

NUANCES OF THE EXPERIENCE OF THE LIMINAL: A CRITICAL READING OF THE IDEA OF LIMINAL AS ENVISAGED BY VICTOR TURNER

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Abstract: The liminal is the phase one has to travel to reach 'their' logic, to conclude 'their' way of life and this might be different from subjective position of another person governed by factors such as observations, assumptions etc. The conclusion can be called belief, the self-sealing logic, and this we have attempted to explain in the paper by making special reference to Devdasi tradition of India, among others. There will be a reality, which one cannot reach, or one hopes to reach, but is difficult, because there is always colours, the panorama of perception creeping in.

Index Terms: Liminal, Performance, Communitas, Ritual

1. INTRODUCTION

A whole host of understanding that intervenes in the binaries of 'you' and 'I,' constitute the experience of liminal. Binaries generate structures of hierarchy that classifies humans in labels of caste, class, gender, race and other such denominations. Liminal negates marks and identities and homogenises individuals using ritual. When to mark is to limit the possibilities of being human (white/black, light/darkness), liminal experience offers alternatives for those in the categories. They are accommodated in the "Liminal space" (Turner 95) which is the imaginary (in the mind) or the material (practices) silhouettes that facilitates any "transition" or "shift" in an individual. "Liminal personae" (Turner 95) is the one who undergoes the transition. The idea of liminal can be best realised from A. Tennyson's "Ulysses" where the speaker delineate his desire to be done with boundaries that contain him and travel in a world of experiences that defines no contours: "...all experience is an arch wherethro'/ Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades/ For ever and forever when I move."

2. PERFORMANCE OF THE LIMINAL

Victor Turner, suggests the experience of liminal as the suspension of the being in the interstices: Turner delineates the liminal as "neither here nor there" (95). For example, the experience of death, or being in the womb, or else becoming part of the wilderness can never be encapsulated by definitions. It escapes the grasps and moves into a slippage in every attempt of containment: it has transcendence to it, which could be called sublime, imagination or spiritual.

The word 'liminal' comes from the Latin word 'limen' that means 'threshold.' Another word for threshold is 'entrance' (entrance is neither inside nor outside: it is the betwixt). The experience of threshold can be best exemplified using the Narasimha mythology (Vemsani, 35). Narasimha, an avatar of Lord Vishnu- who is half-God, half-animal (theriomorphic deity) - kills Hiranyakashyapu on the threshold (udumbara), the mark of entry/exit. Threshold is called an experience, because it denotes a point of transition. Here, for example, in the Narasimha mythology, the 'udumbara' could be considered as the point of transition for Hiranyakashyapu from death 'to' afterlife. Now, what is the 'to' is a mystery and its unravelling is equivalent to unpacking the ambiguity surrounding death. Lakshmanrekha is another instance of the liminal: how do we explain a line? To explain a 'line' or the 'to' amounts to characterizing the liminal: why are certain things recognised, why certain others are a taboo?

Let us analyse liminal space through the example of Lakshman Rekha (Lakshman Rekha is an example for liminal space). Primarily, the relation of Lakshman Rekha (Anand 1) to epic Ramayana is based on the Indian dramatic tradition: it does not find mention in Ramayanas, and it is treated as a later interpolation, used to make public performances of Ramlila (Mathur) interesting. Interpolations, such as these, are explanations enough to explain how certain collective cognizance are constituted. Practices or performances become beliefs of a community, a component of a ritual, a myth, pregnant with symbolic significance. For example, how Lakshman Rekha becomes a universally accepted 'idiom' "to denote the ethical limits of any action, traversing which may lead to drastic consequences." Here, a line becomes a signifier for the transition that a person undergoes, when the threshold (line) is crossed. The attribute of divinity to the action reinforces the seriousness attributed to the action, for God is the ultimate taboo.

In ritualistic traditions, the notion of liminal is the driving principle: the priest, who is an ordained minister initiated in a sacerdotal order in a special initiation ritual known as the Sacrament of Orders is an instance. The rituals that are initiations into a new phase, here the person becomes one with God after going through the ritual and he is no more the same as before, have certain authority to it as they are juridically constituted in accordance to certain principles broadly termed as law. Victor Turner in "Limianity and Communitas," with reference to specific case studies, enunciates on the notion of liminal. One of the examples

that he gives is the “Kumukindyla rites” (an initiation ceremony to becoming chief of the community) of the Ndembu tribe in Africa. The person who is to be made into chief, along with his wife, is treated as a slave in the ceremony. The humiliation that they have to go through indicates the destruction of their “previous status.” It is also a point of induction to a higher status. The rites, which Turner calls rites de passage (99), is ordained and accepted by the community.

The notion of community or law is relevant to the idea of liminal from a dual perspective. On the one hand, as is mentioned already, the ritualistic practice and the ifs and if not surrounding the rites should be accepted by the community. On the other hand, the idea of community with its strict definitions of hierarchy is dismantled, in the case of liminal, in favour of homogenising the community: Turner calls such homogenised communities “communitas” (96). This is a levelling principle wherein those who were regarded as of lower status, even those subsumed as untouchables, are ordained with mythic significance, and often compared to a God-figure, during the period of being in the in-between space. The performers of Theyyam (Sekhar), for example, are from lower caste community; however, they are given the status of God when they are performing. The “event-time” (Schechner, Performance Theory 6) is the point of change or “passage” (Turner 97) for the performer from his state of stigma to a higher pedestal. Here communitas is a reference to the participants, for instance, in Theyyam the performers, in the ritual. Once a performer is initiated into Theyyam, the performer receives the stature of becoming God every time they are into the performance: the performer receives a chance of escape from stigma. Equally, the observers are also given a chance of God-experience through the performance, whereby the observer also undergoes a drastic shift in outlook once they are out of the event-time. This notion of liminal by Turner is similar to Jungian “Collective Unconscious (Jung 99):” There are certain patterns (myths) that are assimilated into the frame of mind so much so that even though the idea of God-experience seems far-fetched (from modern perspective), it is taken as the reality.

What is with Turner’s idea of liminal is that he considers liminal as an “institutionalised state” (Turner 107), which has a certain fixity to it: in fact his attempt is to trace how liminal entities in rituals go through similar phases irrespective of their contextual differences. The status less state attributed to Ndembu chief during initiation ceremony is compared to “coronation of Pope in western Christendom when he is called upon to be the “servus servorum dei” (Turner 102). His attempt is not to trace the anthropological lineage to a ritualistic practice, that is to say, how it was constituted once and how it is now, rather his enquiry is only of the present and how there are structural similarities in spite of the differences.

Liminal can be analysed from another perspective; that is what is the rationale behind accepting something and discarding the same with the passage of time by the communitas? Dave Grey exemplifies the experience of community in his work Liminal Thinking. He compares a community to a bubble that contains individuals with common set of attitudes and perceptions. His attempt is to relate liminal experience to the day-to-day experience. He gives a pictorial representation of the liminal space in order to exemplify his argument (Fig. 2): Grey’s thoughts are similar to Plato’s ‘theory of ideas.’ There is always the ideal reality or the real real, which is not the obvious or what seems apparently true to every person. In his graphic representation of the liminal space, Grey argues that the truth alias reality is always coloured by self-centred perceptions. First, there are the experiences or observations, from which a subject takes in what is relevant or what seems the need. Then out of those chosen observations, various assumptions are derived and thereafter these assumptions are subsumed as conclusions, which become beliefs. It is above these beliefs that one creates their respective ‘bubbles’ or personal spaces and the person accommodate those who are compliant to his/her beliefs into this. The bubbles are called ‘self-sealing logic’ because there is always an attempt to give rationale to their beliefs, justify their beliefs strengthening the bubble.

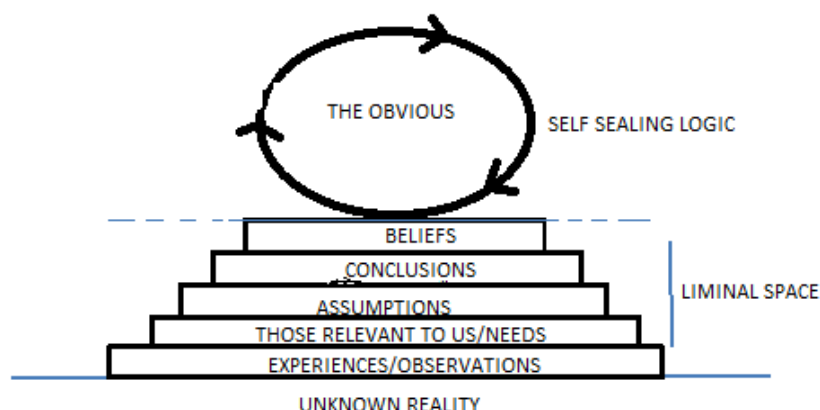


Fig. 2. Structure denoting any belief a person hold at a time, based on Dave Grey’s idea of liminal. Liminal Thinking. (Brooklyn: Two Waves, 2016; Print; 81).

The liminal space is the in-between of the unknown reality and the obvious: it is the bridge facilitating a person to reach their obvious. A separate understanding of the each of the slabs, that is, what ‘I have seen (observation) is coloured by ‘my’ assumptions and ultimately beliefs, will render the questioning of the obvious.

Now comes the question, how many liminal spaces can be construed? Dave Grey employs a simple logic to substantiate his argument: individuals have their specific obvious. In other words obvious is not 'the' obvious, rather there are many obvious (81). This idea can be validated by the representation:

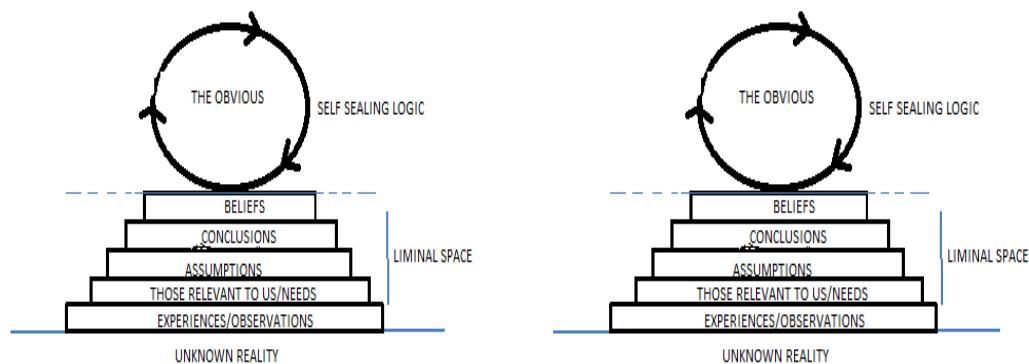


Fig. 3. Comparing the belief of a two distinct person, based on Dave Grey's idea of liminal. Liminal Thinking. (Brooklyn: Two Waves, 2016; Print; 81).

There is no one 'I' rather there are several 'I's' and it is commonly termed as the 'subjectivity.' The individual perception about something might differ or else it may starkly contrast to another individual's sense of self and the world. This, I presume is the fundamental behind contrasting ideologies which is a distinguishing feature of a community from another. The respective pyramids that define a certain contour (bubble) govern the various "world outlooks" (Althusser 295). These viewpoints are "conditions of existence represented to them." Religious ideology or racial superiority is all cogs in the same wheels of conditioning, the part of self-sealing logics of a community.

Community is a complex term, as it is not simply geographically signified: the politico-social-cultural context specific to a time-period is equally relevant. Community, circumlocutes in a "closed morality," structured by "bounded, ... particularistic groups" (Turner 110). As is with the nature of discourse, the normative system cannot persist for long as a different turn in the gyre may take place, due to various reasons: political, social, or religious. Colonialism is an appropriate example for the mechanism that has triggered a change in the colonies, from the already constituted discourse, which certain theorists call nativism, or the indigenous. However, it has to be noted that such changes are ideologically as well as repressively constituted.

The example of Devdasis in India is a case to the point: The Devdasis were a major part of temple traditions, as can be seen in evidences from ancient and medieval representation of Devdasis in temple carvings. The Chandela Temples in Khajuraho (Edward Lucie 9), gives images of temple dancers otherwise known as Devdasis. Somdeva in Kathasaritsagara (1070 AD) enunciates the Devdasi's and their higher status in society. In a travelogue by William Darlymple, *Nine Lives*, the initiation ceremony to becoming Devdasis are given in detail: the red bead necklace that they wear "in pride" (Darlymple 211), indicating their initiation as Devdasis, is flaunted by the protagonist Rani. Though they are often attributed mythic significance, they are related as prostitutes, the immoral elements of society. In accordance with Devdasi Prohibition Act, 2007 (Darlymple 208) the initiation ceremonies are now not held in Temple Premises: now they are given a negative streak.

In Spivak's analysis of R. K. Narayanan's *The Guide* (Spivak, "How to Teach a "Culturally Different" Book." 247-276), Spivak goes on to explain how they [Devdasis] became "gendered subalterns." One reason that she gives in her analysis is the "positional hazard" (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern speak?" 2121) of the gendered subaltern, how western intellectuals represented them in the archives: Foucault explains the problem with the reliability of archival knowledge: "...Foucault calls archival facts, the archive being defined as the text's social discursive presence in the world...." (Salusinszky 126)

Such evidences are taken for granted, on the one side, and a definition to morality and immorality is claimed according to Western standards: Art historian Frédérique Apffel Marglin in *Wives of the God-King* describes Devdasis by outlining Abbé Dubois' work *Description of the character, manners, and customs of the people of India*. It gives the eighteenth century representation of Devdasis:

Next to the Sacrificers, the most important persons about the temples are the dancing girls, who call themselves Devdasi, These ... are the only females in India who may learn to read, to sing, and to dance. These performers are supported out of the revenues of the temple, of which they receive a considerable share. But their dissolute profession is still more productive. (Marglin 4-5).

Abbe Dubois' description of Devdasis gives a matrix of pre-colonial labour that subsumed the profession of Devdasis as dignified. However, it cannot be ignored that Abbe Dubois, a French missionary calls the profession dissolute, and he equates it with prostitution (5) in West. Christianity, the civilising mission of colonialism, associates the exposing of body or nudity to fall of the man and original sin. The respect that Courtesans received might have seemed repulsive to them. Evangelists such as Charles Grant treated Hinduism as a "monstrous' evil" replete with superstition (Cutt 844). In 1813, East India company had agreed on the charter to legalizing education and missionary work of India, due to the interventions made by Charles Grant. One

of the legislative measures maintained that “the East India Company must provide an educational program to improve the moral status of the native” (Said 49). When Grant calls Hindu religious customs as ‘monstrous,’ there was an exoticisation of the customs, such as of Devdasis, taking place. Abbe Dubois calls the way the Devdasis are treated [with respect] as ‘strange.’ This can be related to what Said refers to as “Orientalising the Orient” (Said 49).

However, *communitas* is an answer to the spirit of the ‘normal’ in community, which was brought up by time: what is the standard. In Turner’s diction *communitas*, involves a connection between individuals, which Turner calls social relations (97), and are governed by “moral values” against “coercive power” (110). Here the ‘moral’ does not stand in support of the normative system guided by any factors, including colonialism: They have become part of the collective unconscious, such as with how women initiated to becoming Devdasis were seen as a privilege. In contemporary scenario, despite the immorality attributed to the practice of Devdasis, they are still equated with Goddess Yellamma and are often called upon presiding various auspicious occasions: “When a child is born, they make a cap for the baby from one of our old saris” (Darlymple 212). Also, the Devdasis unlike earlier are from lower echelons of society, and their origination is symbolic of “equality in rights and privileges” (Marglin130), that are otherwise denied to them.

3.CONCLUSION

The homogenising nature of the spirit of *communitas* involved in liminal, the ritualistic acceptance and unacceptance, which could be termed belief of one and the superstition of another or real reality and the forged reality, helps redefine “marginality, and inferiority” (Turner 96). This despite the fact that the notion of what used to be liminal has become decadent in another cultural scenario. Liminality helps question the notion of “immortal antagonists,” (Turner 102) as the antagonists in the experience of liminal come together and reverses the social plane. Whether it is the case of the initiation ceremonies involving priests, or Theyyam performer, or Devdasis, the spirit of liminal gives the niche for compromising the benchmarks of society, and accommodating the differences.

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