# Provocations

## "What is she doing here?" Containing identities, foreclosing abilities

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"Why are women and elders kept in the protests?" asked the Chief Justice of India[1], in January 2021, referring to their participation in the historic protests challenging the new farm laws proposed by the central government of India in 2020. These remarks fetid with patriarchy, were an assault on everything that democracy stands for, given that nearly two-thirds of rural, Indian, working women are actively engaged in agriculture. A similar ableist[2] question was raised in 2014 in a university, where the presence of a student with a disability in an all-student protest on campus, purely as a gesture of solidarity, sparked discomfort among students and authority alike. Ableism of this kind stems from "beliefs, processes and practices which favour species-typical normative body structure-based abilities. It labels 'sub-normative' species-typical biological structures as 'deficient', as not able to perform as expected" (Wolbring, 2011), justifying thereby, the convoluted ideological ghettos that prohibit hybrid bodies and minds from realising their full potential across all social spheres.

What is common to both these instances of exclusion is not merely the denial of entry into a mainstream sphere, but also an insistence that the labelled 'marginalised' stay put in the categories assigned to them. I use here, the image schema of 'containment', borrowed from Cognitive Linguistics, to illuminate from personal experience, the consequences of attempting to dissolve boundaries and stepping out of my enclosure to join hands with the categorised 'abled'.

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[1] https://thewire.in/women/cji-bobde-women-farmers-protest-remarks-rights

[2] The term 'ableism' implies social prejudice or discrimination based on ability. It is the idea that "normal" or typical abilities are superior, and anything less than, or different from such abilities may be subjected to ridicule, criticism, or dismissal.

**The privilege of higher education**

University spaces play a vital role in the shaping and conceptualising of student identities – often illuminating new ones and negotiating with the several intersecting and overlapping facets of the process. It is in these spaces that critical higher-order cognitive and socio-economic positions become more or less stable, and the bigger questions of one's potential role and contribution to society and social change need addressing. The same platforms also allow young thinkers to question and debate existing social inequities, uninhibited and unconstrained by them. The wealth of knowledge and insight I have received from these institutions is beyond measure, but more importantly, higher education to a great extent, has opened up a world of possibilities, particularly for communities that have largely been deemed physically or intellectually incapable of contributing to the socio-economic growth of a nation.

It is therefore extremely disturbing to witness in recent times, the very ethos of such academic institutions under threat and subversion. The thriving diversity that ought to form the very essence of Indian academia is now being stifled, with universities being coerced into becoming majoritarian homogenous bodies, driven by narrow and fictitious aspirations, and we have indeed seen a surge of reactions from academicians across the country, resisting these forces. What is required for a positively tangible outcome, however, is to sustain these movements on a much larger scale; we need a broader vision of what constitutes a truly liberal and democratic academic culture that in real terms — embraces the fluidity of identities, allowing for full participation in all the social structures, irrespective of class, gender, caste or ability. This stifling of identity fluidity and the containment of students into singular, definitive categories is the central theme of this piece, unfolding by way of some of my own experiences.

To what extent does my identity as a disabled student, in practice, allow or limit my participation and agency in the larger, collaborative endeavours for social change?

How does one reconcile with this evident conflict between the process of self-discovery as products of complex identities on one hand, and being coerced into reducing that complexity to a singular attribute on the other? What would count as a reasonable response to the encumbering contradiction: of becoming the object of restrain within the spaces that are

meant to nurture the promise of full participation and agency for change and progress?

## The role of protests: freedom from 'unreason'

I imagine that a similar kind of conflict may have driven Rohith Vemula to give up all hope for living in a less stifling environment, as reflected in his writing about his own dreams and aspirations of becoming a scientist, being reduced to his specific caste. His tragic demise is what it took for academia to take notice of and initiate a nationwide resistance against the forces that undermine and misuse the democratic culture of university campuses. It is difficult to conceive of a more non-violent form of resistance, than expressing dissent in the form of symbolic protests and demonstrations, with a demand for social, as against individual change.

Protests are powerful avenues for mobilisation of resources, where students from diverse backgrounds and ascribed identities come together for addressing broader social issues (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). We see student activism at two levels: the target-based protests — aimed at protecting the rights of smaller communities of students (women, dalits, students with disabilities, etc.), with the primary objective of spreading awareness about the physical, and socio-economic factors that have pushed them to the periphery of the narrative of campus culture. The broad-based protests strive towards the broader aspirations of the student body as a whole, with the collective endeavour to safeguard the progressive academic environment they deserve.

I had the opportunity of being part of one such broad-based protest on campus in 2014, against extremely hostile and unreasonable restrictions[3] introduced by the university administration. The protest escalated to the point of us going on a hunger strike – a drastic but necessary measure, as all possible channels of dialogue between the students and the autocratic administration were blocked. I must add here that my participation in the protest was solely in solidarity of the larger purpose of nullifying the new unreasonable demands placed on students. I had no grievances of my own, nor any disability issue that required

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[3] The restrictions included: prohibition of women students from staying out of campus beyond 11 PM, prohibition of students who were 'Junior Research Fellows' from receiving accommodation inside the University campus, and a sudden, unexplained, unreasonable, fee-hike for the hostel residents, without any consideration for students belonging to economically marginalised sections.

resolution. For a change, here was a student (with a disability) participating in an all-student protest that did not involve any particular disability issue, but a larger, more broad-based issue of student dignity, of woman dignity. This to me, is a classic case of merging of identities to the point where they become a single, unified whole, speaking a single language: that of broader equality. This became the subject of much amusement for the university administration and some of my fellow students because they were simply unable to relate to my presence in a protest that did not directly involve a disability issue. I was summoned privately on several occasions, and enticed with various comforts, so that I may leave the protest. The nature of the comforts offered was solely to do with my physical disability. To my knowledge and experience, there could not have been a more illuminating portrayal of the bigoted, myopic attitudes prevalent even in the most 'liberal' academic environments.

Such forms of extraction however, are not the only ways in which the marginalized are 'kept in their place'. The all-pervasive ableist language used in protests too, may often inadvertently deprive large sections within the disabled community, from 'standing up', 'joining hands', and 'marching in step' with the 'able' protesters towards collective endeavours. While they are indeed not a conscious attempt at excluding or undermining any part of the community, the connotations that these slogans have come to bear, may have lasting and damaging impacts. 'Turning a blind eye to demands', or their 'falling on deaf ears' for instance, have begun to often carry connotations of wilful ignorance. Indeed, eliminating vocabulary that might offend individuals/groups may be impossible and unnecessary; A certain level of trust and understanding between interlocutors may go a long way in the prevention of such misrepresentations. We may do well by being mindful of the power and potential of language, and treading carefully, lest we witness all the zest sapped out of every-day expressions, and our creative freedom relinquished altogether.

## Identities as metaphors for exclusion

Although this particular experience of mine may be viewed as a stray subjective case, it is important to understand its implications in the larger context of exclusion. The number of metaphors that have been used to describe such phenomena is particularly revealing of their pervasiveness in all social spheres.

First among them, pertains to the idea of a healthy body politic (Bhattacharjee, 2017), who interprets the disabled body in light of the government regulations on how the disabled must conduct themselves during the national anthem, as "lacking in proper mental and physical prowess to be properly nationalist" and therefore requiring discipline and indoctrination in order to close the gap between themselves, and the ideal, healthy, patriotic body politic of the nation. The disabled body therefore becomes a liability in the march towards all forms of progress at all socio-economic levels. Participation in the larger aspirations of larger collectives when one is lacking in the basic physical/ mental abilities, thus prevents the categorised abled, from transcending such myths and embracing fluid, intersectional cohesion.

Such ableist practices of prohibition of rightful entry into public spheres form the basis for the central metaphor: that of containment. This metaphor comes to mind from reading Lakoff & Johnson (1980) as a student of Linguistics, who describe our conceptualisation of the world and our bodily experiences, using a finite set of metaphors or image schemata. These schemata are pervasive not just in language, but in fact govern most of our thoughts and actions, enabling us to coherently articulate abstract ideas simply by understanding and experiencing them using more concrete phenomena.

The classic metaphor 'life is a journey' for instance, enables us to instantly make sense of life, simply by mapping the features of the concrete experience of journey, on to the abstract experience of life: the twists and turns, the bumpy rides, the dead ends and the road less travelled, all contribute to the rollercoaster adventure that we all know as life.

These features of journey can also productively be mapped onto the abstract experience of love.

'Time is money' is another well-known metaphor, allowing us the indulgence of doing with time, all that we do with money, such as saving or spending it, or even investing it wisely.

Among these and several others, a fitting portrayal of my experience of exclusion and extraction from the student movement can be explained using what Lakoff and Johnson call the 'containment Schema'. This schema involves "a physical or metaphorical

-    Boundary

- Enclosed area or volume

- Excluded area or volume"

The containment schema may have additional optional properties, such as:

- Objects inside or outside the boundary

- Protectedness of an enclosed object

- The restriction of forces inside the enclosure

- The relatively fixed position of an enclosed object

The containment schema is one of the most elegant and productive metaphors, yielding a number of conceptual schemata where the body and its parts serve as containers for abstract ideas, thoughts, and emotions ('hold that thought', 'get it into your head', 'know it in your heart', and several more).

We may thus understand the recurrent reduction of people to singular identities, as their being contained in boxes, labelled with that identity as defining, thereby demarcating and isolating them from other structures. The accompanying characteristics of the schema, of restriction of movement, and physical prohibition from any contact outside the containing entity, are all images that correspond with my experience. The unease about my presence in the larger campus structures was viewed as a conflicting image from my lawful place within the enclosure of my disability identity.

Daring to step out of this prescribed container for fresh air brings forth another discerning dynamic: that of a 'square peg in a round whole': a "misfit" (Garland-Thomson, 2011).

This seminal concept further enriches the containment schema with its theoretical productivity, capturing the ideas of 'fitting' and 'misfitting', particularly in the context of disability, as "material", rather than mere linguistic constructions. Fitting and misfitting in light of disability, represent "the discrepancy between body and world", when the shape and function of the bodies of people with disabilities comes in direct conflict with the shape and ingress of the built world.

This dynamic captures the scenario where two entities "come together in either harmony or disjunction. When the shape and substance of these two things correspond in their union,

they fit". A misfit, on the other hand, "describes an incongruent relationship between two things", quite like a misplaced piece in the wrong jigsaw puzzle. The primary negative effect of misfitting, Garland-Thomson reflects, is "exclusion from the public sphere — a literal casting out — and the resulting segregation into domestic spaces or sheltered institutions" (being put back in one's place/ container). The jarring visibility of the 'misfit' in that position, and the resultant lack of "anonymity" characterizing such misfittings (be they material or sociolinguistic) speaks directly to the subjective experience that rendered me singularly conspicuous and ill-fitted within a broad-based protest on campus.

It is important to note here, the palpable contradiction: between the demands placed on misfits to continue striving to become more normative, able, productive agents of socio-economic growth and their simultaneous prohibition from entering into discourses and spaces that open opportunities for them to visibly demonstrate their capabilities. This is what I interpret as the practice of 'the foreclosing of abilities'; that is, shutting down possible avenues for witnessing them, before giving them a chance to take flight.

The same reductionist image is again eloquently captured by the Nigerian author and story-teller Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Adichie, 2013) who illuminates the dangers of placing people into single stories, when we are all in fact, a complex of multifaceted narratives. "Show a people as one thing," she says, "as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become." Such are the dangers of segregating people based on the one attribute that renders them different, pushing them to the margins, because power, according to Adichie, is "the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person". That is the kind of power that must be denied at all costs, in our endeavours to become part of the social centre.

The same image of enclosures is also fittingly articulated by Shafak (2010), a Turkish writer who talks about the power of circles, as a means to dispossess and destroy the essence of humanness. She aptly captures the process of 'ghettoisation' as our tendencies to form clusters based on sameness, and then create stereotypes about other clusters, which to my mind, is one of the most serious impediments to our larger aspirations today. Such stereotypes then go on to create even more problematic notions such as typical or authentic member of a category e. g. a typical woman, authentically blind with an ear for music, etc., which in

Adichie's words again, may not necessarily be untrue, but they are incomplete. Our singular identities are not all that we are. When we enter into larger discourses, we bring with us the complex of narratives that make us whole, as rational and able participants in the larger rubric of student hood. The university administration however, thought otherwise. The finality of my containment within the disability enclosure was realised exactly two years later, in the form of a denial of a term extension: a provision[4] entitled to women and people with disabilities during the Ph.D. programme, largely as a means of reprimanding my 'changing containers' and participating in the protest.

## The way forward

Given this prevalent scenario where there is very little scope for social mobility for those in the periphery of the larger structures even within institutions of higher education, one is compelled to wonder whether these two processes of identity construction and agency for social change, are more interwoven than we would like to acknowledge. Attempts to reduce such a correlation must be made, if we truly wish to have a healthy and growth-oriented academic culture. If we truly wish to move forward in our endeavours, we need to include every single fraction of the student community into a unified collective, working towards the preservation of our democratic academic spaces; because none of us, is just a single story. Each of us is layers and layers of complex interwoven stories, endowed with the powerful ability to scale up and scale down those narratives, as and when necessary.

   It is also imperative that we question all the more in recent times, why these liberal spaces that champion the birth of new ideas and collaborations have become so much of a threat, when they are built to be the exact opposite. Most importantly, let us each put one foot in the doors that by right should be wide open to us, and enter those spaces in style, even if it makes certain individuals/ groups, uncomfortable. The ableist notion that people with disabilities (among other marginalised identities), are anomalies in an otherwise 'sanitized world', and that they'd best be confined within their prescribed containers,  must be

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[4] http://cbseugcnetforum.in/media/ugc-regulations-2016-minimum-standards-procedure-award-m-phil-ph-ddegrees-www-ugc-ac-in/

challenged at all costs, and in every social sphere, beginning with the family, all the way up to the representations at the national, and also the global levels.

   Here's to ripping apart all such containers, and 'compromising the sanitised world'!

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