

Caste Violence and the Politics of the Moustache: A Study of Charan Singh Pathik's *Moonchhe*

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Abstract

The paper talks about the politics of the moustache and caste violence while referring to Charan Singh Pathik's short story *Moonchhe*. Keeping in mind, the conflict of reservation between the Meena and Gujjar communities within Rajasthan, the paper argues how Dalits irrespective of their job profile or merit are often reduced to their caste identity by the dominant hegemonic caste groups. Within the theoretical framework of Bourdieu's idea of Habitus, the paper reflects upon the nature of caste violence that Dalits have to face for keeping the moustache. While there should be nothing political about the moustache, however, the same is not true. Why is it that some groups claim to have legitimacy over the moustache?

Keywords: Assault; Caste; Death; Humiliation; Moustache.

Introduction

On the afternoon of 15th March 2022, Jitendra Meghwal is stabbed to death by Suraj Singh and Ramesh Singh in Rajasthan's Pali District. Omprakash Meghwal, the brother of Jitendra Meghwal, says the members of the upper caste Rajpurohit community do not want Dalits to keep a moustache, upload photos on social media or dare to look up in the eye of the dominant caste members.* Smitha R in the article "Why keeping a moustache continues to be deadly for some Dalits" argues that moustache is often associated with virility and masculinity in many cultures; however, this is also imperative to mention that the modest moustache is embedded within the dominion of caste, power, and hierarchy. Moreover, several cases of killing the Dalits for keeping a moustache must invite an enquiry into the politics of appearance.

* <https://article-14.com/post/killed-for-sporting-a-moustache-dalits-in-rajasthan-s-feudal-villages-face-rising-tide-of-caste-violence-624cf9afb65f5>

Why some people are attacked, beaten up, harassed, and murdered for appearing in a particular way? Who decides that a certain way of keeping a beard or moustache is the prerogative of certain caste members? Caste violence in the name of moustache is not confined to Rajasthan alone. In September 2017, two Dalits men from a village nearby Gandhinagar, Gujarat were severely thrashed by the Rajputs for sporting a moustache. This incident led to an enormous uproar among the members of the Dalit community which further resulted in a movement on social media. Many Dalits posted their selfies with moustache using hashtags such as #Right-ToMoustache, #MrDalit, #DalitLivesMatter, #DalitwithMoustache, etc. The National Crime Records Bureau in its report (2020) states that crimes against Dalits rose by 9.4% in 2020 despite it being a year of pandemic.**

Apart from looking at the history of the moustache, the paper will look into the cases of caste violence that have to do with the moustache. While looking into the theoretical trope of Bourdieu's idea of habitus, the paper shall critically examine Charan Singh Pathik's short story titled *Moonchhe* which is based in Rajasthan. The story revolves around a Dalit soldier named Ramraj Jatav who visits his village on a brief break, however, his crewcut and well-shaped moustache become the reason for humiliation and physical assault. Ramraj is picked on by the members of the Gujjar and Meena communities. Ramraj believes that he is not supposed to be afraid of caste crimes since he represents the Army, however, he is reduced to his caste identity in the story and questions are raised about his job profile. He is subjected to all kinds of cuss and abusive words. The paper will also look into the conflict between Gujjar and Meena communities within the context of Rajasthan.

A Brief History of the Moustache

As far as 'Pogonotrophy – the art of cultivating facial hair' is concerned, one could observe that the history of the moustache or beard is not linear. Lucinda Hawksley in "The Moustache: A Hairy History" talks about the proliferation of the moustache in the Elizabethan era. King James, I ensured that his well-looked-after beard and moustache found a space in English art. His son, King Charles I made the handlebar moustache popular. While the different shapes of the moustache remained relevant in the Elizabethan era, however, in the 17th century the moustache fell out of fashion in Europe. The Crimean War of the 19th century added to the rise of facial hair as when the war ended in 1856 one could hardly recognise the soldiers because of their unshaved faces which further supplemented

** <https://twocircles.net/2022mar25/445423.html>

the idea of facial hair as a signifier of bravery, valour, victory, and pride. In the 20th century, during the first world war, the soldiers were asked to shave off their beard and the moustache, as the gas masks used for the protection of the soldiers from the effects of chloride gas, could not be sealed if there were facial hair. The end of the war gave birth to the moustache revolution. Many who could not keep facial hair because of the war were now free to experiment with their beard and moustache.

As far as the history of the moustache within the Indian context is concerned, Sanika Kakirde in "A Brief History of the Moustache" mentions that in 1854, the moustache was made compulsory for soldiers in East India Company's Bombay Army, the moustache was made mandatory because of the notion that men without the moustache, perhaps, were not serious or manly enough. By the 1860's the moustache became an important part of all the British Armed forces. Kakirde particularly mentions the culture of keeping the moustache within the Rajput community to indicate caste pride, however, the members of the marginal caste groups are often targeted for keeping the same. In such a scenario, the act of keeping the moustache transcends from personal/cultural to political. Dick Hebdige in his work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* talks about the subversion nature of choices that individuals make keeping in mind the whole politics of appearance and style. Hebdige talks about style as a form of refusal (2). If one is to probe further into the category of 'refusal' then the moustache may represent caste, culture, masculinity etc., on one hand, while on the other hand, it may refuse the prerogative that is made by select communities/individuals over it. The culture of keeping the moustache and nurturing the same has grown in recent times and the indication of the same could be the popularity of the moustache-care brands such as Beardo, Ustraa, Gabru Mooch Wax, Beoman, Spruce Shave Club, etc. and the circulation of their products.

Caste Violence in the Name of the Moustache

Liam Gillespie examines Bourdieu's concept of habitus and the way cultural settings function with reference to his work *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). According to Bourdieu, the term 'habitus' represents the collective entity by which the dominant cultural and social conditions are established and reproduced. Bourdieu further argues habitus has to do with a subjective but not individual system of internalised perceptions, conceptions, structures that are common to a group or class (86). The internalised structures end up shaping the subject's understanding of the world in which he/she/it/they exist. Moreover, the idea of the habitus

confers meanings upon things both material as well as immaterial. Even at the level of the body, the habitus tends to create properties that are further bifurcated into good and bad. As a result, some bodily attributes are valorised while others are demonised. For example, strength, beauty, fair colour of the skin, etc., are often seen in a positive light. While a wide nose, round skull, and thick lips, etc. may be demonised as it happens in Ajay Navaria's short story titled *Scream* where the non-dalit teacher Kulkarni Sir refers to a Dalit student while discussing the concept of the human race concerning the Blacks or "negro race" (163).

Hugo Gorringe and Irene Rafanell in "The Embodiment of Caste: Oppression, Protest and Change" elaborate Bourdieu's idea of habitus further and remark "This habitus results in the internalisation of specific embodied characteristics, which constitute hierarchical boundaries and, consequently, structure relationships with other castes" (98). As Bourdieu himself remarks that the theory of the mode of generation of practices has to do with the internalisation of externality (Marginal groups) and the externalization of internality (power groups) or more simply it has to do with the politics of incorporation and objectification (72). Bourdieu conceives the body as a product of the material condition of existence that also produces the idea of habitus. The powerful hegemonic groups continue to shape the concept of habitus not only for themselves but for others as well. The incident that took place in Uttar Pradesh's Saharanpur district on July 18, 2021 wherein a Dalit youth named Rajat was harassed by six upper-caste men further validating the power play that goes on amongst different social or caste groups. Rajat was dragged to the local salon at knife-point and was forced to get his moustache shaved by the barber. The question of someone forcing, attacking, and humiliating one to appear in a certain way needs to be asked.

The idea of keeping the moustache while maintaining a certain narrative to exercise control concerning the behaviour of the marginal groups can also be understood in relation to the concept of hegemony and the way it works in society. The process of creating meaning through repression has to do with the normalisation of an idea that may not resonate with a substantial section of society. therefore, one shapes the idea of consent and agreement while making people submit and surrender to oppression. The creation of meaning gets directly linked with the creation and normalisation of a myth and how over a period of time the created myth is replaced by the well-crafted notion of what qualifies as truth. What happened to Rajat is an act of assertion by the upper caste members to announce a claim over a certain symbol of meaning which again is a creation by the

dominant groups to maintain a certain appearance to preserve the caste hierarchy as well as the hierarchy of difference.

Keeping the moustache in a certain way can be a way to maintain the difference while symbolically communicating the caste affiliation. In such a case, one could argue that the system of oppression is so insecure that it struggles all the time to sustain the hierarchy. If the moustache is to be seen as a sign of power, then it is important to ask why something as basic as having or not having the moustache becomes a site of conflict as well as brutal killings. How are we to ensure the decoding of symbols and signs that affect the mobility as well lives of so many? While in one culture, the moustache may represent strength and honour linked with the whole discourse of masculinity, in others, it may assert the abstract idea of caste pride. The assertion of an abstract idea may need coercion, suppression, and violence to sustain itself. The Whole discourse around the politics of the moustache can also be a way to retain control over the resources of production and therefore the idea of caste hegemony. In another case of caste violence, a Dalit man named Suresh Vaghela (22) in Ahmedabad, Gujarat was attacked in May 2021 by eleven men for keeping a long moustache. Vaghela's FIR read that the group led by Dhama Thakor gathered outside his house and hurled casteist profane remarks over his moustache. In Charan Singh Pathik's *Moonchhe* Ramraj Jatav too is abused for keeping the moustache as mentioned earlier. With the backdrop of Meena and Gujjar's conflict over the reservation, *Moonchhe* highlights the precarity of Dalit life. However, before discussing the story through the lens of caste, it is important to look into the Meena and Gujjar clash in Rajasthan.

The Meena and Gujjar Caste Conflict in Rajasthan

In India, where caste is one of the oldest phenomena, it becomes important to locate and explore some historical and ethnographic aspects of caste communities. In the case of Rajasthan, throughout history caste has always worked as a prominent factor. Historically speaking, the first name of Rajasthan was 'Rajputana' as James Tod mentions in his "Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan" and it was named after one of the most dominating, socially and economically powerful 'Rajput' community of the land. The etymology of the word Rajasthan bears the identity of caste.

Joan P. Mencher in his paper "Viewing History from the Bottom Up" suggests that "The traditional view of Indian social structure, which appears codified as early as the law of Manu, assumes that hierarchy is accepted by all as an inevitable part of human existence" (P- 157). Moreover, as far

as the Gujjar and Meena conflict is concerned, Meena comes under Tribal Caste and Gujjar under OBC (other backward castes) and both communities are significant in Rajasthan. Before proceeding, it is important to understand the historical and geographical accounts of both the Meena and Gujjar communities, respectively.

Meena comes from the tribal communities of Rajasthan, apart from Bheel, Grasia, Sahariya, Kthodi etc. Unlike other tribal communities of the region, Meena is the most educated tribe in Rajasthan. Meena has progressed by coming forward in all important and powerful official positions like administrative and other government services. Traditionally, exploring the social set-up of the Meena community, they are divided into two groups, the first one is '*Zamindar Meena*' and the second one is '*Chaukidar Meena*'. According to the book *People of India: Rajasthan* edited by K.S. Singh, Zamindar Meena; the members of the Meena community hold the land and consider themselves as 'Kshatriya' in the Varna system. Delving deeper into the historical and cultural background it is believed that before the 'Kachawaha' ruler in Amer (later Jaipur) Mina was the original ruler of the land. Peeping into the culture of the community Meena Zamindar is an endogamous group and they claim to have eighty-four clans. According to K.S. Singh Zamindar, Meena enjoys the highest status in the community, and in the local socio-ritual hierarchy they enjoy a clean caste status. They have a certain system like upon the death of a person, a widow must enter into marriage with the deceased husband's unmarried younger brother and if the widow refuses, she has to pay "Jhagada" or compensation to the family of her husband, thus the community follows a patriarchal set-up. The Meena Zamindars profess Hinduism and have been influenced by Vaishnavism. Jobner Mata is their tutelary deity and is worshipped by the community. Concerning the background of Meena Chaukidar, they were traditionally the farm guards and their profession has become the identity marker for them. They reside mostly around Jaipur, Sawaimadhopur, and Tonk District. They speak in the Dhundhari dialect of Rajasthani and they are listed as Scheduled Tribe (1981). The Chaukidar demand a status equivalent to that of Rajputs but in the local socio-ritual hierarchy they have a lower rank.

Furthermore, coming to the Gujjar community, a large community widely appeared over different parts of the country, known as the shepherd community. According to K.S. Singh, the Gujjars claimed to be Suryavanshi or Raghuvanshi. They are dispersed in Ajmer, Jaipur, Dholar, and Nagaur and speak in Marwaadi. The caste has subdivisions like Poshwal, Kolik, Liloo, Khatar, Chauhan, Bhatia, Solanki etc. Gujjars consider themselves

to share a commensal relationship with communities like Rajput, Vaisya, Jat, but do not exchange food with the communities to whom they give food eg. Brahmins, Meghwal, Mochi etc.

Reservation and Tussle Between the Meena and Gujjar Community

Both the Meena and Gujjar communities reside in the same region of Rajasthan known as 'Dang Region' and follow more or less similar rituals and language. Historically speaking, both communities had good relations, but with the arrival of the reservation policy, things started to change. By getting education through the assistance of reservation, Meena progressed to a great extent and they got into mostly police and administrative services, whereas Gujjar traditionally a 'Gadariya'(herdsmen) could not progress much and the social and economic gap between both the communities grew wider.

The real caste conflict between Meena and Gujjar began with the Gujjar agitation over the reservation, demanding Scheduled Tribe status and Meenas' resistance not to share their quota in the years 2006-2007. According to a news article in India Today (2007) around 14 people died, hundreds were injured, and worth lakhs of public property was damaged. The news article states the agitation was led by the Gujjar leader, Kishori Singh Bainsala. "A retired army colonel settled in a middle ranking community, lower to Brahmins, Baniyas and Rajputs, but higher in status to all artisan castes and Scheduled Castes." K.S. Singh in *People of India: Rajasthan* discusses, women in the Gujjar community cannot voice their opinion in community matters as they are confined to the four walls of the house.

Charan Singh Pathik's *Moonchhe*

Pathik's *Moonchhe* is a narrative about Ramraj Jatav, a Dalit who belongs to the Chamar caste. Ramraj serves in the Indian army and has come to his home located in a rural part of Rajasthan during a break. While Ramraj is at his village, a storm is going on between the Meena and Gujjar communities over the reservation. The Gujjars want reservations in jobs and education, however, the Meena community is not happy about the same. Ramraj who sports short hair and carefully trimmed round moustache does not think he has any reason to worry as he belongs to the Scheduled Caste and he has nothing to do with either the Meenas or the Gujjars. Moreover, being an army personnel, he is not supposed to be afraid of the ongoing conflict between the Meena and the Gujjars. Ramraj's mother does not want her son to go to his in-law's place as she is worried that

something may happen to him on the way. Ramraj is the only army personnel in the whole Chamar community of the village. Ramraj's mother tells him that the scenario in the army is different, being a Dalit soldier, he is still safe, however, in the village, caste becomes the dominant factor to define a person irrespective of his/her status, job, and designation, etc., Ajay Navaria in his short story *Yes Sir*, points out the same wherein the Tiwari peon cannot digest the fact that his boss is a Dalit. Tiwari, time and again, points out that because of reservation anyone can become an officer these days, discarding the entire politics of caste and its representation. In the story, Tiwari tells his colleague Mishra that *Kalyug* is here as now the Brahmins are forced to wash the dirty dishes of Dalits (52).

The reversal of the hierarchy of labour is not to be tolerated by the Brahmins as people like Tiwari still hold on to the idea that Dalits should not occupy high positions in office and if a Dalit manages to achieve a place of prominence through his/her hard work then caste shall be the point of reference to address and treat the person concerned. In *Moonchhe*, Ramraj decides to go ahead but soon after he is full of fear and starts to think of situations to save his life, in case, he is attacked by someone. He wonders whether he should reveal his caste or hide it if one wants to know about it. At this point, one could argue that caste(ism) needs to be seen as a phenomenon that may happen to a Dalit at any moment. Anxiety lies not in the act of caste prejudice alone but it also lies in the possibility of caste prejudice/crime. On the way when Ramraj decides to stop and buy a few gifts for his in-law's family, he does not want to make eye contact with anyone. This is to point out that there have been cases of caste crime wherein Dalits have been attacked for making eye contacts with the members of the upper caste. As Ramraj moves on, he is stopped by a crowd on the way. Intrigued by the way Ramraj looks, the young leader of the crowd comes forward and puts a knife at his ribs and enquires about his caste, "*Jaat bol Jaat Saaley*" (tell me about your caste) (53) Ramraj says, Jatav. At this point, Ramraj is abused because the crowd assumes he is trying to hide his caste to avoid the Meena and Gujjar conflict. Someone says, "*Chamaro ke purkhe bhi gaye hey kabhi foz mein...*" (have even the ancestors of the Chamars gone to the army...) (53). Ramraj slapped across his face, as many in the crowd (who all were Gujjars) believed that he cannot be a Chamar because, according to them, he does not appear like one. One is beaten up for being a Dalit and for also being someone who defies the dominant idea of appearance as imagined and conceived by a non-dalit about a Dalit? In such a situation, it becomes impossible to resist violence and humiliation. One will be attacked for being a Dalit and also for appearing in a way that does not add to the idea of how a Dalit is imagined by the non-dalits. This bi-

zarre, irrational, unjust system of oppression that is ruled by the principle of flawed imagination needs to be counter-argued.

Ramraj is beaten up black and blue and he has no idea why he is being assaulted. Ramraj needed to run if he was to save his life. He somehow manages to get hold of his bike and continues his journey, however, many from the crowd lament that his moustache should not have been spared. After some distance, Ramraj stops his bike as he needs to pee, petrified from what happened just a while ago, he is lost in his thoughts. Soon after, upon realising that he is surrounded by a group of men, he goes blank. This time, Ramraj is attacked by a group that belongs to the Meena community. When Ramraj is asked about his caste, he decides to lie as last time he was thrashed for being honest. Ramraj replies that he is a Meena, at this point, he is beaten up for not speaking the truth. Ramraj accepts that he is a Jatav and yet no one wants to believe him to be a Jatav, he is not supposed to keep such a moustache. Ramraj is beaten up further as some think that he is a Gujjar. As more people gather around Ramraj, he feels he may not live. In the hot month of May in Rajasthan, Ramraj craves for water. Someone from the crowd goes away and comes back with a lota/container. Upon drinking Ramraj realises, it was someone's urine. Repulsed by the whole situation, Ramraj does not know where to go. Before he notices anything, he is attacked by a person carrying a shaving razor. In no time, half of Ramraj's moustache is shaved off along with a line of partition right through his head. After this barbaric act, the crowd dissolves leaving Ramraj to die in the scorching heat of Rajasthan.

The performance of humiliation concerning Ramraj needs to be probed into. Bhikhu Parekh in his article "Logic of Humiliation" talks about various degrees and levels within which the trope of humiliation exists within a society. Humiliation can be social, cultural, personal, political, singular, multi-layered, sexual, psychological, etc. Moreover, one can be humiliated both by words as well as silence. In the story "Moochche", the ignorance and silence of the policemen, who were busy playing cards when Ramraj was being attacked by the mob, act as an important signifier of oppression. Parekh goes on to say that humiliation is deep and pervasive and it is normally a part of the language that is used to address the subordinated groups. In such a setup one doesn't have to retort to an overt act of humiliation but a reminder of the caste hierarchy in place may just be enough (95). The act of shaving Ramraj's moustache is not only a sign of humiliation but also translates the idea that Dalits must not transcend the abstract idea of appearance. The reason why Ramraj is attacked both by the Meena and Gujjar communities is that he subverts the idea of 'habitus' imagined

by the dominant social and cultural conditions/groups. The symbol of the moustache could also be read in its multiplicity. In Ajay Navaria's short story *New Custom*, the moustache of a Dalit becomes the signifier of disgust (69), while in his other story titled *Subcontinent*, the moustache of the upper caste policeman becomes the descriptor of power and authority (97). Furthermore, in *Hello Premchand* by Navaria, the moustache of a Thakur represents caste pride and ownership (151).

Findings and Research Gap

The paper locates the issue of caste violence within the dominion of appearance and the politics that surrounds it. While following the method of textual analysis, keeping in mind the events of caste crimes that take place both within and outside the text, the paper highlights the vulnerable position of Dalits in society. No matter how they appear, how successful they get, and how many degrees they manage to get, the Savarna members still want to confine Dalits within the domain of docility, passiveness, subservience, and caste inferiority. Through *Moonchhe*, Pathik brings in the question of mob violence and how often Dalits are attacked for being Dalits. The paper discusses caste conflicts from Rajasthan, limiting it to the region-specific. However, the paper also deals with caste in general in the purview of Indian society. Taking into account Rajasthan and caste, citing the recent mob lynching cases in the State, the paper focuses on how historically caste dynamics work. This research paper brings out the internal caste hierarchies and sub-groups which are the integrated part of the whole caste discourse. Rajasthan is stereotypically known as the land of Rajputs and Kings as Rajputs ruled over for a substantial period of time and in the process, Dalits were marginalized from the social ladder. The paper, however, brings out the caste structure of contemporary Rajasthan through Pathik's story.

On the surface, the feudal system does not exist anymore but caste still works in many layered forms. The paper focuses on the sensitive issue of caste causing a person's death even after Article 21 of the Indian Constitution provides the Right to Live to everyone. The paper highlights how various social groups internalise the way of living and this internalisation takes place at the level of unconsciousness. The paper mentions the online movements that support one's right and freedom to appear the way one may want to. However, future research could probe into this area closely to map how the online participation and conversations of Dalits that endorse the idea of autonomous and free bodies impact the lives of Dalits in the offline space. One could also do an in-depth analysis of Dalit life nar-

ratives and notice whether there are references that allude to the politics of appearance and caste violence with reference to the moustache. Further research has the scope to take up other communities from Rajasthan and examine caste within the module of comparative studies. Moreover, further research can also explore the new emerging contemporary Dalit writers from Rajasthan and how their writings and issues are dealing with caste and violence in different ways.

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