

The body in *dehaat*: A theatrical becoming
From applied philosophy to practical philosophy?

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This paper is an attempt to take a hesitant step into unknown waters, that little tester that one does before immersing the foot completely. I say this with much trepidation and anxiety as it suggests the possibility of not just reading Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari as practical philosophers; but also to follow this process of ‘practical philosophy’ in an *adivasi* village, Rukrum in the Gumla district of Jharkhand. By engaging with the Deleuzean-Guattarian thought to arrive at new problems, open up new ideas and explore new ways of becoming; the paper marks a questioning the normalcy and the complacency that a certain discourse and ideology has lulled us all into. How does art, and for the purposes of this paper, the writing of a theatre script, challenge the common-sensical understanding of a space, *dehaat*¹, that has been deemed as backward and lacking by the standard structures of capitalism and development and how can it pave the way for the (re)covering and crafting of a new concept, *their* concept, that will engender the contingent and emergent work of transformative praxis and be indicative of new becomings.

It asks the question – can the process of script writing and a theatre performance help the body in *dehaat* dismantle the way with which it interacts with the world, thereby effectively destroying the controls and rules that are imposed on it in terms of definition, what it *is* and what it *should* be. Would this then help us deterritorialize the structures and become cognizant of the vast multitude and infinitude of intensities that are ever flowing, every changing, getting rejected and projected in *dehaat*? Can the writing of the theatre script provide us *a* way (not *the* way) of disrupting the common-sensical, a way of ‘doing philosophy’?

There is almost a circular quality to the work: a concept, *dehaat*, which has hitherto remained unchallenged, unquestioned in the lives of the women in Rukrum, rigidly bound by structures; their lived experiences and everyday practices replicating the common-sensical; a shared anguish bringing them together to write a script, a script that challenges these very oppressive structures, a script that dares to think differently about *dehaat* and what does it mean to be a *dehaati*²; the process of which destroys common sense, no longer accepts the

¹ The word *dehaat* has its roots in Hindi and it roughly translates into ‘countryside’. However, over the years it has come to refer to the village. The word is usually used to denote something that is very backward and underdeveloped and almost always has a negative connotation attached to it.

² The word *dehaati* is used to describe anyone who lives in a space that is delegated as *dehaat*. It is used mostly as an adjective in common parlance, more so as a comment on the abject backwardness and inferiority of someone

already created and accepted values and assumptions, leading to a recovery of the concept. In this destruction of who we 'are', we find the possibility 'to become'.

Does one then read Action Research as practical philosophy as opposed to applied philosophy or a philosophy of practice? Is there an attempt to re-conceptualise the world, engender rhizomatic ways of thinking; "not to tell truths about the world, but to open up spaces that allow us all to think how our worlds may be changed"? (Cotton & Griffiths, 2007, pp. 547-48).

The body in *dehaat*

However, before disrupting the common-sensical, it is important to lay out the common-sensical that is being challenged through the Action Research. The articulation of '*what is dehaat*' and '*what is the lived experience of being a dehaati*' in Rukrum happened through a process of sharing and writing where a group of five women and five young girls came together, not to collect, count and save money, but to weave words through the complexity of their everyday experiences. There is a structure; a rigid organisational, teleological formulation in place that has already determined the path that *dehaat* has to follow. What is this structure? We have hitherto, talked about and defined a certain 'x' in terms of 'what x is not'; thereby becoming complicit (consciously or unconsciously) to the logic of One, a logic that censures us comfortably in a language that is comprehensible to us; leaving the many, queer possibilities and realities that cannot be assimilated out of the ambit – as a remainder, a relic of the past that we wish to disavow. In other words, there is a primary (let us call it 'p') and the other is a lacking or lagging other (let us call it 'not p'). What this shows is that even when there is seemingly a two, there is always a One, which is 'p' and a lacking or a lagging version of that 'p' – 'not p'. The 'not p' lacks any self-description of its own and is wholly dependent on the 'p' for one.

Something similar has happened to the *dehaat*. In our haste to censure what we 'know' into neat compartments, we have collapsed the existing infinitude of possibilities that perhaps make the *dehaat*; to looking at the rural as a pre-capitalist, pre-modern, backward, underdeveloped and superstitious space that has to be brought into the *telos* of development, to be made like the *sheher*³, leaving whatever cannot be assimilated as a remainder, a relic of the past that is to be erased and forgotten from memory. The description of *dehaat* has always been of one that is perennially trying to catch up to the *sheher*, is there but not so there, yet. In other words, there is no possibility of its self-description, what is '*sheher*' is today, dictates what is 'not-*sheher*' today, thereby leading us to *dehaat*. This goes a step further when it dictates not just what *dehaat is* but what it *should* be; where the capitalist-development agenda wants to do away with this pre-capital, pre-modern space and usher in a transition to the modern society that the *sheher* is symbolic of.

³ The word *sheher* has its roots in Hindi and is translated into town, which is considered as a representative of the urban.

How does the body respond to this organisational structure? The lived experience of being a *dehaati* reflects the anguish, humiliation and confusion when the ones inhabiting the space repeatedly encounter the structure that relegates *dehaat* as backward, pre-capitalist and a lacking other. The Capitalocentric-Orientalist⁴, development imagination puppeteers the body in its response to these labels. A visit to a cloth shop in the nearby town becomes an ordeal for the body – talking in her own language, makes her uneducated and uncouth to the so-called educated other. This diagnosis is accepted and the lack is internalised, thereby controlling and directing the way she experiences her own world. She fumbles, tries to change her language for the one the other expects her to talk in. However, her body is not just a site of humiliation and anguish. Sparks of resistance fly every now and then, when her body performs labour in the fields, practices rituals, collects leaves and branches to make a fire. The body in *dehaat* is thus, becomes a site of both humiliation and pride.

It becomes imperative to understand the irony with which development has operated – in its focus on the so-called underdeveloped space, called rural; it has completely foreclosed the possibility of imagining the rural of something other than what-is-not-urban. Is it possible to imagine a non-teleological future, a future where the rural does not necessarily have to be imagined as something that is always what the urban was yesterday? The so-called rural, either the victim or a utopian imagination, is brought to the forefront as a homogenous space, thereby eclipsing all possible forms of multiplicities.

Disrupting this rigid structure of meanings would first mean freeing the body - this is precisely what the process of script writing attempted – by making the bodies cognizant of the chains that bind them, recognising the assemblage within which they are held captive. By considering the ways in which our experiences have been confined to this unidirectional sense, we might be better suited to understand that the ways our bodies function, is reflective of our decisions and judgments.

Disrupting the organisation

Deleuze and Guattari help us here as they show us that *dehaat* for us has become so synonymous with lack and backwardness that we cannot conceive of it as anything else; and for the bodies in *dehaat* to perform any function outside this structure. This takes us back to the question at the beginning – would art, and for the purposes of this paper, the process of script writing and theatre be the way through which we could hope to deterritorialize the

⁴ Capitalocentric-Orientalist talks about “the inalienable constitutivity of capitalocentricism and orientalism, and the resultant displacement of the economy into a dualistic frame...through the overdetermination of capitalocentricism and orientalism, the space of non-capitalism is displaced into the derogatory other *pre-capitalist*... Thus orientalism and capitalocentrism, in overdetermined imbrications, help to define the dualistic framework of a modern capitalist economy and a traditional pre-capitalist economy. This dualistic framework in turn gives the discourse of development a turn towards historicism represented by the category ‘progress’.” (See Chakrabarti, A. & Dhar, A., 2009, p. 32-33). It combines the Capital-centric understanding of development with the ‘brown man’s’ burden to civilise, to chart out the path for how economies that are not capital must be sent along the path of capital-intensive modernization and progress.

standard discourse of development and unleash desire, desire understood as a creative and productive energy, an energy that can disrupt common sense and everyday life? (Colebrook, 2002)

For us, the process of writing the script was where the disruption happened – it was not one moment, or event; but the flow of the pen capturing the essence of *dehaat*, the feeling of *dehaat* and the intensities and multiplicities that that are forever getting (re)produced. The script was a movement from a representational structure of *dehaat* to ushering in a process of immanent thinking and living, whose target was split between challenging and disrupting common sense and everyday ways of life and on the other producing newer, divergent and differentiated forms of thinking and living that were rooted in the everyday life of a *dehaati*. When the body in *dehaat*, goes to the agricultural field and labors under the sun; she engenders a knowledge rooted in practice, an-other form of knowledge. She might appear uneducated as she does not have the mandatory years of schooling, but she asks us to reverse the gaze – does working on the field, planting and harvesting of crops, cutting the trees in the jungle, collecting dry leaves to make a fire – not qualify as knowledge, a knowledge that makes her educated in a different way?

Understanding *dehaat* not in terms of lack, but as a continuous flow, gives us a possibility to free ourselves from the limitations of the body (understood in the Freudian sense) and senses that subtract us from the teleological way of perceiving the environment. Questioning the conservative developmental notion of *dehaat* paves the way for more molecular, nomadic ways of thinking and living. The script writing gives us an insight into looking at how bodies in *dehaat* become organised in an ever-fluid process; instead of thinking of them as static, already-organised in terms of how they experience the world. Bringing the body in *dehaat* closer to the flows that sustain it; by engendering an art of doing-living-being; there is an opening up of the possibility of *becoming a dehaati*.

Deleuze and Guattari understand becoming as, “...not a correspondence between relations...neither a resemblance, an imitation or at the limit, an identification...becoming produces nothing other than itself” (2005, pp.237-38). Their conceptualisation takes us beyond the fixed *dehaat-sheher* binary and its fixed identity, the predetermined subject positions that a *dehaati* occupies. Becoming a *dehaati* then signifies becoming something else, something that exists beyond what already exists in being a *dehaati* in a world that has already written its epitaph. Becoming a *dehaati* does not mean that the body in *dehaat* has to emulate or imitate certain characteristics and patterns of behaviour that would fit in with what is ‘conventionally’ expected from someone living in *dehaat*. Becoming a *dehaati* would precisely involve the opposite – questioning and defying such dominant molar forms and relations (p. 276).

The writing of the script and the subsequent theatre performance in Rukrum, then can perhaps be a way of working through darkness – of the self, the empirical and the epistemic – a process that can perhaps be a step towards the intensities and productive and creative flows of desire that carry the potential to break down the structure of meanings that *dehaat* has come to internalise over centuries. *Dehaat* and the experiences of being a *dehaati* allowed us

to problematize the space that is referred to as rural, and is homogeneously relegated as backward and underdeveloped. Art helped us to think about desire in the Deleuzian-Guattarian plane – not as oedipalized, emanating from lack; but as a creative and productive flow that would help understand *dehaat* as continuously transforming. Art can also be seen as the connecting force between the different bodies that wrote the theatre script together; that thought of ways to produce their life differently and creatively; where each and every word, phrase and event in the script is a way to reinvent the whole process of thinking and living. The art that Rukrum produced was an outcome of the synthesis of intensities; of creating new styles of perception by exposing the rigidity in the existing styles of perception.

A movement towards practical philosophy?

Thinking about ‘something’ post Deleuze and Guattari would inadvertently lead to a re-conceptualisation of the ‘something’, a process that has no end. Molar forms and dominant structures do not welcome flows, intensities, essences and multiplicities. Will art then help us to move beyond ourselves and the generalities that we habitually impose on the world? This takes us back to the beginning of the paper – does one read Action Research as practical philosophy? Does one read art as practical philosophy? The disruptions in the structure were small; the molar structures of capitalism and development are strong. The body desires to break free, but for every chain broken, new chains are created. Working through these chains is a patient exercise, a continuous exercise. A chain breaks a re-conceptualisation happens – the process continues. Which is why the script writing was not about creating a correct picture or a correct theory of *dehaat*; it was about transforming *dehaat*. What happened in Rukrum is the start of a process of trying to move beyond the representational structure, to transform life, to inaugurate non-representational relations that are indicative of becoming.

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