

Life of the Meek: Shall They Inherit the Earth?

Khataumal Lohano, MBBS

It is quite unfortunate that the combination of societal customs, rigid interpretation of religious texts and patriarchy have managed to maintain hegemony over the marginalized sections of the society. People are generally not interested in either serious reflection or in engaging in debates that could ensure equality and social justice for all. Most of those who study in English language schools become so outward looking that they try to reach the Silicon Valley, or live a materially satisfying but disconnected life in Pakistan. On the other hand, those rooted in vernacular cultures become fatalist and inward looking; they fail to realize the simple yet subversive idea of equality. How does an ordinary, down-to-earth folk counter it with arguments when all he or she is concerned with is survival and livelihood amidst chronic poverty. In addition to this, the lack of opportunities also works as a catalyst in the process of 'otherization'.

This paper looks into the trials, tribulations and struggles of those who are 'otherized' with the help of life histories of three denizens of Tharparkar. All three selected cases are from different communities: Rahimdino Samoon is upper-caste Muslim, Chanpo is Bheel and Mahavji is low Kolhi. The latter two are considered low-caste and are part of the scheduled caste and tribes.

Rahimdino Samoon of village Karmali near Mithi was my class fellow in school in the late 1960s. He preferred to look after goats which was their family business rather than getting a government job. When he started rearing, then it was taboo to sell milk but only those survived who could sell milk otherwise they were not able to afford fodder during drought. He is now facing difficulty with coping the outbreak of disease in animals which is a routine phenomenon but during the 1970s, he was curing animals from faith healers who were not only easily accessible but also quite successful in their trade. He is now considered socially inferior as he is a blue collar due to livestock rearing. The white collars neglect him during social gatherings and family events. Due to climate

change, the monsoon is late and rain is scattered so *bajra*, which is the staple food, has been replaced by wheat flour which is imported from neighboring districts. There is no *chakki* (grain grinder) at the household level so gone are the days when eating *bajra* and butter at breakfast was the norm. The multinationals are purchasing milk at the rate of Rs. 40 per kg and the same milk is sold to the Tharis for Rs. 120 per litre after packing. This is how the market works - we sell on cheap rates but buy expensively. In the 1970s, he owned around 500 goats and sheep but he lost around 10 percent every year due to drought. In the meantime, they divided goats among five brothers. So now, it is difficult for them to survive. Mostly, he used to sell male goat-kids but during drought, he sold female goat-kids to purchase staple food. Due to the migration of Rajputs, the *kandi prosopis* (cineraria trees) have decreased and the goats do not have their favorite plant to eat. The Rajputs used to provide grains to both peacocks and the Manghanhars (a group of people famous for their classical folk music). Now the death rate of peacocks has increased, and the Manghanhars have left music and have become isolated and alienated instead of becoming part of the mainstream.

Chanpo Bheel had to migrate to Mithi from Phull Trai for the primary education of his children. Belonging to a lower caste he was unable to find work. Now he faces the same situation as that of ghost teachers in *katchi abadi* schools. No one invites him to attend *valima* (wedding ceremony) gathering due to his low caste. There is no electricity and water supply near his house. He purchases milk at the rate of Rs. 80 per litre, firewood for Rs. 200 per 40 kilogram and water tanker for Rs. 2000. He has very little storage capacity in his *chounra* (thatched hut). The above mentioned essential items are available in the village at no cost. His son also feels alienated and feels inferior as he sees others wearing school uniforms and trousers who reach school on motorcycles or *chingchi rickshaws*. Despite good rain levels (around 500 mm), Chanpo leased his land to fellows due to uncertain future and preferred to stay in town for other livelihood options and also to continue the education of his children. It is a new thing for him to cast a vote of his choice.

Mahavji is originally from Nangarparkar area of Tharparkar but lives in Mirpurkhas. As an observant person, he has been talking about the change in the attitudes and outlook of the younger generation and by extension, families and communities. These days no one offers boarding

and lodging and everyone is only interested in shaking hands. So he prefers to remain away from the homeland due to the paradigm shift in the attitude of Parkari relatives (the Parkari community is settled in Nagar Parkar, Tharparkar District and majorly consist of peasant farmers).

Before the 1990s, Tharis (capital city of Mirwah Subdivision (Mirwah taluka) in Khairpur District, Sindh) used to struggle to get the highest numbers in the matriculation examination to study in Hyderabad but now we have Thari Dalits who have gone to the USA on exchange programs and also attended the South Asian University in Delhi, India. Folk songs are still popular among the Tharis which are sung during the monsoon, funerals, marriages and the time of departure of daughters from parents' home. The womenfolk remember and sing hundreds of songs on cultural, social and economic transformation of landscape and life.

Every year in November, around 60% of people migrate to canal areas for waged labor and return to their homes in April. Although the economy of Tharparkar is agro-pastoral, it is slowly transforming to waged labor mainly after the advent of metaled roads. The myth has been shattered and people have started visualizing an agro-pastoral lifestyle as a menial job and so their choices have increased. Migration was common among those who were not multi-skilled and were suffering more due to drought, flash floods and earthquakes. The rain pattern has been disturbed due to climate change. Due to this, there is very little growth of *bajra* and the food security situation of people has been disturbed. Once very common, the stone mills (to grind grains) have mostly disappeared from homes. Malnutrition has increased among the marginalized, that is, women and children of Dalits. Before metaled roads, it was a taboo to sell milk but now milk is sold without any guilt and shame. In towns, there is now livestock rearing for harvesting and selling milk. It is indeed a quotable quote that in the good old days people used to consider milk and sons to be equal and not as a commodity to sell in the market.

Before metaled roads in mid 1980s, very few people dared to visit Thar. It can be said that only those who read the poetry of Bhattai ventured but now after seeing photos of Thar on Facebook, several thousand people visit Thar in August. These visitors have been boosting Thar's economy. Handicraft shops have been setup in towns and guest houses have been established to cater boarding and lodging of outsiders throughout

the year. Previously, it took two weeks to plough the land by camel or donkey but now the tractor takes only few hours to do the job.

There was a saying in Dhatki, popular fifty years ago, “*hovey bai ta panji bhai na ta khai kandi meen phae*” - if you have a sister then you will marry soon otherwise it is better to commit suicide. Earlier, divorce and separation were considered to be taboos but now norms have changed.

We used to receive newspapers – The Sindh Observer and others – by post and urgent messages by telegraph, now Facebook helps us share photographs and videos within seconds. Similarly, talking to people living abroad is easy, thanks to Skype and other such tools. Before Partition, Thar exported clarified butter and male kid of cow to Gujrat and importing silver and berry leaves from there. Male kids of goats were exported to Karachi and religious books in Sindhi on Hinduism and *phattakas* (crackers) on *Dewali* (festival of lights) were also imported.

Earlier, people especially farmers waited for sunlight and those who were rearing livestock anxiously waited for full moon because they needed moonlight for cattle grazing but now the latter has been transformed into a ritual. Now hundreds of men and women worship the full moon every month. The Rajputs who stored spikes of millet which was the staple food for decades, have transformed into *Vaish* (entrepreneurs) so peacocks and Manghanhars, who were under the patronage of the Rajputs, are at crossroads. So is the fate of folk lore. It seems inevitable that the children of the E-generation will explore local wisdom with the help of Google. With the advent of modernity, urbanized Tharis have no time to receive guests and chat with them from dawn to dusk. Everyone is busy in livelihood activities to bear daily expenses and purchase goods by multinationals which were not available earlier. I am of the opinion that if one is rearing livestock then it is better to organise it on the lines of a modern dairy farm which is easier to manage and maintain during drought. Traditionally, women received livestock in dowry but rearing it throughout life is not possible now.

If one migrates to towns and cities for education of children then one will have to face several teething problems in the early stage but later on after completing education the next generation would become part of the mainstream. The mainstreaming means leaving the vernacular languages, which is a requirement of the market but it is painful as doing so takes away the traditional knowledge and conventional wisdom.