. The numbers of floating bodies escaped the vigilance of the police even within the limits of their jurisdiction. Both the bodies of men and animals continued to float up and down with every tide, became repulsive to sight, smell, and decency, poisoned the air with unwholesome exhalations. The numbers of increased dead bodies thrown into the river above Calcutta was the main cause of outbreak of epidemic fever during 1862 to 1863 within a few miles of Calcutta. This practice of throwing dead bodies into river was deemed unhealthy, with the enforcement of several laws and petitions by Cecil Beadon, who was the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal at that time. Along with that, the practice of skinning of dead animals at Nimtolaghat and elsewhere was prevented. The practice of burning the dead anywhere in the city was inconsistent with the colonial notion of public order. There was a removal of burning ghats from the centre of the town to some suitable place beyond suburbs, where cremation might be done without violating to the feelings of public and without any injury to the common health issues of the city. The Mussalmans and Christians of Calcutta have long been prohibited from burying their dead within limits of the town, and it is unreasonable that hindus should continue to enjoy the exclusive privilege of disposing of their dead within the same limits of the city. The construction of the enclosure is intended to be appropriated near Nimtolaghat for the performance of the ceremonies practiced by the Hindus (Dasgupta and Chatterjee, 2011). According to the Governor of Bengal, the smasan needs to be situated near bank of the Ganges, followed by some pilgrimages. The north of Nimtolaghat had bamboo forest and required space for seasoning of bamboos for making pyres, along with a ghat for bathing and performing religious, mortuary rituals. 1827, the establishment of Nimtola burning ghat (second oldest after kashimitra ghat), marks the invention of traditional death practices of Kolkata. The geographical, climatic, and cultural stereotypes are coming in making *smasan* as an enclosed place to make a convenient form of modern life. The gathering of people of same caste category, for performing death rituals of Hindus, has distinctively spotted a way of livelihood.

Indian philosophy has focused on the physicalist understanding of the gross body (sthula sarira), which is a futile object. The person who burns these futile dead bodies also becomes an extension of the futile occupation he performs. This occupation, derived from caste, exaggerates the expression of futile logic of labour. The Brahmanical view of caste-labour posits that the kind of work lower caste people perform is itself stigmatizing as they engage with lower substances. The contrary view, however, locates the labouring dimension within caste, as a pure market category. The brahmanical view assumes that the futility of labour has been injected to the identity of doms. This continual debate amongst the scholars is also reflected

upon the doms. Some of them look at this labour of burning dead bodies in terms of earning their daily livelihood. NareshMallick, a *dom* having 20 years long experience has chosen his heredity-based occupation of burning and cremating dead bodies. In 'BangaliJatiParichoy', Sourindrakumar Ghosh (2006) has illustrated a vivid description on the origin of various caste groups, their location, behavioural pattern, occupation and livelihood, socio-cultural dynamics, kinship structure, modes of entertainments, religious belief, rites and rituals. In Bengal doms have arrived mainly from Bihar, and they are also known as 'dombora', 'domar', and 'dombar'. Although burning dead bodies in cremation ground is their primary occupation, but they also invest in making craft goods from bamboo. They dedicate their bamboo-made craft products to their god- 'bihakamkar' and later start to use those products. Some of them also work as sweepers in streets and are known as 'dhangar' (Ghosh, 2006). NareshMallick said mostly all the *doms* have a same surname- Mallick and they come from a particular pargana and district of Bihar. This profession situates their caste-based identity. Their belief in taking this occupation is so stringent that they do not allow others to come into their circle. NareshMallick said that this work does not acquire any prestige, so he does not want his son to come to this field.

The dom inhabits both the burning body which is his own body and the burnt body (dead body) in the same self in his everydayness of dealing with death. The slowly burning wood along with the corpse in it has the sound of a never-ending continuity. The monotonous working of electric furnace and its sound signify the repetitive work schedules of *dom's* life. The administrative functions of the management, the policing functions of surveillance, the economic functions of control and checking, and the religious functions of encouraging obedience and work- these all are controlled by the panoptic gaze of surveillance. The disciplinary mechanism had to be broken down into smaller elements, but to increase its productive functions, surveillance is specified and made functional. Hierarchized, continuous and functional surveillance may not be one of the great technical inventions of the eighteenth century, but its insidious extension owed its importance to the mechanisms of power that it brought with it. It was also organised as a multiple, automatic and anonymous power, where surveillance rests on individuals. It is a power that seems all the less corporal in that it is more subtly physical. This enclosed, segmented space is observed at every point, in which individuals are inserted in a fixed place, where slightest movements are supervised. Here power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure in which everyone is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead. The major effect of this gaze is to induce a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power (Foucault, 1979). The entire *smasan* is under hierarchical observation of CCTV (closed circuit television) surveillance, so the doms activities are always recorded and scrutinized from the above.

There is a special skill of placing the body into the tray of electric furnace, performing the initial funeral rite of *mukhagni* (touching the fire into the dead's face by one of the closest relatives signifies the symbolical disengagement with life), engaging the furnace, and lastly collecting the *naabhikundo* (the naval cord) from the dumped ashes. A skill is an ability to perform an activity in a competent manner. Skills can be classified into three main types: transferable or functional, personal traits or attitudes, and knowledge-based. Transferable or functional skill involves actions taken to perform a task, which is transferable to different work functions and industries. It is completely based on ability and aptitudes. Personal traits or attitude

includes individual characteristics that takes vital role in performing work. This personal trait is developed in childhood through life experiences. Knowledge based skill is specific to subjects, procedures and information, which are necessary to perform tasks. This knowledge-based skill is acquired through education, training and on-the-job experiences. Burning dead bodies is therefore necessarily a skill for the *doms* although the work is considered as completely unskilled. Bodies are placed in pyre in a certain manner: the head is kept in the north side and legs are placed in the south. The repetition of the same work of burning bodies dehumanises and deskills the *doms* to other alternative kinds of work. Deskilling can also refer to individual workers specifically. The term refers to a person becoming less proficient over time. This can occur due to changes in one's job definition, moving to a completely different field, chronic underemployment (e.g. working as cashier instead of accountant), and being out of the workforce for extended periods of time (e.g. quitting a position to focus exclusively on child-rearing). Deskilling also happens in any upper caste job, if it is repetitive in nature and result of increasing rationalisation. The market value of any work is derived from the composite form of human skill and invested labour. The people who come to this occupation are trapped into it by themselves only and by the work itself. Drinking alcohol in this work is invisibly sanctioned to avoid the rotten smells of dead bodies. There is a prevalent myth amongst *doms* that a god, named 'mashal', arises out of the burnt ashes of cremation ground. The *doms* get terribly frightened to observe this scary god at night (Ghosh, 2006). Sometimes the *doms* observe deformed and abnormal bodies with eyes or mouth kept open. The disfigurement of a dead body is also stigmatized because human beings are accustomed to see a desirable form of physical body from its very birth to death. The term stigma traces back to the Greeks who cut or burned marks into the skin of criminals, slaves, and traitors to identify them as tainted or immoral people that should be avoided (Goffman, 1990). As we know it today, stigma is not merely a physical mark but rather an attribute that results in widespread social disapproval - a discrediting social difference that yields a 'spoiled social identity', to use Goffman's terms. Most definitions of stigma comprise two fundamental components, namely the recognition of difference and devaluation. They also emphasize that stigma occurs in social interactions. As such, stigma is not considered to reside in the person but rather in the social context. What is stigmatizing in one social context may not be stigmatizing in another situation. Stigmatization can be overt. It can manifest as aversion to interaction, avoidance, social rejection, discounting, discrediting, dehumanisation, and depersonalisation of others into stereotypic caricatures. Stigma can also be subtle. For example, stigma can arise as non-verbal expressions of discomfort (e.g. a lack of eye contact) that result in tensed social interactions between stigmatized and non-stigmatized individuals. Sometimes the *doms* avoid direct eye-contact with the deformed dead bodies. This initial anxiety of burning a deformed dead body has changed them to a fluid being in their work sphere, so they can work in a morgue or in post-mortem at any time of the day. If their working skill increases they get promotion to other departments and some receive transfer.

Death is an emotional intoxication. *Doms* create the binary of 'us' and 'them' and impersonalises grief to perform this work which engages tremendous mental energy. In *smasan*, dead bodies are marked by numbers to the *doms*, which is like the picture of total institution, whereas in prison or in asylum, inmates or human subjects are reduced to mere objects (Goffman, 1991). In the scenario of total institution,

personal names are taken away from inmates (individuals) which is a process of personal defacement. The basic identity markers and individual attributes are taken away from the inmates. Because naming somebody or any relationship always attracts some emotional attributes. The doms might have somebody known to them, having the same name, the dead body bears. So, marking the dead body as mere objects and by numbers is a mode of increasing rationalisation in the sphere of Dom's work. Laxmichand Mallick, a dom having 30 years of experience in burning corpses, gets trapped into deep sorrow when dead bodies of 12 or 22 years arrive. Being very rational to their typified way of doing duty at times their eyes also drop tears and they feel why they are doing such work. Emotion affects not only what people do, but also the way they do it (of course, the line is often blurred). Some of the effects flow from underlying shifts in the way people perceive and think under the influence of emotion. There are well-documented examples at many levels of cognition where emotion and feelings are widely varied. Gradually this unusual work of burning bodies become a habit and usual to the *doms* but there are unusual spectacles when their emotion overpowers their rational working mind and interrupts their life. The work to him is a habit so he wants to trap himself into that habit and do not want any interruption in that. As Laxmichand Mallick said, interruptions are staying back at home for a long time when he eagerly waits to get back to his habitual action of burning bodies. In this way, the work does not remain a mere skill, but it has been assimilated into the *dom's* body. In some familial rituals if his relatives ask him to stay at home he refuses his personal life. Death and burning bodies act as an intoxication which illuminates him from other substances of life. Speaking intensively to him, I have felt that after 30 long years of experience, he still wishes to learn new working skills and beyond that, he wants to know himself thoroughly by his body which performs the habit. The habitualization of action is to a certain extent necessary and desirable; as Schutz pointed out in his theory of 'typification', social intercourse and practical activities would be impossible if every act, no matter how trivial, had to be scrutinized and consciously planned to execute.

Smasan is a place where humor and sadness coexist. Doms are not affected by others emotional outburst and engage themselves with silly humorous jokes among themselves, which is also a sort of leisure to them. Leisure is a time or opportunity for ease or relaxation. In the scenario of death and bereavement, the doms share moments of freedom from regular activities with their co-workers. They do not possess any time-free from the demands of their work, so they want to gratify themselves with small talks within their work schedule. Even if they are engrossed into working relationship with each-other, they are dealing with death.

Dom's life, work, and leisure all are entangled with death. In 'Death in Banaras' (1994), anthropologist Jonathan Parry has described the death rituals performed by priests and kinds of sacred specialists in the north Indian city, Banaras. But Parry is limited in exposing the vision of pain, death, and burning of a person, who only deals with fire, death and burning throughout his life and work. Henceforth this research is an attempt to explore the status of doms' own body in the schema of death, given the imagination that he is only burning dead bodies. Working on the ideas of doms body relating it to the burning dead bodies, two abstract categories of 'living' (the dom) and 'dead' (the corpse) have been formulated. Here the verb form 'burning' is used in two ways- one is the burning dead body in pyre or in the furnace and another is the burning glazed body of the dom who is burning the dead bodies.

The smasan is bounded by rhythm and soundscape of bereavements. It is accompanied by the smell of burnt blood and muscles and burnt skin of human

beings. The doms have a secular attitude towards death, contrasted with the notion of sacred and spiritual endeavour. The smasan is a profane and ordinary work sphere for the doms. The person who burns these futile dead bodies, also becomes an extension of the futile occupation he performs. The futility of burning corpse does not only remain the question of caste, but it becomes the logic of Marxian alienation of labour. Marx in the section on "Estranged Labour" distinguished four aspects of alienated labor: alienation from the product of one's labor, from the labor process or one's activity of laboring, from one's 'species being' or essential human nature, and from other human beings as a result of the character of one's work life. According to some of the caste theorists, Marxists have always tried to subsume caste into class. Specifically, in Indian context, social reality, psychological reality, immediacy of life, groundedness of the body is so primal for the lower caste that it has to be distinct from just a poor person, in general. In every labour process there is a burn out of the body- in case of a doctor stayed up at last night, the uber driver slept on the steering. But the scenario of smasan cannot be compared with any other workplace, so literally death-nearness, pyre-nearness and the sensation of that burn cannot be compared to the burn-out of any labour-intensive process. In '*Kamalakanter Daptor*' (1875), bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay has drawn an ironical representation of the character of insects and its desire to sacrifice life in splitters of fire.

"Patangodhabito hoy banhir pane, seibanhitenijeutsargokoreekta such anubhabkore."

The insect symbolises doms persistent engagement of dealing with dead body and fire. As Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay says that common people are unable to understand the meaning of various substance of human life. Still, just like a mere insect, people want to explore the meaning of life by roaming around unknown facts.

"Banhiki ta amrajanina. Rup, tej, tap, kriya, goti, ishwar, dharma, gyan, sneho ... prokritoartheeguloki ta sadharanmanushjanena. Tobuoseialoukik o aparigyatopadarthokekendrokoremontaghureberaypatangermawto."

The psychological turmoil of a person who continuously encounters burning dead body and fire, can never be compared to any other kind of time-intensive or labour-intensive work, in terms of life experiences. There is a necessity to consider the lived experiences, where the subject has no choice of not experiencing the reality. In '*The Cracked Mirror*' (2012), Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai emphasised that experience serves to validation and regeneration of theory. Sarukkai further argued experiences in social world are not just enactment of social scripts, but it is the ethics of embodied life. Therefore, I argue that the lower caste people are merely reduced to body and their work is only considered as a habitual practice of the gross body, as they deal with lower substances. The dom's performance of his habit becomes an extension of self emulation and the futile logic of labour. To any human being, the irresistible biological need, hunger is mitigated by consuming food.

The meaning of dom's life gets appropriation by performing the work of burning dead bodies. The body is the core of our sensuous existence, while the social institutions are inscribed in experience and touch. Touch is the oldest and most primitive, pervasive sense. The untouchables in Indian society are those who are economically dependent and exploited victims of many kinds of discrimination and ritually polluted in a permanent way. The phenomenology of untouchability is dependent upon the notion of 'touch' and 'untouch' (Sarukkai, 2012). The Indian tradition considers touch as one of the most important senses among the five other

senses of human body. Montagu points out that skin is the most important of all other organ system, which is constantly in touch with the brain. Following Plato, Aristotle defines senses by reference to sense objects. Sorabji points out two criteria for characterizing touch: Contact criterion is all things that are perceived in contact by touch. Besides, non-localisation criterion classifies the objects of touch as that are common to the body as a whole. Touch is an unmediated sense and there is no medium between sense and the tangible object. The Aristotelian idea of touch also defines the nature of life. The phenomenological experience of touch is contact. Contact reduces the distance between the toucher and the object of touch. Chretien echoes Aristotelian notion that the distance is never abolished but only forgotten. The common way to describe the nature of touch is by replacing the contrast of contact-distance. There is a difference between touching a thing and being part of that thing. The ever-present space or medium or body forms an untouchable element in touch. In Indian context touch (*sparsa*) and contact (*samyoga*) are of distinct connotations: touch is a quality of substance and contact is another quality. Primary substance can be divided into two types: material substance is constituted by five elements such as earth, water, fire, air and internal organs. But immaterial substance is of four types-time, spatial direction, *akasa* and *selves*. Contact belongs to both material and soul substance, but touch is only specific to material substance. According to the Nyaya-Vaisesika the sense organs reside in body but body itself is an entity, excluding the sense organs. Indian philosophical school examines the relations of senses to the object of sense. Samkhya and Advaita Vedanta classify the body in terms of gross body (*sthulararira*) and subtle body (*suksmasarira*).

The argument further proceeds by differentiating between touch and contact. Touch is perceived by only one sense organ, but contact can be by two sense organs. Touch does not produce some of the qualities which contact produces such as pleasure, pain, merit and demerit etc. Contact establishes a symmetrical relationship which involves both the 'toucher' and the 'touched'. Touch is an asymmetrical relation, because the person who touches an object is not touched back by the object at a same time. Touch is a quality that inheres in object, so the untouchable builds up the sense of defiling or untouch within them.

Glucklich examines two basic metaphors of human body: one is microcosmic reflection of the world (*susrutasmhita*) and the other is self-enclosed place which is antagonistic to the world (*Rg Veda*). Popular myth replicates that skin captures the essence of individuals. Skin becomes the primary organ of relation where touch becomes its principal action. Skin acts as a map of character and moral disposition. Thus, whose skin is untouchable is himself an untouchable, so untouchability resides on an individual. The metaphysics of body establishes the binary of pure and impure. In Buddhist philosophy the notion of untouchability is all-pervading. Lang explains how humans are trapped into their body as a distinct entity. Being specifically alert about the body illustrates the notion of impurity, pain and nature of impermanence related to the body itself. It eliminates the belief in self-identity. This tradition believes that body is the centre of impurity from birth to death through different processes. Buddhism negates the metaphysics of untouchability. Glucklich notes the idea of pollution, sin, and defilement is followed within the self-appropriateness of body. In the notion of untouchability, the relation between ethics and body becomes prioritized. Hinduism situates the cognition of moral and natural dirt, where the morally impure person is also impure in his natural body.

The activity of touching and being touched are distinctive and both are actions of body. Sartre in his 'Being and Nothingness' describes touching as an act of body-as-subject. Also, the act of 'being touched' situates the body-as-an-object. Merleau-Ponty criticises Sartre's argument on touching and being touched, where the special occasion of touch negates this binary. Merleau-Ponty in this 'The Visible and the Invisible' talks about reversibility where a unity is maintained between being touched and touching. It explains the notion of identity within difference. This notion of reversibility initiates the notion between self and other. For examples, when one hand touches another then the two hands experience the feeling of being touched and touching at the same time although they are actions of same body or a constitutive whole. So, the untouchables are not untouchables but inaccessible in particular context while untouchable secures an important mark in the act of touching. The sense of touch allows conceptualisation of the body in terms of action. Derrida identifies four themes related to touch. Firstly, there is confusion between touch as a single sense or a group sense. Secondly the object of touch is not determined. Thirdly, there is a problem of non-locality of the sense of touch and finally, there is an immediacy related to touch and contact which is not present in other kinds of senses. Derrida explains the moderation of touch where too much touching is injurious for anything. Kant in his 'Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View' evokes that touching is most crucial than other three objective sense perception because touching provides empirical knowledge. Since hand is the essential object of touch, hence there is greater emphasis on the phenomenal experience of hand. There is a basic difference when untouchables are rejected this ability of exploration through touch. Derrida said tact is something like touch without touching which is hidden in tactile. Touching is forbidden in the relation between untouchables and law.

Both in Indian and Western context, touching is situated within the object itself that is the untouchable person. Untouchability accumulates both touch and non-touch where objects specific to the idea of non-touch are the untouchables. Untouchability involves the notion of possibility of touching and untouching. Moreover, for untouchables touch as a sense is not negated. In the word 'untouchable', 'un' is a negation operator. The impossibility of not touching is divided into two fundamental kinds: not-touchables and touch-unable. These two types of inability define the nature of the object and nature of the subject simultaneously. This explores the notion of subject-object dualism. So, untouchability is only the inability of the toucher, the person who refuses to touch the untouchables. This phenomenological experience of act of touching is applicable to both Brahmins and the dalits. Every act of touching becomes reflective, whereas touching is no more an automatic sense, but it becomes a judgement. Potential untouchability is of oneself rather than of another. This represents the uniqueness of untouchability in Hindu practices.

Dumont constructs hierarchy of caste system which occurs through the antagonistic idea of pure and impure. Ambedkar was aware of the temporal untouchability amongst the Brahmins where impurity is not untouchability and untouchability is not about impurity. For example, one individual refuses to touch another as because he is in the purer-state. Untouchability for acharyas is not about perceiving that state of untouchability but it is hereditary and a part of tradition. There is a continuous process of brahminising the Brahmins. Untouchables are not untouchables to their own community but to certain others. Here the untouchability of the Brahmins is outsourced to the dalits which is primarily based on the ethics of touch.

Gopal Guru (2012) argues that only the people who own an experience can theorise about it. At the other end, theoretical impulse arises in response to an experience but does not expect the theoretician to have anything to do with the experience. There are different ways of understanding these opposites. One such way is through the binary of emotion and reason. Experience is often placed under the idea of emotion and related terms whereas theory is something that arises under the action of reason. The experience of untouchability was transmitted from one generation to another through complex mediation of caste and patriarchy.

Axel Michael, in his essay on '*Untouchability and Tactility in Hindu Death Rituals*' (2014) exaggerates that, touchability in death rituals is normally related to pollution and thus prohibited. There is a specificity of tactile sensation in terms of the dom's contact with the dead body. As deeply ingrained taboos about untouchability, touch and pollution are intrinsically linked in India. Pollution thus represent a constant threat that calls for techniques to return to the state of purity. Traditional hindu scripture states that the lower caste gets more polluted than the higher caste.

This occupation of burning bodies is not gendered. A woman of 13 years work experience has joined her husband's profession after his death for the need to run the household. She also performs the special task of placing the body and collects the ashes of burnt corpse. As she said, her monthly income, for doing this work, is well fitted with her family's expenditure. This woman cooks at home in the warmth of fire and she burns dead bodies at her workplace with the initiation of fire. As mentioned in AgneyaPurana (one of the classical dictionary of hindu mythology and religion), fire has ceased to be an object of worship, but is held in honour for the part it performs in sacrifices. In brahmanical idea of cooking the consumption pure (*paak*) and impure (*apaak*) foods represent caste untouchability which is closely related to the art of burning corpses. After death, human dead body gets its highest respect while it becomes touch-able to the untouchables. The doms become the sacred specialists who purify the dead body by touching it and light the funeral fire.

Discussion:

The daily business of Nimtola burning ghat also accompanies the people of allied occupations, the chaiwala, the street beggars and the local shop-keepers. I have encountered two brahmin brothers who take photographs of the dead body and the relatives of the deceased person, by profession. They also have small shops selling clothes to the deceased family, aligned to the burning ghat. The narratives of this brahmin brothers reflect that the doms are only the body, performing daily habit of burning corpse. According to them, doms are mindless entity, so they cannot perceive any kinds of sensory feelings or emotions. If an old dom dies in far remote places, then the family makes a musical band procession to carry to dead body of the old dom to the smasan, as if the lower caste people are not affected by death or permanent separation. The doms have some secret work-politics which is not widely displayed to the outsiders, but the people of allied occupations who inhabit the same workplace with them, encounter these politics. The two brahmin brothers, Subimal Acharya and Parimal Acharya pointed the rigidity of caste system as they showered immense hatred towards the doms although inhabiting a same surrounding of work and living. As they said whatever the dom might acquire in life, but they cannot transcend their caste identity as a 'dalit' and cannot step outside. The futile nature of work of burning the dead has trapped them into their caste-based occupation. The brahmin brothers asserted that the lower caste people could gather symbolic and cultural capital, but their caste position can never be changed or transcended. To elucidate the dom's caste

position, the brahmins have added if a piece of coal is washed off more than hundred times, it will still remain a coal. So, the caste identity is derived from the occupation but the occupation of dealing with lower substances, does not always generate the stipulated lower caste identity marker. The Brahmins have always tried to maintain their caste superiority in their working sphere, as they are bound to deal with these occupation, residing in burning ghat, out of their compulsion to run the household. The experienced, senior doms get a decent amount of monthly salary on a scale of 30 to 35 thousand rupees for being a corporation wage-labour, moreover they use their low caste status to bargain with the deceased family to claim excessive amounts of money to burn the dead body. In the mythical story, king Harischandra has observed downward mobility from his caste position as a kshatriya to an untouchable being. Even king Harischandra was trapped into extreme poverty and was bound to sell himself to a crematorium care-taker and became a 'chandal'. To perform his own typified duty, Harishchandra has claimed money to burn the dead body of his only son. The ethical bargaining rights before burning a corpse and the legitimacy associated with it comes from a non-caste, untouchable person, Harishchandra. The brahmins have traced similarities between the dom's bargaining right to burn dead bodies and the beggers' unending demand to beg for more and more money.

The second gate of Nimtola accommodates eight electric furnaces where bodies are burnt in heat temperature. It shows the mechanisation of work which has reduced manual labours. The *doms* said through these changes their labour has reduced as well as their excessive income which they claim from the party. As now most of the bodies are burnt in furnaces. In only 50minutes the bodies are turned to ashes in furnaces where in wooden pyre it takes at least 2-3 hours. Before burning body one earthen pot is broken in front of the head of the body which signifies that the dead person is breaking all relatedness with human possessions. There is a special skill of placing the body into the tray, performing the initial funeral right of *mukhagni* (touching the fire into the dead's face by one of the closest relative), engaging the furnace, and lastly collecting the *naabhikundo* (the naval cord) from the dumped ashes. *Mukhagni* is done by a priest who has an amicable relation with the *doms*. The notion of caste pollution between the priest (higher caste Brahmin preferably) and the *doms* (low caste people, commonly known as untouchables) are not maintained crucially in terms of earning dailyhood in the work sphere of burning ghat. Thus, whose skin is untouchable is himself an untouchable, so untouchability resides on an individual. The metaphysics of body establishes the binary of pure (*suchi*) and impure (*asuchi*). The dead bodies get detached from excessive clothes, except the basic necessities. Sometimes the *doms* take the clothes of dead bodies as their right (*gharka pan*) but they have stopped doing it now. It has been said that the clothes of dead bodies are unhygienic for health so those are dumped together. Still costly clothes are taken away with due permission from the party and those are sold in the market to get money. This posits the initials of recycle business. The shoekeepers of nearby Bhutnathmandir said that, there are young boys who come to collect the shrouds (clothes given only to dead bodies) at late night and they has an enmity with the *doms*. The priest of nearby Shiva temple (Bhutnathmandir) comes to *smashan* twice daily to collect the burnt ashes of dead bodies from pyres. Lord Shiva (*smashan-chari*: who lives in cremation ground) is worshipped by these ashes of burnt corpse.

Now the entire area of smasan is under the hierarchical observation of CCTV surveillance, so, the bargaining business is not too acute at present times. One of the *dom* said the bodies which mostly come after midnight are not 'standard body' by

which they indicate the bodies of any service man or entrepreneur or business man. The family or party which comes at late night for burning bodies talk in a rough language and use slangs, most of them come after consuming alcohols. The security guard of burning ghat said that doms are Bihari, dull headed and do not possess rational working mind. So, these categories of people are only invested for doing manual works. The Brahmins have expressed utter disgust to the dom's way of living life. Those people marry twice or thrice and lead a carefree, happy life in their terms, as if they are not deprived of any other substance of life. The Brahmins posited these sort of reckless life as a very low caste way of living.

The Acharya brothers illustrated, doms are chandals by their caste position, and so burning corpse in daily basis has become a habitualised action to them, as for example, the doctors are used to observe the bed-ridden, suffering patients in pain. Everyday corpses keep the intact flow of business in the cremation ground. Death of any human beings brings smile on the face of the business party of Nimtola burning ghat. Death is a source of happiness and opportunity for earning to the people of allied occupations of Nimtolaghat. As Subimal Acharya said, "The mourners give me money for taking photographs of their deceased relatives. I have no other way to refuse it, as it is my profession and the prime source of my subsistence on daily basis". He also explained, "The post-mortem bodies are mostly deformed and abnormal and have a sticky bad smell. I cover my nose and mouth with handkerchief and control breathing for few seconds to take pictures of such horrible corpse". The Brahmin brother asserted their occupational identity by mentioning the burning ghat as a service sector, providing the facilities to perform the last death rites of Hindus. It paves out the passage for liberating the gross body, made by flesh and blood, into the panchabhut (air, water, soil, fire and sky).

According to Axel Michael (2014), previously, untouchables were the caste from whom water cannot be accepted, and a touch of that community required water purification. The untouchables were outside the hindu social fold of rigid caste system. Any form of gross and subtle 'physical' contact can, therefore, be problematic. Touching even the shadow of an untouchable, could previously made a traditional Brahmin immediately take a ritual bath. The Brahmin brothers assured that, with the change in societal values, untouchability is not exercised now-a-days in their work sphere. The repetitive time cycle of day and night are controlled by the continuous arrival of dead bodies in cremation ground. The Brahmins said, outside the tropes of body and habitual action of performing the work, the doms have a separate private life with their families in festive seasons or in any familial occasions. The doms exhibit with their body. The surroundings of doms quarter is dirty and filled with left-over food, animals' excreta and filthy as represented in the brahmins narrative, whose shop is just at the opposite side of the road. The back side of dalit's house is portrayed as an 'alakshmi' (indecent) space in the Brahmins account.

Untouchability (*achuti*) is a unique phenomenon of Indian social experience. The conceptual categories related to untouchability addresses the problems of asymmetry as well as the ethics of theorising and the politics of experience intertwined in the discourse. The dalit who experiences oppression legitimately owns that experience of oppression. However, the experience of oppression also involves an oppressor, either as an individual or a system, and the dalit has no control or ownership over this oppressor. Gopal Guru (2012) argues that only the people who own an experience can theorise about it. At the other end, theoretical impulse arises in

response to an experience but does not expect the theoretician to have anything to do with the experience. There are different ways of understanding these opposites. One such way is through the binary of emotion and reason. Experience is often placed under the idea of emotion and related terms whereas theory is something that arises under the action of reason.

There is a certain overplaying or exaggeration of life itself, in the way the brahmins talk about the doms. The Brahminic imagination gives a materialist understanding of death and death specialists, which situates the low caste, low class people as only a mere body for performing scheduled habits. Hence the life of such low caste person is looked down and equated to death. The doms life is almost aligned to death and deathliness. There is no such vivid difference of life and death for a low caste being. So, the doms spontaneously could take part in any occasions and they are immensely capable to rush towards newly arrived dead body, at the same time. As if their life and death run together as two parallel lines. My portrayal may probably be characterised as a kind of Brahmanical romanticism and may be compared to the kind of Brahmanical representation that these two people (Subimal Acharya and Parimal Acharya) are providing. However, I am still going to maintain a certain difference in the representation of materialism. The two brahmins brother are representing the materiality in a negative sense that the dom is unable to think and is only a slave of habit. I am trying to however understand this materialism, not as belonging to specifically doms' only, but extending this as a logic of work to all other caste and classes, where we all are subjects of our labour and habit. Here in the question of phenomenological starkness that the doms life and work are distinct from any other working person per say, the caste logic is extended to the logic of work and labour. It may still seem to be the case that I am romanticising this material aspect. The Brahmins narrative of the doms life is critical in nature, but to be true to doms' experience of life, I need to maintain this romanticism. In his sense the economic and class anxiety of the Brahmins has taken a caste rhetoric. Peculiarly in India, the class analytic takes the caste specific dynamics, in this case which naturalises the doms' work of burning dead bodies, as the only sort of work that such a low caste people deserve to perform. As an extension to this phenomenological understanding of caste, the Brahmins have claimed to remain as a pure category although they inhabit the same workplace environment with the doms.

Conclusion

Death is not an equaliser. Also, habit is not an equaliser. According to these brahmin brothers, doms are habitually habituated to work and death simultaneously. In '*CharjagitiPanchashika*' (2015), Dr SumangalRana has ironically illustrated the logic of untouchability. He pointed out that doms reside outside the societal settlement and he is '*noiratma*' (who does not have soul). Here the dom symbolises a kind of '*sarbasunyata*' (meaninglessness). Dalits are born to be doomed to habit, but the brahmins are not habitually accustomed, they can transcend the habit and there lies the uniqueness of their caste. Even when Subimal Acharya takes a photograph of the dead person, he thinks of death. Besides as the lower caste embodies low caste and lower substances, they cannot think of death. The doms too are not able to transcend the lowness of caste and overplay their own caste identity. The Dalits cannot utter slokas, which the brahmins spontaneously do by their caste position and logic of purity. The Dalits can only burn. The doms learn the work skill by observing another doing the same kind of work. So, they do not have any existence outside their bodily formation of repeated habitual actions. However, labour is not considered a

preferred resource for producing knowledge. Since Aristotle's time, bodily labour has been considered a source of contempt and disgrace. Aristotle considers labour as the meanest because it deteriorates the body and cannot generate any intellectual form of imagination or activity which involves thought process (Arendt, 1958). The *doms* work and get paid, as if they cannot demand anything beyond selling their labour as a pure market category. The *doms* are impure, and almost like a deadly creature, whose only work is to burn.

In this context, authorship is an important criterion in distinguishing experience and theory. A person who experiences is not an author of that experience like a person who theorises about that experience. There is always a problem of representation. Experience is often placed under the idea of emotion and related terms whereas theory is something that arises under the action of reason. To hold Habermas' position is to give into this absolute dichotomy between emotion and reason or experience and reason. There are many pointers to why such a dichotomy seems to make apparent sense. Experience is local specific and context specific. Guru's position, in contrast to Habermas, is to merge this distinction and construct an essential relation between them. Asking for theory to be essentially related to experience is asking for reason to be essentially yoked to feeling, emotions and such terms. This yoking is not at the level of legitimacy; that is, Guru is not claiming that it is epistemologically illegitimate to not relate reason to emotion. He would like to claim that experience and reason are in some sense ontologically related; that is, they are related as facts of the matter (Sarukkai, 1997).

Like untouchables, death itself stays at a distance from the flow of human life. The *dom* touches the dead body as it's an integral part of funeral ritual. According to *hindupuraan* fire purifies the dead and *doms* are sacred being as they emancipate the human body into five basic natural elements (*panchabhut*). Famous Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore referred *sangsar* (household) as a crematorium ground where a continuous cycle of events follows one another in a monotonic repetition. In human physical consciousness death is the darkness like sleep and *doms* live their life in that illumination. After death any human dead body gets its highest respect while it becomes touch-able to the untouchables (*doms*). The formality of everyday practices is indicated in these narratives, which frequently reverses the relationships of power, like the stories of miracles, which ensures the victory of the unfortunate in a fabulous utopian space.

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