IDENTITY IN MARGINS: MAHARASHTRIAN
MARWADI OR MARWADI MAHARASHTRIAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper shows how the Marwadi identity is not something derived from any one location and it looks at how it gets constructed in the very act of migration of the community. It deals with the question of how even if there is no one same place the semantic construction of the term 'Marwadi' throughout the country, wherever the community is found is similar. For the purpose of this paper the researcher has taken the frame of a novel in Marathi by Dr. Girish Jakhotiya Eka Marwadichi Goshtha, an autobiographical fiction by a Marwadi settled in Maharashtra, to analyze the community. The misconception that others have about the community and the community has about its own self and its links with the past are elaborated upon in this paper.

KEYWORDS: *Identity, Margins, Marwadi, Community*

INTRODUCTION

Human beings live in a symbolic environment – an orderly scheme – which gives meaning to all objects and events, which are classified into categories. To facilitate reference to these categories each is given a label; words are the name that designates categories. Human beings are not just categorizing objects and events they categorize themselves as well – the identity of individuals, groups, and individuals belonging to a group. One important way of organizing and categorizing human beings is with the concept of 'community'. Geographical regions, in India, serve as a very dominant way of marking communities: 'Tamils' are in Tamil Nadu, 'Maharashtrians' are in Maharashtra, 'Kannada' are in Karnataka, etc. Such a focus takes us away from understanding an important phenomenon, that of the internal diasporas – Biharis & Gujaratis in Mumbai, Punjabis in Delhi, Bengalis and Malayalis in so many places outside of Bengal and Kerala.

MARWADI: AN IDENTITY IN MARGINS

In this scenario, the 'Marwadis' has a very unique location in two ways. First, in that, they are to be found almost all over India, and in all places, the construction of their identity is on similar semantic lines. Second, that there are no Marwadis (as they are identified elsewhere) in Rajasthan, supposed to be their place of origin. They are a community whose identity did not exist in any one place before it formed through the process of migration. In fact, the formation of the identity depended on migration. Merchant traders have migrated from villages in Rajasthan to towns and cities all over India from the 18th century onwards. Though these migrants came from different villages, belonged to a variety of lineages,

sub-castes as well as sometimes even religion, over a period of time they came to be labeled with the ethnic tag 'Marwadi'. The tag Marwadi is not a geographical indicator, first because these migrants came from different parts of Rajasthan and second because the merchant trading class of Marwad region, as well as that of all over Rajasthan, are not referred to as 'Marwadi' in these regions. This tag is not inferior to the community, but was/is applied by others. To quote Anne Hardgrove, who has researched the Marwadi community in Bengal: "there are no Marwadis as such in Rajasthan; they only become Marwadis when they leave." (Hardgrove, 2004) The 'Marwadi' is an identity which is at the margins in all the regions where they are present as other communal identities are dominant. How does one explain the very similar kind of semantic identity and the tag Marwadi used all over the place where these migrants are found, although the construction 'Marwadi' is not to be found in Rajasthan and the community is dispersed all over India.

In the discipline of social sciences the most accepted theories, which have attempted to explain community formation and which can be used to explain "Marwadi", are the ideas of 'invention of tradition' as propounded by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Ranger, 1983) and the notions of 'imagined communities' as presented by Benedict Anderson. (Anderson, 1991) Hobsbawm and Ranger posit that the so-called traditions of modern societies are in fact new and invented. They make a distinction between custom, a genuinely changing set of social practices, and invented traditions which masquerade as custom, to create legitimacy and identity for some social groups. Anderson makes the significant point that imagination helps people in forming a consciousness about the group to which they belong although they may have had no real experience of meeting all the people of the group. However, both these theories talk about the development of the identity of a group in the interior space. They may not be of use here in our analysis of the application of an identification tag such as Marwadi from outside. When does a group consciousness get formalized and ratified, as such, from the wider society world? In the Indian context, a useful insight in understanding the distinctiveness of identity formation is presented by the Indian political scientist Sudipta Kaviraj in an unpublished paper as cited by Dipesh Chakrabarti. (Chakrabarty, 1995) Sudipta Kaviraj points out how communities in pre-British India had 'fuzzy' (vague) boundaries; in British India, they became enumerated. The Modern governing practices that the British introduced in India consisted of the census of one, in which collective identities were counted in either/or manner and which made people see and organize themselves under these identities.

Both the ideas of 'invention of tradition' and 'imagined community' are of help in explaining the formation of 'Marwadi' identity. Coupled with this is the role of the census in Mid-Nineteenth Century in which 'Marwadi' like other communities, would have formalized this identity. Not much historical work has been done in this community, other than the business-house/ corporate sponsored history. For the purpose of this paper, I am limiting myself to Maharashtra and more specifically to a novel in the Marathi language "Eka Marwadyachi Goshtha", written by Dr. Girish Jakhotia. (Jakhotia, 2006)

MAHARASHTRIAN MARWADI OR MARWADI MAHARASHTRIAN: GIRISH JAKHOTIA'S *EKA MARWADYACHI GOSHTHA*

"Eka Marwadyachi Goshtha", literally, The Tale of a Marwadi, traces the development of a Marwadi child from a very small town of Maharashtra growing up to have a glorious career in academics/management consultancy in the city of Mumbai. It is the story of Gopal, all of nine years when the story starts, and his experiences of growing up. The subtitle to the novel "I am Maharashtrian Marwadi or Marwadi Maharashtrian"- very clearly focuses on the contours of identity for a

Marwadi boy born and brought up in Maharashtra. Throughout the novel, it seems as if one of the chief concerns of the writer is to enumerate the different shades of the 'Marwadi' way of life and their identity as perceived by the community itself in Maharashtra and by those outside the community. In fact, the author writes in the forward to the novel: "My Great-Grandfather came from Rajasthan to Pune. I am the fourth generation of our family in Maharashtra. My schooling was in Marathi. My wife is Marathi. We speak Marathi at home. I have written a lot in Marathi. But the perspective of the listener changes as soon as they hear my surname. Result: A frustration builds up somewhere." (Jakhotia, p. 9)

It is this sense of discomfort which makes the author in this novel search for answers to the questions about the identity and life-worlds of the Marwadis in Maharashtra. The author uses two strategies in the novel to bring out these nuances of identity. First, although the story has an omniscient narrator, it is narrated from the point of view of the child Gopal. By making the point of view, that of a child's, it becomes very easy for the author to question everything. Gopal has a bagful of questions about everything that he encounters. The answers, as well as the lack of clear answers, bring out the true status of how the Marwadi world in Maharashtra is. Gopal bombards all the characters with his questions. If nobody else, his father is always eager to answer his questions. In fact, the earlier part of the novel is much richer in bringing in a variety of perspectives, whereas the latter part when Gopal is an adult presents much more fixed views.

The second strategy employed by the author is in portraying the head of Gopal's family, his father, in a manner which is everything that a Marwadi is not understood generally to be. He is poor; spiritually inclined; a voracious reader; a total contrast to the usual conception of Marwadis being rich, materialistic and interested only in money. What such a character does is it splits the community open as the focus is laid on the difference between the family of the protagonist and the wider Marwadi community. It questions the typecast way in which the community is labeled, understood and perceived by others. When people within the family and outside in the community talk about this difference, they in turn, construct the dominant ways in which being a 'Marwadi' is understood/ formed.

Glorifying the act of migration and putting it up as something heroic and which the community is able to do perfectly is an activity which the migrant do and pass on such a sense of the next generation. This keeps the memory of migration always present and hence the desire to create and claim a space in the adopted land, by doing whatever is feasible and sensible. The novel presents many illustrations of such an act. It comes out most clearly in the character of Gopal's maternal Aunt's family, who live in a village of Maharashtra. We are told that they have become similar to the Maharashtrian community in their dress, food, language, rituals and even religious beliefs (having adopted the ethos of Warakaris of Maharashtra). This episode is summed up by Gopal's father in the following words: "A Marwadi can be found even in a tribal village. Living like a tribe. No place, culture or language in the country is unknown to a Marwadi. It is said 'jahan jati nahi hai gaadi wahan jaata hai Marwadi'….coming out of the harsh deserts Marwadis, to try their luck went wherever it was possible and profitable, stayed and became native of these places." (Jakhotia, pp. 56-57) The Marwadis in Maharashtra invented traditions for themselves by borrowing heavily from the Maharashtrian tradition, particularly of food, religious beliefs and festivities along with the language. The migration of Marwadis to Maharashtra always had a sense of finality to it. As the novel tells us that even for sacrosanct ceremonies such as 'mundan sanskar' the community went no more to Rajasthan, its being done in Maharashtra. When the migrant does touch base with the native land he has to return only with bitter feelings. With the realization that what he thought to be his own was no more; it has changed beyond recognition. When Gopal's father visits his native town, he realizes that this is not what his own father had

left behind; it has changed. He has no interest anymore in the native place; the people there also have no interest in him other than to get whatever money they can out of him who is thought to have earned a lot in Maharashtra. With such experiences comes the realization that they are different from their natives as well as the natives of Maharashtra.

The construction of identity within the community is seen in the novel in what the characters speak about and advice Gopal and his family in dialogues such as: "Gopal should now work in Nandumamaji's shop in the evenings. Learn the business. Only business is of use Gopal could never understand why Rameshwar kaka and others always said that the service was bad and business good." "Reading the books your father has only become a pedant. Books don't have practical knowledge." This comes out best in what Gopal's Nani has to say: "Those who are Maheshwaris do not waste time in debates. They do. Building up wealth, penny by penny. A schoolmaster is a nobody in a village; influential are the moneyed. Respect etc. is all a bundle of lies. If money is there respect comes" (Jakhotia, p. 32) However, this very idea of a business-centric, the materialistic only community has undergone a change. Not in that business and entrepreneurship are not valued anymore now, but in that the community now pays the greatest amount of importance to education and knowledge. The Maheshwaris, part of the Marwadi community in Maharashtra, realized the importance of education quite early and latched on to it. Others in the wider Marwadi community followed suit. Today the community sees education and intellectual development to be of paramount importance. This is seen in the novel in the way in which Gopal's Marwadi community in his village respects him for his education, and comes to him to seek advice on any big project of theirs.

From the outside the construction of Marwadi in Maharashtra are various. Marwaris are compulsorily supposed to be rich. Gopal and others in his family invariably have to face this question: How can a Marwadi be poor? Gopal used to face this question when he used to stand in the long queue at the Rationing Shop or while seeking fee waivers for his brother or sister. They are seen as outsiders and are reminded of this status by the native Maharashtrians, whenever there is even a minor conflict of interest. Many times Gopal has heard this: "You are a Marwadi. Go back to Marwar. Came with a 'lota', now behaving as a boss." The Marwadi community also has not been confrontational. This in fact, gets reflected in the very few conflicts that the community is involved in. They are also seen by the modern progressive Maharashtrians to be very traditional and ritualistic. This comes out in the novel very clearly when Gopal and Manasi Karve, a Maharashtrian Brahmin girl want to get married. The only worry for Manasi's mother is the traditional and unprogressive image of the Marwadi community. The Marwari's are also perceived to be very miserly; the positive aspect of it is that they are seen as practical and rational in their day-to-day life.

CONCLUSIONS

The identity of Marwadi community in Maharashtra has evolved over a long period of time. They are identified today as much more educated, intellectual etc. The direction of change in the construction of their identity is towards a more progressive and modern image, both within and outside. However, for the outsider, this change is just another addition to all the other understandings about the community.

The Politics of identities and their construction has been and is a dominant issue in public debate in Maharashtra. Political parties find enough grey areas where they have an opportunity to put forward their own discourse of identities. There have been many instances of groups and communities being identified, by these political parties, as 'outsiders' and being targeted and attacked. Marwaris in Maharashtra has not faced any such discriminating attacks. The only time this happened on a large scale was at the time of the 'Deccan Riots' in British India. The reason for this was that Marwadis in

Maharashtra had not tried to get their share of the pie in the politics of representation. They were neutral, focusing their attention on the development of business, career without any kind of confrontation. As there is a no-confrontational stance, there has been no targeting. They may have progressed a lot, earned a lot more than the native Maharashtrian but still have caused no disturbance in the minds of the majority and the political parties representing their cause. The reason for this is that they are not seen as a 'community' – as some other communities are – who can be a rallying point to make the majority masses feel deceived and feel that they are not getting what is due to them.

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