

Looking through the Veil

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This paper implores the action researcher to go beyond and examine the responses that conventional social science methodologies seek to elicit from its respondents. It enables discussion of the action research work undertaken with multi-ethnic adivasi rural communities located in the eastern Madhya Pradesh. Through this discussion, I implore the reader to closely examine the host of responses that researchers may encounter in their respective fields of work. Before arriving at an articulation of the problematic(s) that may emerge from within the needs of the community, I make a case to examine and re-examine the narratives and testimonials that are often offered to a researcher. Such responses, narratives, testimonials, stories often act to shroud experiences that may stand contrary to a dominant narrative. These contradictory snippets may in turn offer one a fleeting opportunity to come across occurrences that may allow one to explore the anti-hegemonic possibilities. Through this paper, I make a case to hold onto such contradictions that have the potential for the action researcher to look beyond the obvious and follow such fault-lines which would undo the popular narratives that might be carefully curated to shroud the multi-various realities, truths and experiences of a community. I begin the discussion by comparing these hegemonic narratives by invoking the presentation of the self in the everyday – where narratives when repeated in the everyday work to give an illusion of a certain reality scripted in the framework of the discourse. I am arguing for a possibility wherein such responses are not only curated and scripted with immense care against the chaos of the back stage to present a coherent front; but also to iterate and re-enforce a projection. I extend this comparison to ask what if this repetitive performance happens to be more than a simple (re)-enactment that requires its actors to wear a mask day in and day out, at times for long durations – to put forth a well collated performance of stylized acts. What if this performance has

taken the form of a performed activity, as theorized by Judith Butler, where stylized repetition of acts have caused the masks worn for too long to now melt and fuse with the real face. What if the community itself has begun to believe that the fused mask is the real face. Hence, I attempt to show through the discussion of work in Kuraili to work through the layers of the fused masks, carefully curated and constructed narratives (that give an illusion of truth), and follow the fault line that might give the action researcher a glimpse of the crack(s) that would be the undoing of the performance. These very crack(s) will enable the action researcher to find a critical opening through which the axis of the transformative work may be situated.

Social science methodologies, for long, have been obsessed with narratives and responses that allow them to have a glimpse of the lives of their subject(s). Social science methodologies rely too much on these responses and thus uncritically respond to the narratives by the (innocent, naïve) rural respondents. However, for the purpose of this paper, I choose to stay with these phrases or perhaps these phrases have stayed with me! These few phrases remain like a leitmotif throughout this paper while the attempt remains to not just understand the semantic meaning of the phrases but also to understand the speakers' position(s) in relation to their community, their 'be-ing' in relation to the collective being as various actors utter (and reiterate) these certain phrases. This will also help us understand and delve into how these phrases constitute the being of actors who are part of the development fabric, the community. With the help of Goffman's theorization of the presentation of the self and Butler's performativity, I examine these phrases. My attempt has been to read these utterances through these theorization to understand what lies beyond the glitter of phrases such as 'model village' where everything is perfectly alright. Here, in the 'model village', I encountered statements like -

“Aur cheezon ke alava, Kuraili humara ek model gaon hai” - Representative of a development organization that has been working in the village from 2014¹

“....Aaj jo vikaas gaon mein dikhta hai woh sab gaon ke didi bhaiya ke eksaath milkar kaam karne se hua hai...” – Rajesh ²

¹Translation: Amongst all other things, Kuraili is our model village (in this vicinity).

“Log Kuraili mein ya to seekhne aate hain; ya (Kuraili se log) training dene ya seekhaane jate hai” - Nilkusum³

“...Aap bhi chinta na karein, Kuraili ki didiyaan gender trained hain aur bhaiya gender sensitized... ~~We~~ **who** aur gaon ke aadmi jaise nahi hai...” - Nilkusum⁴

“Kuraili mein log yeh bhi dekhne aatein hai kaise alag alag jati ke log ek jut ho kar kaam karte hain. Unki ekta ka eku dharan bana hai” –Jyoti⁵

The ‘WHAT’ of the Action Research

In anthropological works on ‘village studies’⁶ one often comes across arrival stories and descriptions of the first day in the field. These arrival descriptions have both been extensively critiqued as well as have received accolades. These arrival stories consisting of a day or a string of days become pivotal for the research (and the researcher) as they leave an impression that often appear and reappear as palimpsest during the course of the research.

The arguments that I present in this paper are drawn and founded critically on a set of first few impressions that left a lasting impression on me. It was through these sets of impressions that I encountered fault lines that helped me pursue the other narratives that often are shrouded for the sake of maintaining a cohesive narrative. These impressions, I would like to add, appeared repetitively during the course of the action research. I realized that an understanding of the research problematic and the subsequent course of action will remain incomplete without a discussion of the

²Names of the respondents have been changed

³Translation: People come to Kuraili to learn; Or the people of Kuraili go (to other villages) to train and teach them.

⁴Translation: ... You may not worry, the women of Kuraili are gender trained and the men are gender sensitised... unlike the men in other villages.

⁵Translation: People also come to Kuraili to witness the unity of different tribes who have worked together. This unity has become an example (to look upto) for the people of other villages.

⁶Frederick George Bailey, *Tribes and Nation* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1960)

Andre Beteille, *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)

Shyama Charan Dubey, *The Indian Village* (London: Routledge, 1955).

Kathleen Gough, "The Social Structure of a Tanjore Village". *The Economic Weekly*, (1952), 4(21), 531-536.

Village Society, ed. Surinder Jodhka (Hyderabad and Mumbai: Orient Blackswan, 2012)

Triloki Nath Madan, *Kinship: A Study of the Pandits of Rural Kashmir* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965)

Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas, *The Remembered Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976)

inscriptions⁷ that were left on me, by the projections of the first set of impressions. These first impressions about the site of research engagement – KurailiRyt⁸, were formed from my conversations with actors both within and without. These descriptions informed and shaped my understanding of the village.

The actors-without consisted of development professionals, bureaucrats at the block office, the people of the neighboring villages and the block town – people who had engaged with the village directly or indirectly. Discussions with these actors presented to me how the village had earned its reputation as a village of ‘model’ values in the transcript of discursive development. They introduced me and also took the liberty to reassure me about the cosmopolitan nature of the village that was going to host my action research project for next ten months. I was narrated the glorious past of Kuraili – that excelled at (development) interventions. While development practitioners shared with me the success of the village’s women-led credit groups, commercial cultivation of vegetables, poultry farming; the bureaucrats shared about the awareness of the community about their rights and entitlements as citizens – and how they have accessed the same by making demands upon the block office and collector’s office⁹. The people from the neighboring villages and nearby block towns spoke of Kuraili with the highest of regards. They spoke about the spirit of entrepreneurial-ship and the cosmopolitan nature of the people of the village who have managed to move beyond the clutches of regressive traditional practices that rural India and adivasi communities are often identified with. During this period, I was constantly reassured about the availability of mobile network and institutionalized toilets. Honest attempts were made, by whosoever I met, about how Kuraili was ‘the’ place befitting for an urban woman to carry out her research. More than anything else, the people of Kuraili knew how to host guests¹⁰. As I was still wrapping my head around these discussions I have had about the perspectives

⁷James Clifford, “Notes on (Field)notes,” in *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*, ed. Roger Sanjek (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), 47-70.

⁸Block Samnapur, District Dindori, Madhya Pradesh

⁹An instance that is often cited was when the women of Kuraili sought funds directly from the collector’s office for a road that would connect the village to the main road and to install a diversion based pump that would ensure a perennial source of water located atop a hill.

¹⁰After all people of Kuraili were already used to hosting visitors for exposure visits which was a routine affair and the people of the village had acquired the requisite skills to host the outsiders. Something not every village can boast of.

of the people about Kuraili – a model village, my curiosity peaked – as I braced myself to encounter a village and its people who appeared to have stepped right out of the developmental fairy-tale.

However, I would like to start my ‘encounter’ with the village as a set of first impressions. My encounter with the people of the village was as dramatic as were my previous encounters with the people who spoke of Kuraili. The description below will detail how the village left an impression on me. As I engage with Kuraili over a period two years beginning in 2016, I elaborate on how Development left an impression on Kuraili and how Kuraili appeared in Development. Uncannily these experiences became a template against which I read my experiences during my stay in the village.

The following section dwells with how the narratives that came forth as I traversed with different people in the village at various junctures unfolded for me and how I began to unwrap them. I have already discussed my initial set of impressions of the village formed by those who have either worked in the village as bureaucrats or development practitioners/professionals or have engaged with men and women of the village on various other occasions. In the following section I move to an understanding of Kuraili from the inside. I draw upon many conversations where the people of different generations walked me through the village, elucidating events that have shaped them and their experiences. This process made me see the village through the people making me realize and understand what it meant to be part of Kuraili, to be living in Kuraili and to belong to Kuraili. It is from these experiences that I elaborate about how I perceived the village at the end of such interactions – what I made of Kuraili.

Setting up an encounter: The method and the methodology

The ‘HOW’ of the Action Research

One might be provoked to think at this juncture about what would be the methodology and the method to understand the ever evolving matrix of human relationships, in order to inaugurate a conversation with the discourse of development. Through this section, I wish to elaborate on the method and methodological framework against which I read

the relationships that existed in Kuraili- the site of my action research. Kurt Lewin¹¹ introduced the phrase ‘action research’ to describe a form of enquiry that would enable ‘the significantly established laws of social life to be tried and tested in practice’.

The M.Phil. programme of Development Practice seeks to go beyond the Lewinian understanding of action research as a form of enquiry. Rather it seeks to work with communities in a collaborative manner- where the members of the community become co-researchers and embark on a journey of exploration along with the action researcher. I built my understanding of action research through Wilfred Carr¹² as he outlines action research in a non-methodological view. He argues that the chief task of action research was to promote a kind of historical self-consciousness that the development of practice presupposes and requires. He added that the primary task of action research as a mode of inquiry was to reclaim the sphere of praxis from its modern assimilation (and relegation) to the sphere of *techne*¹³ by fostering certain kinds of dialogical communities in which open conversation(s) can be protected from the domination of a pre-given research methodology¹⁴. Carr¹⁵ continues to discuss:

Action research was to be a form of inquiry that recognized practical knowledge and understanding can only be developed and advanced by practitioners engaging in the kind of dialogue and conversation through which the tradition-embedded nature of their assumptions implicit in their practice can be made explicit and their collective understanding of praxis can be transformed.

‘Immersion’ then becomes an integral method of engagement for a practitioner of action research. Immersive stays, according to the design of the programme, are founded on a yearlong engagement with the adivasi life world. The stay at the immersion site is divided into three phases aligned with the agricultural calendar of the

¹¹Kurt Lewin, “Group Decision and Social Change,” in *Readings in Social Psychology*, ed. Eleanor Maccoby, Theodore Newcomb and Eudene Hartley (New York: Holt, 1952), 564.

¹²Wilfred Carr, “Philosophy, Methodology and Action Research,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 2006, 40(4), 421-435.

¹³*Techne* (Greek), as stated by Carr, is guided by productive philosophy. This philosophy then provides principles, procedures and operational methods which together constitute the most effective means for achieving some predetermined end.

¹⁴Carr, 434.

¹⁵Carr, 433.

region in which the action researcher works. The first phase of my own stay coincided with the harvest season i.e. January, 2016 - February, 2016. The second (also perhaps the most difficult) phase of the stay happened during the monsoon of July and August 2016; the third and the final phase of the stay was from January, 2017 to May, 2017. I derive my understanding of Immersion from the imagination of Professor Anup Dhar¹⁶ which is about experiences, engagements and relations; where the research begins “in a psychoanalytically sensitive manner with the adivasilife worlds”¹⁷. The attempt was to co-research rigorously with the community on questions, issues and problems relevant to the community (including attention to psycho-biographs of hope, despair and desire), to collaboratively arrive at an action research problematic with the community. The researcher will then develop a ‘framework of action-ing the co- researched finding(s), and finally research in a theoretically rigorous manner the action-ing process’¹⁸. These tenets therefore form the foundation of this work and then become the beacon to help me navigate through the complexities of the life-world in Kuraili.

Therefore my research question of imagining collectives that acknowledge differences could not have been arrived at, without an everyday encounter with a homogeneous narrative around the triumphant journey of ‘vikaas’ (aka development). The method of immersive stays offered me an opportunity to encounter such narratives that cloaked experiences which may present an alternate picture of this journey. The immersive journey enabled me to reach personal experiences bringing forth an image that would contradict the ideal-ness of the village. I thus encountered instances that revealed hostilities between various communities and their members, the fallacy of men’s pride of their women’s development efforts, upholding of separate dining rituals in spite of years of efforts by the Self Help Group federation that seeks to fight such divisive ritualistic practices. In order to realize an imagination of collectives that recognize and respect differences (of opinions and origins), action research as a framework offered me a route to work along with the people of Kuraili, through the delusional veil, the disavowal and denial of the existence of such differences. Play (of

¹⁶Anup Dhar, “Action Research: Writing on Righting Wrongs.” Last modified April, 2015, [researchgate.net/publication/274953109_Action_Research_Writing_on_Righting_Wrongs](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274953109_Action_Research_Writing_on_Righting_Wrongs).

¹⁷Dhar, 2015, 12.

¹⁸ibid.

gully cricket) offered me the essential axis through which I could inaugurate discussions around fluidity of subject positionalities – to arrive at recognition and an acknowledgement of differences. To pave way for a different kind of coming together – one that is not founded in solidarities of uniformity¹⁹.

Understanding Kuraili through front stage and back stage

To have a deeper understanding of the repetition of the meta-narrative that seems to exist in and around Kuraili, to understand what remains unsaid when this meta-narrative is fore-grounded; I begin with Erving Goffman's theorization²⁰ of how people present themselves in the everyday particularly when they are collectively presenting themselves to the outsiders. Goffman's dramaturgical analysis may help us to develop an insight on the individual behavior, and the nature of group dynamics through a discussion of teams; the relationship shared between performance and audience. Goffman's analysis helps in forming an understanding of what happens when a group indulges in a performance for its audiences, day in and day out.

In the image of a theatrical performance, Goffman discusses in his book how people have a 'front face' and a 'back face' for every interface that they have with an audience. He elaborates how in a theatrical performance, the actors in the play implicitly request their audience members or observers to take seriously the impression fostered before them. Before we proceed, it will be worthwhile to know how Goffman understands performance and then I shall discuss how it informs me to develop the aforementioned insight on the behavior of the individuals and the groups in Kuraili. Through Goffman, I understand performance as the activity by an individual (or a group of individuals) which takes place during a period marked by his (or their) continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers. 'Front', then, is that part of an individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance.

¹⁹All women united as victims of patriarchy, poverty, deprivation, adivasi, dalit, so on and so forth.

²⁰Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books), 1959.

The members of the audience are asked to believe that the characters before them actually possess the characters they appear to possess²¹. Rather the audience steps into a theatrical performance with an implicit agreement that they will be willing to suspend disbelief for the duration of the performance. However this is a setup where the audience is aware that it will be witnessing a performance. In Goffman's theorization of performance in the everyday there too is an implicit agreement made between the two parties²² where the performer and receiver of the performance agree that the act the performer is presenting will be taken as it is presented. Goffman²³ uses the concept of the team to illustrate the work of a group of individuals who "co-operate" in performance, attempting to achieve goals sanctioned by the group. Co-operation may manifest itself as unanimity in demeanor and behavior or in the assumption of differing roles for each individual, determined by the desired intent in performance. Goffman refers to the "shill", a member of the team who "provides a visible model for the audience of the kind of response the performers are seeking", "promoting psychological excitement for the realization of a goal (generally monetary), as an example of a "discrepant role" in the team"²⁴. In each circumstance, the individual assumes a 'front' that is perceived to enhance the group's performance.

Kuraili can thus be seen as engrossed in a performance i.e. the performance of being a harmonious homogeneous village- the one that works collectively to usher in vikaas. In this performance, people in the village place the needs of the needful as their priority, women become the principle drivers of change and men support their women in all their progressive decisions. Meanwhile everyone is constantly resounding the (meta-) narrative; perhaps this then becomes the 'front face'. The individuals together become the ones who come forth to chronicle the glorious journey from deprivation to abundance – to funders, civil society organizations' members, women (and seldom men) who come to Kuraili, to draw inspiration from this small village in the Samnapur block.

²¹Goffman, 10.

²²Here, unlike in a theatrical performance where the audience forms the third party, in the everyday the respondent and the third party-the audience and the witness to the performance collapse into one party- the respondent. This respondent is the one who directly responds as well as assumes the role of a witness/observer to the face that the first person is putting forth.

²³Adam Barnhart, *Erving Goffman: Presentation of Self In Everyday Life*, 1994.

²⁴Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 91.

These visitors want to know how this journey was made possible and how it can be emulated in other parts of rural India. The ‘shill’ in the team takes the form of the empowered articulate didi who chronicles the journey meticulously highlighting the moments in which people came together to usher in ‘badlaav’.

The necessity to repeat the narrative of progress in Kuraili can be seen as the necessity of each individual to maintain his or her front in order to promote the team performance which reduces the possibility of dissent. Barnhart²⁵ elaborates Goffman’s formulation of this team-work that while the unifying elements of the team may often appear shallow and less complete than the requirements of performance, the individual actor feels a strong pressure to conform to the desired front in the presence of an audience, as deviance destroys the credibility of the entire performance. This comes to life in Kuraili as the empowered didis assume the responsibility to voice the journey of the village (on behalf of others) in every meeting organized in the village particularly during exposure visits made by the agents of development. This compulsion to apprise the outsider with the recent but glorious past of the village was evident during the first period of my immersive stay- where the virtues of the people of Kuraili, were presented and emphasized with the repetition of this narration. In my attempt to explore how such a village that works together and lives together resolves issues of say, access to facilities provided by the state or how they engaged with the local state bureaucracy, in order to bring out the instances of collaboratively working through struggles and impasses, a standard answer that I received was – yaha**a**_bhi sab theek_hai!²⁶. This statement was (again) made by a number of members of the village. Every time, this response unanimously emerged in my discussions with the groups. This unanimous response was then repeatedly presented to me, to the community service provider, to the development actors such as the PRADAN executives, and to the representatives of the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM).

As a result, disagreements are to be carried out in the absence of an audience, where ideological and performance changes may be made without the threat of damage to the goals of the team as well as the character of the individual. In this way, a clear

²⁵Barnhart, *Érving Goffman: Presentation of Self In Everyday Life*.

²⁶Translation: Everything is alright here, (at the moment)!

division has been made between team and audience. Goffman describes the division between team performance and audience in terms of “region”²⁷, describing the role of setting in the differentiation of actions taken by individuals. Extending the dramaturgical analysis, he divides the region into ‘front’, ‘back’, and ‘outside’ the stage, contingent upon the relationship of the audience to the performance.

While the above description of the performance can be seen as part of frontal stage act, the back face or back stage, as Goffman²⁸ articulates, may be defined as a place relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course. Goffman continues to conceptualize the back region as a space where the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated; it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. Given that people in Kuraili have a shared history of about 100 years, will it not be natural to have discords among people once in a while. Women would often declare to me how after joining the samitis, they have given up their prejudices- prejudices that stem from (within) their jati-identities. Unlike before, they now accept water and food from the households in the village that are different from their jati. They would further add that in Maha-adheeveshans²⁹ women of all jatis – the Gonds, Agariyas, Bhariyas, and Banwasi (Kols) along with Lohars, Ahirs, Yadavs and Pradhans (the latter group of jati’s are considered lower in the stratified hierarchy of the adivasijati system operating within the region) congregate and have a fellowship together, and share the food that is cooked for all by all women³⁰. However as the village’s young Panda³¹ Shyamroo acknowledges that while men and women in Kuraili come and dine with each other in the presence of the district collector, civil society organizations, funders, donors, people who visit Kuraili to view its developmental

²⁷Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 107.

²⁸Goffman, 69.

²⁹*Maha-adheeveshan*—A day and night event organized at the block level where women whose SHGs are affiliated to the federation of samitis, come together and participate in various events organized by the federation. In Samnapur, Rani Durgawati Tejaswini Mahila Sangh is the federation at the level of the block to which most Samitis that were formed under Madhya Pradesh Rural Livelihood Project, were affiliated with.

³⁰This move to inter-dine with the women from various jatis seems to be a source of pride for most women inside and outside of Kuraili. They have often shared their experiences of events like the Maha-adheeveshan or trainings that are organized for women by the federation in the block, where no jati discrimination and prejudices would be tolerated.

³¹*Panda* is a Shamanic Priest who performs rituals and offerings to the older Gods of the adivasis.

achievements and others from the discourse of development; rules of purity and pollution pertaining to food habits need to be maintained when relatives or people from their biradri³² visit the village. He then quickly adds that such norms have to be observed since the distant relatives, coming from the outside, do not understand why inter-dining is important and these outsiders feel a need to acknowledge the differences that stem from within various jatis. Thus people in the village maintain such segregation in the presence of their relatives or members of their biradri just to avoid any discord or disharmony within their jati commune. Although what remains intriguing and therefore becomes integral in our articulation of the back stage is that even though rules of purity and pollution in food are suspended once in a while in front of actors and agents of the development sector, the endogamic rules are strictly observed within the village. This sits contrary to the confessions that women have made about letting go of their jati discriminations and segregating practices due to their membership to (developmental) organizational structures that require them to cleanse themselves of their jati subjectivities³³. These incidents and more constitute the back face in relation to which the front face is constructed and presented. It should be remembered that while samiti memberships have now become an important part of the lives of adivasi women in Kuraili, their jati identity remains intrinsic to their everyday being.

Goffman makes one feel that one has control over what one presents and what one does not. One has control of what face one would like to present to the world and the one they want to keep away. At times one wears many masks at once. But does one always wear or change or remove masks consciously? Do we present our various selves to an outsider, always being consciously aware which front we would like present? Can one always be completely aware and conscious of the mask or the face, have complete autonomy and agency over the front that one needs to presume and present to the outside? What about the unconscious fronts that we often put up for the other? The masks that we place to conceal our real faces, without the awareness of the presence of

³²*Biradri*- members of the jati community

³³Development as a discourse requires its subjects to be independent of such jati subscriptions and prejudices which it renders traditional and therefore regressive.

the un-real face. It is here at this juncture that Judith Butler helps me understand, through her concept of performativity- the unconscious of the masks worn.

Understanding Kuraili through performativity

Judith Butler³⁴ helps me in extending and re-enforcing Goffman's articulation of everyday presentation of the self and the constitution of subjectivities through her discussion of gender identity through 'performative acts' in the everyday. She discusses how gender is not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time- an identity instituted through 'stylized repetition of acts'³⁵. I feel the argument can be extended to other socially located identities and subjectivities such as the adivasijati identity. Butler's formulation of gender moves it off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of constituted social temporality³⁶. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that- a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which mundane audiences, including actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. This can be said to stand true in the case of the adivasi (jati) identity. Even though this space is regulated by a social institution of jati-samaj, it is through the acts or actions performed in the everyday that constitute particular jati subjectivity. For instance endogamy rules are strictly observed and mobility (of women) across ethnicities is kept strictly under control by ensuring that no man or woman has marital alliances outside of a particular jati group³⁷. The norms relating to purity and pollution are observed in the everyday through rules of restrictions on ritualistic inter-dining practices which determine who one can give food and water and from whom one can accept the same. When people of Gond community in Kuraili do not accept meals from

³⁴Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory". *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 1988, 519-531.

³⁵Butler, 519.

³⁶Butler, 520.

³⁷Nitya Rao, "Good Women Do Not Inherit Land: Politics of Land and Gender in India". *Journal of Asian Studies*, (2008), 70 (1), 289-290.

communities they consider lower to themselves³⁸, they reinforce the jati hierarchy and their superiority within the jati structure. In the February of 2017, while narrating an incident, Vanita Poyyam (wife of the community leader of the Bhariyas) stated- “un logon ne humara chhua khana khane se mana kiya”³⁹. This act of refusing to accept food can be seen as socially distancing⁴⁰ oneself from other social groups. Emory Bogardus⁴¹ has written about social distancing and its practical applications. This distancing also reinforces the stratification within the jati structure across social relations. All these aspects together cumulatively re-enforce a certain identity and its status – an identity of Gond.

In a similar fashion, in order to reinforce a certain identity, the people are required to continuously put forth a narrative and perform actions that speak for the ideal-ness of Kuraili. At the same time this requires them to ensure various discords (that occur amongst people across tribal communities, families, power centers and individuals) are kept under wraps in the construction of a uniform narrative of a unified harmonious village in the face presented to the outsiders. Although hostilities continue to fester and manifest themselves in the ‘back stage’, where it is assumed that there will be no outsiders or observers to question and judge the harmonious existence of Kuraili.

Therefore, the ‘front face’ for Kuraili becomes an essential space of performance for its developmental becoming, a village with regard and reputation amongst other villages. However, this performance comes at a cost of repression. The village often performs the narrative and through this it displays its progressive-ness by adopting practices such as multi ethnic dining, enterprising and gender empowered women who take critical financial decisions while they constantly receive support from their families (particularly men), enthusiastically participating in women-centric initiatives⁴². The ‘back stage’ then becomes integral to keep the adivasi rural life world contained.

³⁸For instance Nitya Rao’s work among Santhals (in Jharkhand) elaborates on the hierarchies within the tribes.

³⁹Translation: They (few members of Gond tribe) refused to consume the food that we (Bhariyaa and Agariya) had touched.

⁴⁰Social distance – a concept developed by Emory Bogardus (1938) to measure prejudice towards a variety of groups, to reinforce social hierarchies.

⁴¹Emory Bogardus, "Social Distance and its practical application". *Sociology & Social Research*, (1938), 22, 462-476.

⁴²That often isolate men and work to keep them alienated from such initiatives.

Although, this containment comes at the cost of a repression, a restrain. Every time the image of a model village is fore-grounded, this happens through a repression of differences, segregations and contradictions. When these contradictions surface, they manifest themselves as inconsistencies and interruptions in the performance of an ideal unit. These recurring inconsistencies (although fleeting), gave me a window into the back face or the constantly repressed face of Kuraili. Since children have still not become the agents (or actors) within the discourse of development, they are still away from the performativity that goes into projecting a certain image of the village. Thus they are able to show the inconsistencies that present themselves as contradictions to the performance put forth by their elders.

To one it may sound that something similar might happen in many other villages that have been exposed to the discourse of development – where people would like to keep their differences contained within the social boundaries of the village. Kuraili becomes a peculiar case because the difference between the ‘front’ and the ‘back stage’, as theorized by Goffman, has begun to blur, and we find these two spaces confronting each other, from time to time. What becomes a cause of concern is how a series of events rooted in personal conflict culminates into excommunication of one community by another. This excommunication then threatens to disrupt the front face. This disruption then came forth when few Gond women refused to make contributions for the annual event of Maha-adheevshan. They felt that since they do not wish to dine with the women from other (lower) jatis, given their position in the hierarchy, they saw no use of making food contributions in an inter-dining event⁴³.

These lines that seem to appear to blur, manifested themselves in terms of aberrations to the flawless performance. In the month of March and April 2017, Kuraili was confronted by five instances that can be seen as a culmination of resentment – a resentment that has been harbored for long. This resentment was seen at its brutal best when a powerful Gond siyaan’s⁴⁴ family refused to dine with the members of the other

⁴³The nature of the contribution is decided at the level of the federation, which is partly made in cash and partly in form of rice portions, which should be enough for at least two people. These rice portions are then collected and cooked on the day of the event where everyone would be coming together irrespective of their jati identities and partake in a meal together.

⁴⁴Siyaan–Patriarch of the tribe within the village

two communities- Agariya and Bhariya citing reasons of purity and pollution. This quickly escalated to the level of ethnic communities. Initially the siyaans of the other two tribes decided to boycott the Gond family at fault however within a week compromises were reached between the elders of the community. Even though the compromises were reached there was no discussion around the root of the conflict. In this sarvajanik_ramdhun⁴⁵, meals were prepared separately for different groups. As Bhanumati remarked even though this event was sarvajanik⁴⁶there was nothing in it that felt like a collective being-in-together_ "Saath_mein_khadhe_hai, par saath_jaisa_lagta nahi. Saath_hai par saath hone ki_khushi_nahi_hai"⁴⁷.

This then creates the need to bring together another kind of collective- a collective not based on erasure of differences and denial of contradictions built on repression of resentments; rather what may be needed was a creation of a space for acknowledgement of differences and disagreements. In this space there should be no pressure on the community to perform roles that would suit an ideal developmental model village, but a village that acknowledges and confronts differences. An acknowledgement of differences could pave way for new kinds of possibilities of transformation.

About a year ago (since January 2016), it seemed that Kuraili and its people have come to a halt. Across several meetings, when I began asking questions around what happened after everyone prospered, when everyone had (seemingly) achieved economic security, what it meant to be part of such a village? Till when did such prosperity continue? What happens after having been developed to a certain level? What is the next phase in this trajectory? What happens next in this story of success? To this, I was only met with silence.

Three words that stand out so far in the narrative are: vikaas, badlaav and ekta. These three words provoke me to ask the following questions: what is vikaas or development in the context of Kuraili? How has development changed Kuraili and

⁴⁵Ramdhun is a 24 hour ritual, where Ramayan is to be read by few individuals who can read the text, and people of the village along with the host family accompany the person who is reciting the text with musical accompaniments and songs of worship.

⁴⁶Sarvajanik- public or community based

⁴⁷Translation: We stand together but we do not feel as if we are together. There is no joy of being together.

translated itself into the village? How have the modern institutions interacted with traditional ones? And what is the meaning of ekta, salah, soojh_boojh⁴⁸ in a multi-ethnic village? What do these words symbolize when one of the women in Sharda samiti meeting declares to me “yeh badlaav, humare_aapsi_soojh_boojh, salah aur_eksaath_kaam karne se aaya_hai”⁴⁹ or when Vanita remarks, “samiti mein aa kar hum sab ek_hain”⁵⁰. Or when Nilkusumadds “Humari_ekta se seekhne log aur_gaon se aate_hai”⁵¹.

What do these words mean in a small village with five different ethnic communities who practice endogamic rules and segregated rituals? What is the meaning of ekta in such a village? How does salah and soojh_boojh take place in such a context? How do people of different communities, histories, ethnicities and opinions come together? Is unity possible amidst our differences or will it happen only when we forget our differences? Is forgetting of differences the only way of coming together – where the unit(y) requires its members to be homogeneous, cleansed of the characteristics of their identity which would set them apart from each other? Are differences then a cause for disharmony? Or can there be harmony in differences? Can harmony be on acknowledgement and recognition of differences (and not only in forgetting of such differences)?

Thus the research problematic takes the following shape - what would be the imagination of a collective where differences (of opinions and origins) can be acknowledged and recognized?

The ‘WHY’ of the Action Research

One begins to feel the absence of any differences in the narrative told and retold to an outsider such as myself. The repetition of the narrative seems not only uncanny, but one almost seems to feel as if the narrative has been scripted. Scripted either inside the village or outside, one could not have said that then. Of course one might argue that the

⁴⁸Ekta- Unity; Salah - consultation (in the context of the statement);Soojh-boojh- sense and sensibilities.

⁴⁹Translation: This change was possible because we worked with our mutual understanding and shared counsel.

⁵⁰Translation: When we come together in the group, we feel like we are one.

⁵¹Translation: People come to learn from our unity.

narrative could be formed due to the interaction between what constitutes the outside and the inside of the village. However I began to wonder why there was a need to narrate to me about the cohesion amongst the people repetitively. The village had people that belonged to five ethnically differentiated tribes. These were people who found themselves differentially placed in the jati hierarchy of the adivasi life world. Shyamroo (the shamanic priest for Agariyas) would often elaborate about the rules of purity and pollution pertaining to various clans as observed among the five tribes in Kuraili. Interestingly he discussed how these rules were often relaxed in the presence of development agencies and civil society members. Another event that one often hears in Kuraili which became a marker of people's unity in spite of their jatis, was the event where the members of various clans dined for the first time in 2012 and broke a social taboo. Conversation with Shyamroo would inform how such taboos were still observed in the presence of the relatives (from other villages) and clan members particularly in the events of kinship alliances - where the clans have strict practices around endogamic rules of tribes. The progressive inter-dining is observed only in the presence of progressive development actors.

At this juncture it almost seemed as if a picture is being projected of coercive sameness⁵² – a sameness that represents cohesion and unfaltering collective presence⁵³. A collective presence that cannot allow differences of any kind to emerge. Differences that may seem like aberrations, standing contrary to the narrative that floats in Kuraili. What seems to come across from my interactions and engagements with various groups

⁵²Aradhna Sharma, *Logics of Empowerment: Development, Gender, and Governance in Neoliberal India* (University of Minnesota, 2008).

⁵³Aradhna Sharma through her aforementioned work discusses the complex relationship existing between development, gendered subjectivities, and community. This discussion is enabled through an examination of MahilaSamakhya (a programme that worked to collectivize women in the rural areas through SHGs). It is an attempt to understand how the programme universalizes and homogenizes the identities and oppressions of marginalized women who are the programme's clients. The MS programme assumes a natural affinity of interest among the similarly identified groups of women and wants to forge a spirit of collectivism among them; that is, it hopes to turn "a community in itself" to "community for itself" (Ibid, 167). The term 'MahilaSamakhya' translates as 'Women Speaking with an Equal Voice'. This programme is structured as a hybrid government-organized non governmental organization which aimed to "collectively empower and mobilize low-caste, rural Indian women who have been systematically and actively disempowered by economic forces and by social and political structures" (Ibid, 15). For us what becomes noteworthy, at this juncture, from Sharma's work is how collectivization of women on the basis of universalization of certain identities did away with particularities of certain groups. This meant erasure of quintessential differences such the differences rooted in origin and origin based affiliations in order to inaugurate equality offered by the discourse of development.

of people is (certain) sameness and homogeneity. As if one cannot be allowed to look at the instances that do not conform to the image that is projected of Kuraili. An image based on harmonious homogenization of differences. In order to depart from this homogeneity I began to explore personal experiences of loss and triumph in the larger narrative of success (the narrative resounded to me). I began to explore what would be an imagination of groups or people coming together not based on forgetting of differences and denying contradictions but rather by making spaces for such differences that are often based in everyday subjectivities. Can there be a space where such differences can be voiced or shared? Is there a space in the institution of samitis, where women can narrate personal experiences of pain, struggle and loss, while the village progressed on the path of vikaas? I begin to explore what if we start talking about our differences, our disagreements in a collective? Can there be an imagination of a collective that is based not on erasure, not on forgetting of differences, but rather where the people come together being conscious of what differentiates them from each other?

I began my next immersive stay with these set of questions keeping at the heart of my enquiry about the possibilities of imagining collectives with differences; where I seek to explore what would be an alternate story, the other story of Kuraili's success. During this stay I also delved a little deeper in the contradictions that appeared to me. Through these discussions I go back to the dis-similarities between what is narrated to me and what seemingly appears to me. A difference between what is presented and what may exist. The differences between what is said and most importantly what is left unsaid, words that get veiled behind what gets voiced and what does not.

Up till now, I have shared conversations that have imprinted my perception of Kuraili marked by the first visit with development professionals to how I encountered Kuraili through various people who live in the village. Conversations and discussions with Rajesh(a Bhariya leader), Nilkusum, Vanita, Jyoti, and Bhanumati who are the active members of the samiti, shaped my perception and the experiences of the first sixty days of immersive stay in the village. However my proximity with the youngest members of the village revealed to me another aspect. It was through them that I became aware of the homogeneity of the experiences that were being shared by the

adults, the amicability and amiability being projected to me who was still an outsider. Interactions with the children and their adults, in addition to the views held by people in the block town brought forth a picture that was marred by contradictions. On one hand I had women and men - who shared numerous instances of people coming together for vikaas and badlaav; while the children displayed feelings of hostility amongst each other. As people together projected a picture of ekta, aapsisoojhboojh and badlaav; conversations with Sunita for instance revealed a quick glance into the fissures present in the seamless narrative of badlaav.

Reflecting on my interactions and engagements with various groups of people brought forth (certain) sameness, a homogeneity. As if an outsider cannot be allowed to look at the instances that do not conform to the projected image of Kuraili. To break this image based on harmonious homogenization of differences and in order to depart from this homogeneity, I sought to explore personal experiences of loss and triumph in the larger narrative of success (the narrative projected to me). I attempted to explore what would be an imagination of groups or people coming together not based on forgetting or erasure of differences and denying contradictions but rather by making space for such differences that are often based in everyday subjectivities.

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