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The Politics of Survival: An Intersectional Analysis of *Kaala Paani*

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Abstract

This article deals with concepts like intersectional environmentalism and environmental racism to analyse the disparate power structures that operate towards the disadvantage of marginalized communities. A study of the Netflix series *Kalapani* is undertaken in such a backdrop of climatic disasters and environmental mishaps.

Keywords: Intersectional feminism, Intersectional Environmentalism, Environmental Racism, Indigenous.

The access to clean air, water and safe natural spaces have become a luxury in today's world. For those of us, who wonder if that statement is indeed true or exaggerated, we just need to rewind our memory back to the days of the pandemic. Covid-19 exposed the world of its disparate systems of power structures, and we witnessed marginalized communities getting severely affected under the medical dictum of social distancing that brought the world to a stand-still for months. "From the disparate impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in communities around the globe to international protests against racism and discrimination, current events have shown that we are far from achieving equality. Trying to interpret and battle a multitude of injustices right now may feel overwhelming" ("Intersectional Feminism: What It Means and Why It Matters Right Now"). Marginalized communities are often the most vulnerable and they bear the devastating consequences of both man-made and natural emergencies and social injustices. Climate change and such calamities impact people disproportionately. Social positionings and multilayered identities have a telling say in their struggle for survival. People from poor communities and people with vulnerable identities are more affected by the harsh aftermaths of disasters and emergencies. An intersectional lens, lays bare the disparities emanating from these multilayered identities which results in gross negligence and violations.

Using an intersectional lens also means recognizing the historical contexts surrounding an issue. Long histories of violence and systematic discrimination have created deep inequities that disadvantage some from the outset. These inequalities intersect with each other, for example, poverty, caste systems, racism and sexism, denying people their rights and equal opportunities. The impacts extend across generations. ("Intersectional Feminism: What It Means and Why It Matters Right Now").

Intersectionality is a concept that has taken over discussions on oppression, climatic disasters, refugee crisis, racial injustice and even the pandemic crisis. Coined by Kimberly Crenshaw some 30 years ago as a means to understanding the curious situation of Black women, intersectionality, is simply the interconnectedness of social categories like race, class and gender. How these categories connect and overlap to create identities that prove to be disadvantageous for the individual is the essence of the concept. Crenshaw herself defines Intersectionality as

... a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts. (Steinmetz).

Thus, intersectionality has become a pivotal concept in the realm of identity politics and on matters of social crisis.

Today the world is going through an unprecedented condition of warfare, economic crisis, environmental destruction, refugee problems and the lingering aftermath of the Covid-19 which has opened new fears of apocalyptic proportions. These situations are threatening the survival of vulnerable communities across the world, by amplifying the already existent inequities. Redressal of any kind must start with the recognition of those overlapping structures of power systems that play to oppress. Intersectionality has been put forth by the United Nations as a means to dissipate systemic discrimination,

Intersectionality can go a long way towards addressing these inequalities. With growing recognition that failure to address complex social systems and identities can obscure or deny the human rights protections due to all, it is crucial to design programmes and policies that effectively address not only discrimination based on disability but the situation of those affected by all forms of compounded and intersecting forms of discrimination. ("Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit")

The fact remains that it is harder for low-income communities and marginalized communities to access clean air, water, or land. Most often, these communities are pushed into areas of toxic waste, dry lands, landfills, or areas with persistent environmental hazards. Such startling life disparities existent between the marginalized and the privileged communities, prompted Leah Thomas a student of environmental science and policy to coin the term 'intersectional environmentalism'. The institutional and environmental policies seem to be ineffective in protecting the vulnerable populations that they are envisaged to protect against social and environmental injustices. It was during the Black Lives Matter protests of May 2020 that Leah Thomas asked environmentalists and climate activists to stand in solidarity with the BLM movement, calling it as intersectional environmentalism. "Thomas says that intersectional environmentalism is a more inclusive idea of environmentalism that identifies the ways in which injustices that are happening in marginalized communities and the earth are interconnected" (Fathima). Simultaneous to this concept lies the concept of environmental racism, created in 1982, by Benjamin Chavis, an African American Civil Rights Movement leader. Environmental racism as described by Chavis include,

...racial discrimination in environmental policy-making, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of colour for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and the history of excluding people of colour from leadership of the ecology movements. (Cammarata)

This form of systemic racism is prevalent everywhere in various magnitude. The marginalized communities are disproportionately burdened with health hazards through practices and policies that

pushes them to be in proximity with toxic waste sources like mines or sewage or water bodies or industries and factories that emit airborne toxic waste.

Among marginalized communities come indigenous people or tribal settlements, who are often one of the most affected people in the world. The archipelago of Andaman and Nicobar Islands is a recent hotspot for ecological debates due to the increased concerns about the island's sensitivity towards new developmental policies. An escalated interest in island tourism is threatening the habitats of many endangered species and the island's indigenous settlements. Further construction practises, encroachments, tribal reserves, poaching, and commercial forestry is adding to island's exploitation. "The demographic landscape of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is complex, with the tribal population facing the threat of extinction and the settler population lacking representation in governance" (Salahuddin). The island is host to around four aboriginal tribes, all of which are nomadic in nature. However, the population of these indigenous tribes have come down drastically, due to conflicts, epidemics and health crises brought in by the colonizers and the settlers. Their indigenous way of life is almost extinct and so are their languages, which are also on the brink of being lost for ever.

The islands' Black Indigenous Asians are widely assumed to be relics of the distant past and have been treated, literally, as attractions in a human safari, with buses full of gawping outsiders rolling through indigenous reserves. Their choices about contact with the outside world have always been, and continue to be, conveniently ignored. ("Misguided Mega-Projects Threaten to Devastate the Andaman and Nicobar Islands")

This friction between the indigenous people and the urban settlements have been a source to many literatures and movies. Netflix showcased a series surrounding the same issue, set in a futuristic post-pandemic Andaman & Nicobar archipelago.

Directed by Sameer Saxena and written by Biswapati Sarkar, *Kaala Paani* is a survival drama television series released on Netflix in October 2023, starring Mona Singh, Ashutosh Gowariker and Poornima Indrajith. Set in a post-Covid world, in the near future, *Kaala Paani* is at once apocalyptic and dystopian in nature. This Netflix series has been praised for its portrayal of island life, wrought with ever dwindling resources and teeming with urban population. Caught in between this web of concrete apocalyptic angst, is an island rich in natural resources and tribal life called the 'Orakas', who are the original inhabitants of the island. They are therefore protected, much like the forests and resources of the island; and yet, in a world of ever-expanding greed and human population, the Orakas represent a past which is on the verge of being lost forever.

The story unfolds in Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the year 2027, with the world already reeling out of the aftermath of the Covid-19 and is on the verge of another similar disease called the LHF-27. Unlike Covid-19, LHF-27 is a waterborne disease, and its sudden onset stuns people and death becomes imminent. The strategies employed to curtail the disease is very much like that of the Covid-19. Therefore lockdowns, social distancing and masks ensues. Being on an island further escalates the dreadfulness of the situation and the title "*Kaala Pani*", refers to the colonial prison of the island, the infected waters of the island and also the abysmal waters of the ocean, that is imprisoning.

The pandemic world is by no means fictitious anymore, and on the contrary, it is more real and more traumatic now. This heightens the dread since it is not the disease alone that the series portrays but also the immediate crisis like the shortage of clean safe drinking water, that looks like a possibility in our reality soon. With the waters infected, every drop becomes banal and the search for uninfected drop of water becomes an endeavour engaged in by every character. This reality check therefore becomes complicated and ironic within the setting of an island.

The Chief Medical Officer Dr Soudamini Singh played by Mona Singh is the first person to warn the island of this health disaster. The island is preparing to host the Swaraj Mahotsav, which is a huge cultural event aimed at booming the island's tourism. Thus, the island is expecting thousands of visitors from all over the world, and this intensifies the urgency of the situation. The administration led by Lt Governor Zibran Qadri played by Ashutosh Gowariker, along with the police forces tries to absolve the situation by initiating testing camps and isolation centres. The festival, where the island's culture is to be celebrated, stands in stark contrast with the island's urban way of life. In fact, *Kaala Paani* exemplifies the concept of intersectional environmentalism, by its very exclusion of the Orakas from the mainstream medical containments prompted to protect the urban population. An inclusive form of environmentalism that supports both the protection of the people and the planet will ensure to address the overlapping structures of injustices inflicted upon the marginalized communities and nature. The focus of such inclusivity will target both the environmental degradation and the oppression of the indigenous communities.

The series explores the dehumanising of the indigenous community Orakas by the larger urban population, through their politics, greed, development, and prejudice. Today the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is facing very pressing issues on the on-going conflict between the ecology of the island and the holistic developmental strategies that are in place, which can result in mass deforestation, loss of natural habitats, loss of endangered species of flora and fauna and the displacement of the indigenous communities inhabiting the island. It is against this backdrop of reality, that the series engage in topics like the rights of indigenous community, ecology and urban conflicts, poverty, medical access, casteism and human survival under crisis.

The dehumanizing of the marginalized communities is an issue that comes under the purview of intersectional environmentalism. In fact, Leah Thomas has maintained this dictum of environmental justice through social justice, right from her BLM protest participation. Dehumanizing is a prime strategy of exploitation. In the series, the Orakas are dehumanized in multiple ways by the administration and the general urban population. The administration of the island looks upon the Orakas as a means of revenue. Hence even though the forest and the tribe are protected, the administration has made roads through settler forests to encourage tourism, without giving a second thought to the Orakas's agency or consent to interact with the outside world. The Orakas are reduced to mere tourist attractions and thereby their way of life is threatened to the very brink of extinction. Interaction with the outside world has further alienated many Orakas from their true way of life. They are paraded and exhibited like objects for the entertainment of tourists. The interaction with the outside world has also brought in modern diseases into their midst. Rampant poaching results in violent crimes being done to the Orakas. Women are raped and murdered in brutal ways and the evil in modern man finds expression in the violence they inflict upon the Orakas. The settler population has brought in greed which has proved fatal to the Orakas. While their land and they themselves are plundered and exploited, the mainland population is disgruntled by the Orakas and their presence is seen as a threat by the struggling urban dwellers. The Orakas are looked upon as illiterate, anti-development and destructive by the mainlanders. This is indicative of how the urban dwellers perceive of the Orakas as lazy jungle dwellers who live off government aid without working. While the whole island is in mayhem due to the pandemic, the Orakas sensing the impending danger from their ancient wisdom, disappears altogether into the deep forests. But when the medical team and the island administration discover the cure for the disease in the DNA of the Orakas, they do not hesitate in hunting the tribe down and to capture the Orakas like wild animals for lab testing. "This moment narrates the subordinated status of the Orakas in the social order and their lack of agency and bodily autonomy" (Chakkar). Citizenship is not a privilege extended to the Orakas and therefore the administration doesn't hesitate in considering a genocide of the Orakas as a solution for the pandemic. Under extreme circumstances, survival of the majority becomes a priority for the administration and the dispensability of the Orakas is justified through their failure to evolve by the Lt Governor Zibran Qadri. This is

indicative of the deep-rooted prejudice or environmental racism of the administration. The Orakas are not extended with the privileges of citizenship and their lands, and their resources are plundered and exploited by the administration. They are not included in any of the policy making decision even though, it is their lands and resources that are being used. This prejudice reaches a dystopic level when their sacred burial sites are demolished by the ATOM Cooperation to make a landing strip for their CEO. This burial site is what unleashes an ancient, buried infection into the waters of the lake in the island. The Orakas knew of the way to protect themselves and the world from the LHF-27. But the greed of the modern man leaves no hope for salvation and what ensues is an attempt at a genocide with the Orakas bravely defending themselves with bows and arrows against guns and automated weapons. “*Kaala Paani* captures the complicated dynamics of what subaltern studies theorist Gyanendra Pandey referred to as the ‘subaltern citizen’, wherein through the Orakas, the series holds up a mirror to the politics of citizenship of the oppressed and subordinated classes of society” (Chakkar).

At the intersection of the urban and the primeval is a character called Chiranjeevi, who for the first half represents the average embittered diabolic city dweller and towards the end of the series, transitions into an Oraka when he realises that he is half-Oraka. Born out of an Orakan woman and a poacher, who had raped her and left her to die with severe burns and wounds, Chiranjeevi represents the cusp of urban-primeval divide. He embodies the dehumanizer and the dehumanised. He traverses between the urban and the subaltern, the citizen and the object. His journey from a goon and poacher who lives off exploiting and hating the Orakas, to walking into the forest with his brother Oraka, questions our own perception about humanity. Humanity is also pawned through the characterisation of Santhosh, a mainlander, a tourist, and a family man. The trajectory of his character is synonymous to the downfall of man. With the loss of his wife and son to the pandemic, the darkness in Santhosh is awakened through his survival angst. The downfall of this sweet family man who is innocently out on a family vacation, is at once startling and brings out the realities of human resilience.

The series provides a serious reality check at various levels. The plot brings together various institutions of modern society like administration, police, doctors, corporates, and civilians, uniting them all under a common cause of selfishness. However, the series portrays and justly represents the tribal community Orakas as saviours of humanity and as evolved beings in a wholesome metaphysical way. The series concludes with the Orakas at the end of their tether of kindness and patience towards their fellow beings, the settlers, who have never returned the courtesy back.

Although *Kaala Paani*’s closing scene offers us a glimmer of hope and reiterates the strategic genius of the Oraka, it nevertheless also shows us our follies as a society. In the end, what we are left with is an innate understanding that the subalterns in *Kaala Paani*—like the Orakas and Ritu Gagra’s Dalit father—are forever trapped in the liminal space between being and becoming. To borrow Gyanendra Pandey’s argument, they are always only a potential: potential dangers, potential resources, potential citizens, and potential equals. (Chakkar)

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