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Understanding Regional Spaces vis-à-vis "the" Indian Space: A Study of Récits

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Abstract: Stories and story telling have been, since times immemorial, the most significant form employed by mankind to make sense of the space around them. This space, physically and the concept behind it, altered with time, but the common denominator to understand and define it remained constant: Stories. Spaces eventually grew into civilizations and each civilization, across the globe has, to date, its stories that define, not only its length and breadth, but also the cosmic truth by placing the origin of the universe around the civilization. One such Grand Space is India and its civilization that is the oldest surviving in human history. However, what makes India unique is that within its grand ambit have survived Spaces that are regional and inhabited by peoples with their own narratives, "little stories" limited to their physical and corresponding psychological spaces. The research paper strives to understand these Regional Spaces and their cultural paradigm with specific reference to select regions of Himachal Pradesh. The paper attempts to place the Grand Narratives of the pan-Indian civilization vis-à-vis the Folk Narratives of the regional communities, juxtaposing them and foregrounding the foundational contrasts between the two. The paper also aims at assessing the impact of the influx of Grand Culture on the regional and its implications.

Keywords: Space, Grand Narratives, Petit Recits, Myths, Epics, Lores

INTRODUCTION

Humans, since times immemorial, have told stories, through disparate mediums like wall paintings, mosaics and, since the advent of phonology, morphology, semiotics, and the likes, orally and scripturally. It has been a faculty inherent to humans, something presentiate, and hence, present very prominently in the history of human evolution. Looking at the ascent of human understanding and acumen, it emerges that there has been, immanently, a knack of narrating, of telling what transpired: "humans have a compulsion to narrate…Wherever there are humans there appear to be narratives" [1]. These narrations, the emerging stories, invariably and consequently, possessed the stature of being representative of the "what," "how," and "why" of the space around the humans who constructed them.

The inclination to tell stories and engage in narratives, primarily, stems from the vastness of space in which man has found himself since antiquity. His physical space was divided into the known, comprising his vicinity and the unknown, comprising the unreachable, like the skies, visible yet impossible to reach. Psychologically too, man found himself surrounded by, not only the known, things tangible, but also by the unknown, the untangible like heaven and hell. The two, in tandem, produced, apart from a limited known space, a large, incomprehendable and unsurpassable spatio-temporality, defining him and his life. The multi-dimensional space sparked a sense of inquiry and various precepts, significantly God, religion and morality; with philosophy and story-telling emerging to answer the conundrum. While philosophy, to date, is man's way of "thoughtfully" understanding the space, story-telling is his way of understanding it through contextually inter-related narratives, as Harré and Levine opine, through a tendency to "storify" [1]. In this "storification," creation and consequently, Gods too, become an imminent participant, with narratives catering to them gaining prominence as the foundational stories of a people.

Human evolution saw the establishment of huge civilizations as well as smaller communities, largely autochthonous. In sync, two major types of narratives emerged, eventually leading to the creation of two literary styles: myths and folklores. Whilst myths catered to foundational narratives of a civilization, folklores focussed on the narratives of regional communities and

peoples "hidden" within a civilization, clinging onto their indigenous cultures. In narrative, the two were nomenclatured as "Grand Récits" and "petit récits." Esther Syiem, in her poem "To the Rest of India from Another Indian" represents the categorization:

We have no Rama
no Sita
no Arjuna
ours are differently named [2].

A civilization is, as a norm, spread over a massive physical and psychological space. It subsumes in its narratives, stories catering to the origins of the civilization, and in sync with its grandness, the mythical stories of the creation of the universe. The Grand Récits of Greece, manifested in Hesiod's *Theogony*; the grand story of the Christian civilization; and the mythical narratives of India cater to, not only their respective civilizations but also Creation and the subsequent development of the human race. The most significant marker, common to all these, is the pan nature of the narratives, one that subsumes entire Greece, the Christian world and the *Jambu Dweep* respectively, each in its singular narrative and each authenticated in its scriptural revelations. All other narratives that subsequently developed within the civilizational ambit, were either extensions or footnotes to these primary grand narratives.

These narratives of a civilization, manifested principally in their myths, though critical to its culture and rituals, are essentially metaphorical guides, outlining a way of living with the ultimate aim of a metaphysical magnitude like Judgement Day and Salvation. This gives these narratives two very significant attributes: scriptural fidelity and abstractness. Kancha Ilaiah, in *Why I am Not a Hindu* iterates this abstractness as being derived from the scriptures and obsessively aiming at an "abstract spirit" (44) [3]. The abstractness of myth-man relationship, then, can be summed up in the words of Malinowski:

The forms of myth which come to us from classical antiquity and from the ancient sacred books of the East and other similar sources have come down to us without the context of living faith, without the possibility of obtaining comments from true believers, without the concomitant knowledge of their social organization [4].

In India, in contemporaneity, this civilizational space has assumed a new form of nationalism and nation-building. In other words, the Indian civilization, owing to its singular narrative of a national religious affiliation, has become the basis of the establishment of a nation. Visiting the entire construct through the theoretical Gaze, the Grand Narratives promulgate the typical Modernist paradigm, of a universal structure having the ability to subsume all variants within its ambit. Within the entire positionality of Modernism is the presumptive paradigm of reducing all narratives into a common Meta-narrative. This meta-narrative places at its centre, the metaphysical, the realm beyond the senses, as Kancha Ilaiah, in *Why I am Not a Hindu* reiterates this when he critiques the Brahminical mindset, "Human beings are not supposed to relate to nature and to other human beings, they must relate only to the 'other world'" (44) [3]. There are myriad stories related to attaining salvation, ranging from Jaya and Vijaya, the gatekeepers; to the sage Dhruv.

Two grand narratives that manifest this entire ideology in Indian culture are *The Ramayan* and *The Mahabharat*, manifesting the same meta-existences: Vishnu as Ram and Krishna while Shesh Nag as Lakshman and Balram. Moreover, these are the narratives that singularize the value systems and ways of living, through these meta-existences: meta-creatures infusing *maryada* in humans. To quote an example, the epitome of righteous way of living is *maryada purushotam* Ram while the epitome of upholding *dharma* is Krishna. It is an undisputed following of the standards of the two, abstract owing to their stature as unattainable benchmarks, that defines an ideal individual in the Indian civilization. Most of the value systems in the scriptures and manifested in the epics foreground, not only the ideal way of living for the inhabitants in the civilization, but also promulgate the unquestionable and established stature of the scriptural knowledge and their linearity and singularity that is ubiquitous and set in stone.

However, India, unlike most of the Western nations, is not a homogenous entity, linguistically, ethnically or religiously. In physical spaces like India, the grand civilization has always been interspersed by regional communities that have their own cultural paradigm, a multitude of peoples who have their regional affiliations and lifestyles that stand in direct contrast and juxtaposition to the standard Indian civilizational norms. Mahasweta Devi says for one conglomeration of such communities, the tribals, "Their word for Hindu is Diku-outsider" [5].

These regional communities are 'restricted' to small physical spaces and satiate their "inquiries" within the demarcated physical space. The psychological space follows suit and is evident, directly and explicitly, in their folktales, their petit récits, that comprise foundational stories of the concerned peoples only. Their lores do not take into account the questions of creation and the maximum stretch of the loric imagination is up to the establishment of the community in the current physical space. Moreover, owing to the presence of a multitude of such peoples, inhabiting disparate physical spaces, there are multiple foundational stories, each catering to a specific community.

For a long time, these communities survived, "hidden" from the Civilizational Gaze, principally owing to their geographic inaccessibility. Though myths do mention incidents where they came face to face, like when the Pandavs burnt the forest to build their capital, that led to a killing of the *Nishad* people, but these are sporadic and heavily dismissive of the peoples of the regional communities. Moreover, their presences were appropriated within the larger concerns of the mythical narratives, much like the stories of Eklavya or Shambuk. The narratives of the regional communities, petit récits, in contrast, are stories of their own spaces, outside the ambit of the civilization, of presences that stood the test of time,

and, identify, on theoretical framework, with the Post-modern, challenging and interrogating the universality of Modernism. The significant absence of *The Ramayan* and *The Mahabharat* as consistent narratives and the missing link of Vishnu in the regional cultures highlight their stature as fissures in the fabric of grand civilizational narratives. In power dominated literary expressions, these gaps project minor presences that have survived under the blanket of the mainstream that was drawn over them and not because they came into mushroomic existence over the grand fabric.

With time, however, the geographical aloofness was compromised and the mainstream found its way into the communities and their lives; and by virtue of its "selfhood" starting carving a niche for itself. This niche was in sync with the ideology of singularization, and hence, efforts were directed towards a subsuming of the regional communities within the grand fold. It was primarily, was a twofold process: first, imposing the Grand Récit as the cultural marker for the indigenous communities through the introduction of the Grand Récit, the civilizational narrative, into the fabric of the regional cultures; and secondly, subsuming the 'anomalic' regional folklores into the standard myths.

This cultural transference of the Grand narratives, from mainstream culture to an indigenous form of culture, as the latter's cultural marker, was a paradigm spatial shift from the scriptural to a life-centric ideology. Geertz foregrounds the distinction that led to this paradigmatic transition:

Traditional religions consist of a multitude of very concretely defined and only loosely ordered sacred entities, an untidy collection of fussy ritual acts and vivid animistic images which are able to involve themselves in an independent, segmental, and immediate manner with almost any sort of actual event… Rationalized religions, on the other hand, are more abstract, more logically coherent, and more generally phrased [6].

This transition was too drastic, as the abstractness of the mainstream was sorely inadequate to make necessary "dents" into the "instance centred" and hence concrete, community narratives. As a result, the mainstream desperately strove to manifest itself concretely, thereby generating physical reference points, "spots" where mythical characters had once marked their presence in an absolute past. Consequently, Kullu and other mountainous regions are replete with such places and a corresponding story of a mythical character related to it. One such and probably the most conspicuous manifestation was in terms of a display of physical strength, as it also marked authority. In sync, most of the places marked with some remnant from the mythical narrative refer, in one form or the other, to physical strength, and the primary character representing it being Bheem, the physically indomitable Pandav brother. Consequently, there is a plethora of *Bheem Shilas* and *Bheem ke kanche*, enormous artifacts, mostly rocks, as concrete representations of the presence of the mainstream within indigenous spaces and cultures. The use of rocks as markers of a civilizational past not only offered it concreteness but also ensured connect with the salient quality of regional cultures, of worshipping stones, "*Pindi*…a "non-anthropomorphic form," [7] set in divinity. It was only through identification with the native gaze that the mainstream could vie for a subsuming of the regional cultures within its scope. Apparently ironical but the mainstream, to establish its feet in the regional cultures, had to commence with a concretizing of its abstract and other-worldly principles.

But these stories, of spots, are absent from the primary Grand narratives and also, the stories of one spot are aloof, unconnected and "ignorant" of the story of another spot. The only common connect amongst all such stories is the standard line, akin to children's literature: once upon a time when the *Pandavs* came here during their *Agyaat vaas*. There is no continuity of their departure from a certain spot and reaching the next one. Moreover, the reference to *The Mahabharat* in general and the *agyaat vaas,* in particular, and little to no reference to *The Ramayan* also speaks volumes of the "imposed nature" of the civilizational narratives on communiuties' narratives and lives. While Ram's *vanvaas* is marked by the 'knowledge' of his journey in search of Sita, the *agyaat vaas* of the Pandavs is an ideal 'veil' to place them anywhere as there is little to no 'knowledge' about their whereabouts during the period.

Consequent upon the mutual unconnectedness, a further demythification of these sporadic grand narratives in local cultures occurs with their lack of contextuality in relation to the space, a quality that regional lores possess immanently and inherently. The indigenous sacred manifestations have a narratorial context, a petit récit that tells the "causal connect" of the deity with the space. Yulla Kanda, in Kinnaur District of Himachal Pradesh, is an example in case. The lore goes that *Jal Nag* was worshipped at Yulla village as the presiding deity and then, once in the past, snakes started emerging in the houses of the people. Perturbed, they went to *Jal Nag*, and he said that his wife lives unnoticed and separated in the *Kanda* at the top of the mountain and they should go there. When the people went up, they saw a stream like a snake and two spots in a mountain, eye width apart, from where water was flowing for some distance before disappearing into the ground. The lore says that they were tears of separation of the *naagin* and they flow even now as she expressed her inability to leave her *kanda* and go to the village. The villagers say that when they first reached the *kanda*, they saw the temple. The story then went that it was built by the Pandavas during the *agyaat vaas* and was dedicated to Krishna. Presently, there is an idol in the temple, not antique, and a few stone sculptures, not recognizable placed there. Surprisingly, there is absolute silence about how and why the *Pandavs* visited there and upon being asked the locals vaguely point towards the mountains saying that they came from here, *Pandu Ropa*, and went to the other side. Hence, whilst there is an entire narrative about the *naagin* and her connect to the village, their culture and rituals, there is scarcely and narrative or connect about the *Pandavs* and their presence in the space, except the temple.

Albeit used in a different context, Bascom, invoking Malinowski, foregrounds the sentiment of the disconnectedness of grand narratives from the lived experiences of the natives, when he says, "The stories live in native life and not on paper, and when a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourish he has given us but a mutilated bit of reality" [4]. The mainstream narratives, in community culture, remain limited to the place and the artefact as isolated narratives around the space. This and the basic grain of the mainstream, of abstractedness stands in striking contrast to the native "atmosphere," the Lived Experience, thereby becoming an unsurpassable hurdle to a seamless unison of the two, leading to fragmented and non-contextual mainstream narratives still being redundant in the paradigm of local cultures and life.

What is also unique to local cultures and specific to local gaze is the multiplicity of the stories of the origins of their deities. These stories are unlike the standard and set narratives of the mainstream Gods. A classic example is of the presiding deity of Malana, the village republic nestled in the interiors of Kullu. Known as *Jamlu,* according to folktales, he came from Tibet; brought the deities of Kullu from *Maantalai*, the source of Parvati River, who got scattered when he got into a battle with the "*asura"* king of Malana at Chanderkhani; and is also a *Nag* related to Raja Ghepan, the deity of Lahaul, and Hadimba, the Goddess at Dhungri at Manali as their brother. Being the deity who came from beyond the *Kulantpitha* and established himself as the presiding deity of Malana; and as the brother of Hadimba, he happens to be, traditionally, "…a sort of demon-spirit and, like the Malanis, he has an independent nature and does not pay homage even to Raghunathjee, the principal god of the Kulu Valley, to whom most other local gods do reverence" [8]. The reference is substantially old, 1968, but another research and record of the 1950s extends the argument: "But, in the words of Colin Rossier who conducted fieldwork in Malana in the early 1950s: 'Jamlu's mythological exclusion from Kullu does not result in his exclusion from the Kullu pantheon…Indeed he is widely and commonly referred to by Kullu villagers as "the most powerful" of all Kullu gods'" [9].

What offers acceptance to multiplicity of indigenous narratives, and negation of the mainstream singularity, is their intricate interweaving with the lived experiences that are "autonomous" [10] and "area specific" [10]. The entire ritualistic, social and judicial structure of Malana revolves around *Jamlu* and the *asur* king he fought at Chanderkhani, giving the place the sobriquet of "the living republic." The national narrative, on the other hand, merely places *Jamlu* as one of the sages in *The Mahabharat*, *Jamadagni,* with negligible contextual narratives to corroborate it; and also provides no added relevance to the lived experiences of the people. Another factor that makes these small narratives acceptable is the immediacy of the deities to the peoples. The *devi-devtas* in this regional space are intricately inter-connected and seamlessly inter-woven within the fabric of the lives of the peoples. They not only preside over *dev pratha* like the *Jagtis* and *Hooms*, but also engage animatedly in lives of the peoples on special occasions like birth, sickness, marriage and death; and also in the 'mundane.' Their animation is not symbolic or metaphorical, nor is it abstract, but concrete, visible through the independent movements and the dances of the *raths* of the deities.

The grain of the national civilization's ritualistic and scriptural structure does not align with this regional sacredness. The Local gaze, then, is culturally distinct from the Civilizational Gaze: "The problems of meaning, which in traditional systems are expressed only implicitly and fragmentarily, here [mainstream] get inclusive formulations and evoke comprehensive attitudes. They become conceptualized as universal and inherent qualities of human existence as such, rather than being seen as inseparable aspects of this or that specific event" [6]. This grand order of culture, then, stands at loggerheads with the little cultures, "The tribals and the mainstream have always been parallel. There has never been a meeting point. The mainstream simply doesn't understand the parallel…" [5].

The narratives of a civilization impose uniform and nationally majoritarian rituals and traditions on all the regional communities within its physical space, a nation as it is called in contemporaneity. For the community cultures, this singular identity that is explicitly not their own is a threat as it posits the possibility of the annihilation of their rich, plural and unique culture that has preceded the mainstream in its regional geographical space. The mainstream narratives that have encroached upon the regional communities are "…cultural items situated more within the boundary of a separate cultural identity or nationhood than within [the regional]…The mythical characters of Rama, Sita, and Arjuna may very well have cultural significance for the rest of the Indians, but…(do) not subscribe to (regional) authority…(It is) cultural encroachment and hegemonic occupation intended by the migrant and dominant centre at the core of Indian nationhood" [2].

Amidst the mainstream marking its presence in regional communities by thrusting its cultural markers, through sporadic concrete reference points and re-naming the local deities, the regional cultures retained their local Gaze through a rigid and uncompromised insistence on following their rituals in letter and spirit. The civilizational gaze, for its validation, asserted that the endeavour aimed at a 'raise' of the regional communities to a higher Pan-nationalism. This resonates the definition of a nation given by Ernest Renan in 1882 [11]:

Man is a slave neither of his race, his language, his religion, the course of his rivers, nor the direction of his mountain ranges. A great aggregation of men, in sane mind and warm heart, created a moral conscience that calls itself a nation. As long as this moral conscience proofs its strength by sacrifices that require the subordination of the individual to the communal good, it is legitimate and has the right to exist. If doubts are raised along the frontiers, consult the disputed populations. They certainly have a right to express their views on the matter…after many fruitless experiments, they will later return to our modest empirical solutions. [11].

The impetus that the definition offers is to an "aggregation of men" creating a "moral conscience." This explicates the construct of a nation as a homogeneous entity where the "disputed populations," the regional communities, shall "return" after failing in their individual endeavours. "Disputed" itself manifests how the nation is a construct emerging out of a political gaze striving for an unquestioned unity, physical and psychological. While physical is manifested immanently through geographical boundaries, the psychological is imposed through such constructs. The imagined national character that subsequently emerges, negates the regionalities and the "ethnically conscious" [2] behind the veneer of singularity: the communities staying inside a civilization becomes the outsiders.

The emphasis on mainstreaming and mythicizing, then, becomes a political agency, infused with the intent of "the" nation, identified by sameness, a monologic identity. This political agency is the discourse of the dominant, executed on the dominated people living in a different cultural space. This dominant space attempts it in full awareness of the existence of community cultures 'believing' in a physical space, a country in the modern sense, but of a lost geographical space, with a common cultural history represented through its defining texts, narratives and scriptures. Srinivas sums it up aptly [12]:

One's country becomes the home of one's gods. Patriotism acquires a religious quality. (222)

The entire construct of religion, in its grand or petit form, is socially centred, as religion is, supposedly, a handbook of information about appropriate social behaviour and "continuing system of relationship amongst human beings" [13]. But in a country like India, that defies all Western notions of a nation having linguistic and religious unity as its fulcrum, the grand récits merely promulgate the assertion of an identity that is discriminatory and annihilatory because they adversely impact the India that lives "within" this national order, the peoples whose "religious behaviour" [13] and "ritual idiom" (ibid) is distinct and paradoxical when poised against pan-Indian nationalism. The pan-Indian civilizational gaze strips the immanent quality of co-operative living amongst the communities and, at best subsumes them within its purview and at worst negates its very existence. Either, however, fails to make this nationalistic homogenization as the transcendental signifier of India as "there are very important remains of paganism" [13] in the form of native rituals and traditions.

The underlying manifestation of a Pan-Indian religion with its own singular ritualistic behaviour, established on grand récits and its scriptural 'richness,' evident in "Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and the Philosophical Systems…the *puranas* (stories….of the gods), *itihasas* (…the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*)…" [9] is a mythical construct that needs to be deconstructed and demythified. One of the most significant ways to achieve it is to return to India's national identity to the term "Hindu," but in its etymological purity and linguistic uncorruptness. By re-asserting thus, the apparent pan-Indian national construct shall be restricted to a purely geographical unity comprising people living East of the Indus, *Sindhu* river, rather than being the only "ritual idiom" [13]. This shall offer the country its actual and inherent identity: multifacetedness in all aspects, including "religious behaviours" (ibid) without the need to proselytize.

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