

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Drifters Adrift: Balancing Her Daily Bread

Pitamber Kaushik · Wednesday, January 29th, 2020

The Kumbh Mela is the largest human gathering in the world, attracting no less than 150 million people, by some estimates 200 million. A periodic pilgrimage of Hindus worldwide, in order to take the ritual dip in the holy river Ganges, ablutions during this period are believed to rid the pilgrim of all their sins and negative karma amassed over their previous and current births. The *Ardh-Kumbhs* (lit. Half-Kumbh), held every 6 years at Prayagraj, Allahabad along with the rotationally-held Kumbhs, commemorate the spillage of the mythical nectar-pitcher over Earth.



Balancing her Daily Bread

Nats, also known as *Gulguliyas*, are a socioeconomically ultra-backward community comprising of dedicated guilds of acrobatic performers and motley entertainers, oft enlisted (read obligated) as casual, manual labour. The indigenous group is essentially nomadic (*banjaaraa/khaanabadosh* lit. one who forages for food), called *ghumantus* (literally “those who (keep) move(-ing)”). Often travelling in bands and caravans, these performers seldom stay at one place for more than a few months and are seasonally employed, subject to the whims of nature and vagaries of sociocultural rhythms. Although, many of them have settled and adopted a quasi-sedentary lifestyle, the majority still suffer from grinding impoverishment and cultural-cum economic backwardness.

The underprivileged status could historically never be alleviated, in the slightest, owing primarily to an insidious ostracisation, marginalisation and connoted segregation as outcasts. The community continued to be exploited throughout ancient India, the Mughal era, the Colonial Period and post-Independence, as they fall on the ignominy-ridden leeward side of policymakers. Their multifaceted exploitation entails an abuse that borderlines passive enslavement and social entitlement to the mainstream denizens of the place they reside in. Hence, historically disadvantaged and typecast as criminals, and treated as such, they avail a Hobson’s choice of either inhabiting the fringes of society or staying transient. This leads to no social security, particularly compromising education and health, besides obviously precluding a stable, let alone guaranteed livelihood. This creed dwells as fringe elements and are regarded with skepticism, often compelled to systematic yet informal menial labour and organised prostitution. Being arbitrarily subjected to petty, casual manual labour is routine for this creed, predominantly in the countryside. The eponymous inhabitants of the infamous ‘prostitution-village’ Natpurwa are almost exhaustively constituted by this community. The village gained notoriety for being near wholly dependant on prostitution, a profession undertaken systematically by fathers who make money off pimping their own daughters.

These jugglers have forever faced indignation, but particularly under the British Raj: being deemed, amongst others, as “criminal tribes” by the British administration. At my recent visit to the Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj, I availed the chance to interview a nuclear family belonging to one of these guilds: constituting of two such acrobats who juggle their culture, relevance (in the era and context of the YouTube and Laser Shows) and daily bread. Sustenance for them, the hunt for a livelihood is a struggle and strife, undertaken on a veritably daily basis. Looked upon with tangible, palpable condescension and a borderline incriminating suspicion, this traditional subcaste’s outrageous categorical branding as petty felons and their demonisation as mercenary criminals have seeped into modern informal police repression as well.

The patriarch of the family, Lal Baaboo, is a stout pentagenarian. He walks with a shifting gait. I realised it’s the consequence of an inherent limp in his left foot. His wife, clad in conservative West Indian attire, with a modest pallu (draped head-cover) upon her head, Kunti Devi, prepares food in her makeshift wagon, which doubles-up as their mobile residence. Unlike the upper castes of Rajasthan, where they hail from, they lack the characteristic fad of a son being a prescriptive staple. They were content with three daughters. Chaandani, the older sister appears stunted, owing perhaps to protein-energy malnutrition. Her hair is matted, browned, a rather dirty auburn, out of the natural colour. She owes the departure from the paradigm because of an obvious lack of tending and cleansing. Her looks betray her age. But by a fairly rough estimate, she’d be in her middle teens. I found it impudent to ask.

Rimjhim, the better nourished of the two was perhaps born after the (relatively) rainier days of the family hath past, I reckoned. Sure as I’d figured, I soon discovered to my utter dismay, the family had hit a tragic rough patch, leading to their elder daughters undernourishment. Rimjhim looks to be aged seven or so, her hair fashioned in pigtails. There’s not a hint of the characteristic childish playfulness and liveliness, let alone frivolity or naivete on either of the sisters’ wizened visage. Her conjugated act consists of balancing a stack of consecutive earthen pots precariously perched upon her head, whilst swaying sideways and gyrating rhythmically to various Bollywood tunes, as if mere ropewalking wasn’t enough. The community still dances to the tunes, and caters to the whims of the Hindu upper castes, and hence have evolved and modernised secondary aspects of their performance, to stay relevant, though they ardently preserve the core tenets of their culture and profession.

I inquire their mother regarding her livelihood, the sustainability of her profession and whether she manages to eke out an income to makes ends meet. Through a *ghoonghat* (traditional Hindu overhead-veil), she says:

“It widely varies. We forage for food on a daily basis and our children are forced to fend for themselves early on. We are often accused of being criminals (as a fact, they serve as a prevalent and convenient obligatory scapegoat in rural India, particularly pronounced since the advent of the Raj). Hence we keep away from mainstream settlements, lest we be (arbitrarily) accused and tried. Some days we make no money at all. We’re thankful to God that here (at the Kumbh festival) amidst the festivities, by God’s grace, we manage to eke out two square meals a day. If we manage a thousand Rupees per fortnight, we are content. We mostly get coins. Kumbh is a time for bumper earnings, as rural supplies run dry due to urbanisation. (They are hired as bonded/indentured labour to supplement and overcome seasonal nature of their employment). *Kaurdi-Kaurdi jordkr rozee jugaardte hain saheb!* (We derive a living by assembling individual coins). Even in Kumbh, donors are stingy and ends are stringent. We are often forced sleep on empty bellies. Most of, even the (reasonably) well-off folk spectate the act, and then casually leave. We’ve adapted and evolved

to cater to short attention spans of tomorrow but we won't detach from our roots (alter the form of the original act). *Zyaadaa tardakta-bhardakta nahin kar sakte* (can't introduce excessive thrills-and-frills)."

The next morning I make a beeline for the previous dusk's rendezvous, and as sure as the girls' composure and grip upon the tightrope, they are nowhere in sight. But that's them merely justifying their own name: *banjaaraas* i.e. Drifters.

I gaze skyward at the Siberian migratory birds, who took a small local detour from their conventional routine routes to be fed by the pilgrims; They appear as guests, a pleasant bolt from the blue and quickly disappear into it; Into the thin, thin air that prevails.

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