

Veena Das. *Slum Acts*. Cambridge: Polity Press (2022), pp. 1-190, 2022.

ISBN: 978-1-509-53785-3 Notes + References + Index.

Price, Hard Cover €50.90, Paper Back €17.00

Veena Das's engagement with violence and everyday life goes back to her active involvement in rehabilitation work with the victims of the riots that occurred in Delhi in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. The anti-Sikh riots gave her long standing interest in kinship and religion a new turn as she explored the ways in which the violent event reframed kinship relations. Unlike many scholars who work on such subjects Das does not view catastrophic events as bounded entities. Instead she explores the ways in which they enfold themselves into the texture of everyday life so that their reverberations may be felt long after the event actually occurred as victims try to knit back their lives 'pair by pair'.

Given her academic background in Sanskrit and research on religion and linguistics she is able to decipher subtle gestures and verbal expressions that resonate with the larger universe of myth revealing the many registers on which the everyday is lived. Thus, in one of her early papers on the anti-Sikh riots she describes the way women victims, for whom words had become frozen, silently protested against the state and society that had allowed the violence to occur by sitting unbathed and filthy outside their smoke-charred houses surrounded by small heaps of ash that pointed to the fires on which their loved ones had been burnt. They may or may not have been aware of the mythological significance of this gesture, but for Das it evoked the image from the Mahabharata of the menstruating and disheveled Draupadi after she vowed to remain uncleansed until she could bathe in the blood of her defiler.

Revisiting this scene of silent protest, in this work Das uses the term 'inordinate knowledge' coined by the philosopher Stanley Cavell to describe experiences where one might lose one's touch with words. Cavell does not define the term but instead gives a string of adjectives that tell us what it is not. He describes it as knowledge that is excessive in its expression as opposed to knowledge that is pale and bare, or intellectualized or archived or bureaucratic, or distracted, expression that is insipid, shallow or indecisive. Not all experiences may be as dramatic as the 1984 riots but even 'small events' may have catastrophic consequences for those affected by them. It is to the small events that are bundled together within large acts of terror such as the Mumbai bomb blasts of 1993 and 2006 that concern Das here. She explores the ways in which these small events such as seemingly ordinary criminal acts that are normalized in slum communities may radiate out

into dispersed sites, moving from local police posts where 'likely suspects' are picked up and taken to police stations and law courts, their crimes now redefined as terror acts. Police procedures such as constant surveillance, mechanisms for evidence gathering that may include torture as an interrogation technique, the generation of documents that rely on legal fictions to construct narratives that would be plausible in a court of law are the kinds of inordinate knowledge that slum dwellers often live with. Questions of scale become important when one considers the dispersed sites through which power circulates. Governmental mechanisms to regulate order at the local level lose some of their distinctive detail when they are made to fit a bigger picture either to produce scholarly generalizations or a final judgment in the law court. The small acts that go into constructing the narrative on which the judgment is based get hidden.

Two cases that exemplify this aspect of legal procedure are particularly arresting and worth mentioning here. The first is based on Das's interactions with Wahid Sheikh, accused in the 2006 blasts and author of *Begunah Kaidi* (Innocent Convict), based on his experiences of confinement and torture in prison and the second, the horrifying experiences of an eight year old girl, abducted and abused by a neighbor with the likely complicity of the local police officer. In both cases the victims showed exemplary courage in being able to their experiences and confront their abusers. These cases tell us not only what it means to live with inordinate knowledge but also asks us to ponder on the potentiality of inhumanity that lies within the structures of democratic societies and in the texture of everyday life. As Das shows evil does not have to have a monstrous face, nor be part of nature. Rather it may be secreted through the very apparatuses of governance.

Widely regarded as a philosophical anthropologist, Veena Das does not go to philosophy to anchor her ethnographic insights. Instead she tries to seed concepts from places not conventionally associated with anthropological knowledge production – from regional caste puranas, Sanskrit texts on ritual and grammar and from interactions during fieldwork. In the process stable concepts such as democracy and the state or sovereignty that are the subject of this book reveal dimensions not visible on the surface. Aptly titled 'slum acts' it is in small acts and minor documents that carry traces of the state's signature that this entity acquires a different embodiment from the one that we conventionally know.

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