One position in the Indian Subcontinent, which shapes even our micro-experiences by vice of pre-determined mannerisms, roles, and standings, is that of caste. It is an age-old social system codified in Manusmriti- the religious book of Law, that lays ground for only those at the top of caste hierarchy to amass wealth, knowledge and power.

Meena Kotwal, a journalist from Dalit community and founder of Mooknayak- one of India’s first news portals dedicated to covering atrocities against marginalized groups- is a fierce Ambedkarite and a loud and assertive voice in anti-caste politics. On the occasion of Mahad Satyagrah in 2021, she uploaded a video of herself putting a page of Manusmiriti to fire. The intensity of harassment that followed is better left unrepeated, but it definitely stands as a testimony to the deeply casteist and gendered underpinnings of digital mediums, that replicate the systems of real world in myriad new ways.

Caste remains the strongest force permeating into every aspect of social and personal life- from national/regional politics to day to day living- things in this subcontinent play out under the framework of caste. The vigilance of Right Wing faction groups around any breakaways in the set system has multiplied since Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has occupied a position of power in the Union government, as they bank on a false idea of Hindu Majority. The Vigilance works to reinforce this narrative and to weaken any opposition to it- ideological or political -by novel ways of trolling, ridiculing and spreading fake news.

In the interview that follows, Kotwal talks about casteist undercurrents of Media in India; social media as a tool of assertion for the marginalized; novel means of harassment by state and non-state actors to ensure suppression of such assertions; and her personal journey of dealing with it all in the face of stubborn and patriarchal state.

…..

AA: Journalism is not something a woman generally sets out to do. How did you land up on this decision?

MK: I never grew up thinking about getting here. I began working part time as a sales person while I was in 11th grade, doing product promotions at malls, etc., on weekends after school. Self-dependent hone ki aadat ho gayi.

I got into a correspondence course in DU as I had to study and earn both, but was not enjoying anything I was doing. I got into Mass Communication in Jamia thereafter, but back then, I didn't know much about the media. It was synonymous with anchoring and that's
what I went there for. Once I was there, things began to change. I started knowing more, reading more. Then I got into IIMC.

My first opportunity came to me through an fb post about a new website, National Dastak, that needed recruits. There, I was exposed to myriad ways in which caste functions in society and within the media industry. There were so many stories on Dalit atrocities and lynching, so much so, that my Delhi grown-self sometimes felt they were over reported because I too come from the same community. Along with all this, I also started observing how there were no Dalits in any higher position in my field. All of this filled me with negativity. I retreated back into academics after working there for some 5-6 months. I then did my Mphil from Lucknow University, leaving the media with the thought of never returning.

While I was completing Mphil, I came across a vacancy call at BBC Hindi. My partner encouraged me to apply for it. Now BBC is a respected media house, known for their good coverage on Dalit, Adivasi, Minority and women rights, which gave me a push into believing that things would be different there.

AA : How was your in-room experience at BBC?

MK : BBC might boast of an international stature, but in the Delhi office of BBC Hindi, there are people from amongst us. Just one type of crowd, all savarna. I was the only Dalit woman in the newsroom at that time. When I joined the BBC, I had made false assumptions based on my interactions with their social media that things would be more progressive. My experience, though, remained contrary.

There are two channels of the day to day harassment that I faced there- personal and professional. At personal level, I was asked of my caste by my co-workers and ignored thereafter; comments were passed religiously; picture of Behenji (Mayawati) was skid towards me with some remark from behind “tumhari neta hain”- they’d similarly do it with Baba Saheb’s photo; once while eating also I was told “Brahmin mahila to khilaoge to punya milega”- such was the atmosphere.

At professional level, there used to be some loophole in my story always, at least that’s what they wanted me to believe. I earlier spent my days thinking that I needed to polish my work, which I kept on doing- but despite all my effort, they continued with their negative attitude towards my work, pointing towards errors and gaps that just won’t go.

My Editor, Rajesh Priyadarshni, asked me to continue pitching, everytime I went to him to address the issue. I noticed the same stories that I had pitched and were rejected, being
later covered by others. India digital Editor, Mukesh Sharma and Rupa Jha, Head of India, BBC News were others that I worked under.

I was swift to file complaints to the concerned authorities. There was nothing but inaction in the newsroom.

AA: What kind of emotional toll did this take on you?

MK: I began taking antidepressants while working at BBC, kept running from one hospital to the next for treatment. Nerves in my heart had begun to block. Safdurjung, AIIMS, Fortis, Max, Ganga Ram- I had to visit them all, only to be diagnosed with Hypertension. Office workers never paid heed to my deteriorating health, despite walking around with medical documents.

I was not taken seriously or trusted by people, including my partner in the beginning, in general because it was the BBC I was talking about. Andar hi andar ghut rahi thi kyunki kisi ko bata nahi paati thi. I became very suicidal and attempted suicide twice during this time.

The entire episode used to be targeted. I was asked to censor my social media activity when I wrote about the experiences and atmosphere of the workspace as a first generation woman earner. I was subjected to systemic harassment- shouted at and scolded right in the middle of the newsroom, even though it is a written policy of the BBC to not do so. Even the camera-person pointed it out to me saying that he is only subjected to such treatment when he’s working with me. The social media manager used to say that there’s no void in the story that had been rejected/returned by my editor, but he can’t do anything because it’s not in his power. Everyone witnessed each of these playing out, but never spoke up on anything.

AA: What happened in the days following your Manusmiriti dahan video on twitter? Who all were involved in the harassment?

MK: I feel there’s a Manu residing within all of us, including myself, as it is an inherent part of our society. Even if we don’t believe in it, we live in its laid system. I wanted to kill the Manu residing in me, so I put a page of it on fire and posted it on twitter.

Trolls and comments were immediate reactions which later turned into phone calls that would not end. All these men from Hindu faction groups like Bajrang Dal, VHP, etc., used to call non-stop all night-throwing rape and death threats. I was told whatever happened to Gauri Lankesh will be repeated, and that it will not take them more than 5 minutes to
locate my house. People who didn't even know the matter used to call, as someone amongst them informed me that they've just been given a list of names and asked to threaten those people, with no extra information.

Abusers on social media were also those who didn't know anything about the matter, and didn't care too. They just knew that she’s a woman, so that served as one basis for all the slurs and on top of that she’s a Dalit, so that became the other basis for abuse.

AA : You requested the police and the government to provide you security arrangements when the threat seemed holding enough power to cause you potential harm. How were such requests dealt with?

MK : It’s been more than one year of filing F.I.R under SC/ST atrocities Act at Ambedkar Nagar Police Station. Nothing has been done till now. In the beginning, the police denied registering a complaint unless they do a search, which is contrary to the rule which states that under this Act, the complaint shall be registered first which will then be followed by investigation.

Only when this matter was taken up on social media and the police understood that it can’t be let off so easily, the police filed the FIR. I was called by the DSP to the police station the next morning and given a copy of the complaint. If this is the condition in Delhi, imagine the effectiveness of the Act on ground in other remote and non-urban spaces.

According to estimates, almost 700 cases of atrocities against Dalit Women are registered everyday, and these are cases that are recorded. Imagine the condition of those that aren’t, given such a policing system at place.

AA : As a reporter-founder of a web news platform, your interaction with digital media is a daily affair. How do you see the irony of such a space where on one hand it provides a platform for varied assertions by marginalized voices, and on other it morphs into a tool of harassment against the same voices?

MK : Everything that comes in the market has its own share of benefits and disadvantages. The thing with social media is that no money is required for occupying a space on it, instead it can help you generate income. Our country has a huge pool of young minds who are all using social media, so there is access and reach, both.

Even the administration takes it a bit seriously, especially twitter. I feel it is the real media for us, who are systematically silenced in other mainstream media spaces. That is why at Mooknayak, most of our stories are sourced from here, rather than from TV or Newspaper.
People around the country directly post about issues, without needing any mic or having to wait for a reporter to reach them. People can now directly make a video of the matter at hand and provide you with a first hand report by uploading it- such is the democratization of voices that has been enabled by this space. Once we get to the source, we move towards verifying it.

On the flipside, there is constant pressure for speaking up. I am reminded of how Bulandshahr police threatened legal action against me for tweeting on a Dalit groom requiring PAC police to get on horse at his own wedding. They accused me of spreading violence for pointing out the inherent violence of casteism. It is similar to how people also accuse me of spreading casteism! People who don't want the caste cycle to break are abundant and ever prepared to attack even the remotest form of rebel.

AA: How is harassment dealt with in your workspace, do you all address/discuss it amongst yourself for solidarity and support?

MK: Many people that work here are not professional journalists, so they are learning. Sometimes they are scared or wish to stay away from controversies, which enforces some censorship on them. I too limit my activity to only talking about work-related stuff, so definitely there is some level of silencing that plays out because of the harassment. We discuss and inform our team about things, the kind of language that can be used when writing on social media, etc.

AA: How did your identity as a woman and a dalit play out in your journey till here?

MK: My reason for starting Mooknayak has been precisely this. Despite building a strong CV and gaining experience at BBC, I could not get a job. I went for so many interviews but people didn’t want to hire a ‘troublemaker’. First of all they don't want to hire a dalit, and especially not if the person asserts their rage against issues.

I started working in Bahujan Media without any payment. Its patriarchal set-up soon began irking me, as there were no other women. It was here that I wished to create a space myself just like Baba Saheb did in 1920, and the idea of it being done by a woman felt powerful.

…..