

Book Review

Ghumantoos—The Roadies of India and Canada

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Reviewed by Swagata Bhattacharya

When Dr Sayantan Dasgupta asked me to send a book review for this edition of the CLAI webjournal, he reassured me that the volume in question was an “interesting” one--*Ghumantoos: The Roadies of India and Canada*. Indeed. To me, it was doubly interesting. First, the book in itself is interesting in terms of both the content and the style of presentation. Second, as a member of the Centre for Canadian Studies and as someone who happens to have worked closely with both the editors of this book, the task of reviewing their work is not just interesting but rather quite challenging. However, since I was not involved with the project either directly or indirectly, I had the opportunity of going through the work with a clear unbiased interest.

The volume is a chunk off the principal researcher’s doctoral thesis on the performances of the Chhara community of Gujarat (India) and the Métis of Canada. How urbanization has affected the two “roadies” of these two nations and how that in turn has affected their theatre. is the foundation on which this project is based. Since the moment of its inception, the idea was to inculcate research as activism within the academic space. The slender volume has been divided into two parts. The first part again divides itself into small subdivisions, not exactly in the form of separate chapters, since connection is the keyword here. The entire volume is conceptualized on this essence of connection and continuation as the editors themselves have described as an ongoing process, a “work in progress”. The second part consists of the English translation of a play called “Bulldozer” by Dakxin Chhara, a member of the Budhan theatre run by the members of the Chhara community of Gujarat. Additionally there are four appendixes at the end of Part I—the Constitution Act of 1982 (Canada), Criminal Tribes Act 1871 (India), Government of Bengal’s pamphlet declaring Gobinda Dom’s gang a criminal tribe (1924) and finally 26 coloured photographs capturing moments and personal experiences of the researcher in Chharanagar. The appendixes help in grasping the essence of the research project.

The title “ghumantoo” signifies a lot in the context of this project. ‘Ghumantoo’ literally means ‘nomad’ or one who has no fixed address. The nomadic tribes of Gujarat and Rajasthan are known by this name. As urban readers the first misconception we have about them is that they are nomads by choice. The book opens by quoting Dakxin—“ghumantoo theherna chate hain lekin...in logon ke liye sarkar ke pass koi thikana nahin hain” (The nomads want to settle down but the government fails to provide any permanent address to these people). Not just the ghumantoo of India, but the tribal communities of Canada, too, have been herded and shoved across the nation. The same colonial legacy may have gifted both the Métis community and the Chhara community a similar fate, but post-independence their respective nations have done little to better their conditions. This is precisely where the “intervention” of this kind of a project is much welcome. It is not just another work on subaltern studies. No doubt it provides a backdrop, sets the stage by introducing who are the Chharas and the Métis and what is the implication of being a DNT (De-notified Tribe) or criminal tribe. Then the book goes on to delineate the colonial legacy and contextualizes the intervention of the researcher. But it is not another *This is Our Homeland* (2007). It is through the eyes of an outsider who was determined not to place himself in the position of an ethnographer studying and documenting the “other” (p 55). His close association and personal interactions with the members as well as their activities at the Budhan theatre, the Tejgadh Tribal Academy in Gujarat and with Lee Maracle and her group in Canada has enabled him to achieve his purpose. The spirit of sharing which had began with the Etching workshop and performances of the Budhan theatre in Kolkata, reached the point of culmination with Maracle conducted her theatre workshop in Gujarat in December 2012.

Coming to Part II, including “Bulldozer” serves as the perfect conclusion to a project which aims to throw light on the forceful eviction of indigenous communities in the name of urbanization. “Dakxin’s response” at the very beginning echoes the same thoughts as his play—the history of serving the nation and in return being bulldozed upon by the administration.

For practitioners of Comparative Literature, such works based on research as activism would be more helpful in understanding and practising the dynamics of the discipline. Though I personally feel the Canadian context could have been a tad more elaborated in this volume. However, since this is a “work in progress”, we might very well expect another volume in continuation. I would

like to take this opportunity to thank the project coordinator for supporting such an endeavour which not only strives to transform the lives of the tribals but also opens up new areas/avenues of research to be concentrated upon.