

Rethinking Pain and Body in the Context of Everyday

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Abstract: *This article seeks to interrogate the common understanding of pain as an “extraordinary” event and rethink it in the context of the everyday. By critically engaging with the idea of pain as “negative” and “exceptional” that emerged with the advent of modernity, I intend to argue for the ordinariness of pain. I do so by bringing in three distinct contexts; pain in the practice of bayam (exercise), pain in asceticism, and religious pain to argue for the place of pain in the everyday. By bringing in my ethnographic fieldwork in the bayam samitis (traditional gymnasiums) and akharas of Kolkata, India, I argue that in the practice of bayam, pain becomes an everyday engagement with the body and remains crucial to its cultivation. The ethnographic works of Patricia Lawrence and Jane Derges in the warzone of Sri Lanka, I argue, bring in the everyday means of resisting violence through the embodiment of religious pain. Lastly, by employing Peter Van De Veer’s understanding of ascetic pain and Glucklich’s (2001) sacred or religious pain, I argue that pain remains integral to the formation of ascetic subjectivity. Thus, these three distinct contexts raise the possibilities of understanding pain outside the negative connotations it has carried since modernity and make us delve into pain in ordinary everyday lives and circumstances.*

Keywords: Byam Samiti, *byam*, body pain, self-imposed sufferings, empowerment of body.

Introduction

Everyday life is familiar, mundane and “just there”, which is why Jacobsen argues it is also the “unnoticed” and the “obvious” (Jacobsen 2009: 1). Yet the “turn” to everyday (Sztompka 2008) urges us to question its “taken for granted” nature, to interrogate the “familiar” and the “obvious” to unravel several possibilities of knowing (Jacobsen 2009: 1-2). Although the taken-for-granted nature of “everyday” is now being interrogated and analyzed,

what constitutes “everyday”, I argue, continues to be taken-for-granted. In this context, I shall speak about the concept of pain and body, specifically bodily pain and suffering, which occupies a contradictory position in the context of everyday life. This paper is an attempt to reflect on bodily pain and seeks to understand it in its everydayness. Pain, the very word, opens us to an understanding of it as an aberration of everyday life, a moment or a condition that is extraordinary, specifically in need of immediate care, attention and cure. Thus, pain stands as opposed to the mundane ordinary “everyday”. Although the common meaning of pain seeks to reduce us to one singular idea, pain I argue has various possibilities. This paper thereby seeks to rethink this notion of pain in context of the body to argue for an understanding of pain that is situated in the context of “everyday”. The paper attempts to do so by bringing in two distinct contexts. Firstly, I bring in my ethnographic research in the *bayam samitis* (traditional gymnasiums) and *akharas* (place of wrestling) of Kolkata to discuss “everyday pain” in the context of *bayam* (exercise) practices. Secondly, I attempt to bring in the ethnographic works of Patricia Lawrence (1997, 2000, 2003) and Jane Derges (2013) in their study of the everyday violence in the war zone of Sri Lanka and the ways of embodied resistance by the local people through the concept of religious pain. These two different contexts are made sense of through Peter van de Veer’s understanding of ascetic pain (2009) and Glucklich’s (2001) sacred or religious pain. Through this, the paper tries to rethink the concept of pain as extraordinary to argue for an everyday understanding of pain.

Pain, the paper argues, occupies a contradictory place within the discourse of everyday life where it comes to occupy a position of an exception that disrupts the ordinariness of everyday. Pain thereby becomes opposed to the very essence of everyday. This also stems from within the medical discourse that conceives pain as occupying a negative place, something that needs to be erased or cured. This way of conceiving pain, either as a disruption of the everyday or the immediate need for its negation or cure emerges with modernity and medical science that places pain solely in the hands of science and medicine. Pincikowski argues about the “secularization” and “medicalization” of pain that makes pain either a negative attribute to be treated or a hidden or absent aspect to be kept away (Pincikowski 2002: 3-4). According to Glucklich, the “modern self” only seeks to understand pain as a “medical problem” and thus “modern suffering” always seeks to “cure physical pain” (Glucklich 2001: 7, 208). There is always an attempt to see pain as outside the realm of rationality and perpetually tied to the body that needs medical attention and not

understanding (Asad 2003). While pain is highly medicalized in modernity (Morgan 2002), beliefs about pain are deeply socially and culturally embedded (Burr 2008: 8).

Bayam and Pain

The place of pain in practices of *bayam* (exercise) can be understood as contradictory since *bayam* seeks to cultivate the body while pain can be read as impeding such a cultivation. My ethnography in *bayam samitis* and *akharas* of Kolkata reveal a distinct idea of pain and towards pain. I have conducted my ethnography in *bayam samitis* (traditional gymnasiums) and *akharas* (place of wrestling) of Kolkata, India where questions of pain (bodily) emerged as a form of injury in the narratives of my interlocutors, as a negative aspect, which needs treatment or cure and which impedes the cultivation of the body. Yet the pain, although an exception that impedes their daily routine of cultivation, also remains attached to the body becoming part of them and their identity. One of my interlocutors, who was a wrestler in an akhara in Goa Bagan, discussed how his body is marked with injuries that he has sustained over time. Although they see injuries as a moment of disruption, when they have to rest or cure their body before resuming their everyday practice of *bayam* and wrestling, yet achieving a full cure is almost considered a myth. Our bodies are often taken for granted, it either disappears or is forgotten and hidden. Pain and injury remind us of our bodies (Spencer 2012) (Leder 1990). Thus, pain in case of injury I argue can also become an everyday negotiation with the body rather than remaining outside of everyday. However, this pain is understood as an impediment to everyday life that constrains activities. Yet injuries or pain are a part and parcel of *bayam* and thus become a part of their everyday life. *Bayam* or body cultivation is an everyday activity and that has to intimately do with the bodily efforts and pain involved in it. The practice of *bayam* entails an engagement with the body following a strict and painful regime of continuous exercises alongside the austere lifestyle that is demanded. Engaging in *bayam* results in physical pain that takes place through one's continuous efforts on and through their body. For example, men often lent out shrieks or cries while performing in the *bayam-ghor* or gym room, either while pulling weights or while engaging in continuous and relentless *dand baithaks* (a form of exercise). The physical pain that goes through their bodies is expressed through their cries yet this physical pain does not stay back always as a form of injury. Often this momentary pain becomes a means to know the limits of *bayam* and sometimes becomes a form of addiction that

they enjoy. The everyday nature of this form of painful engagement is not always considered as “pain” or “injury”. The everyday repeated nature of *bayam* and the physical bodily pain emerging from it is banalized and ordinary yet it is this ordinariness that cultivates the body.

This ordinariness also comes through the simple austerity of the everyday life of the practitioners that is cultivated through simple living, a simple diet and a strict regime of self-control. Pain in *bayam* also takes the form of painful efforts through bodily activities. One of my interlocutors once discussed the significance of fasting in keeping the body “fit”. While fasting as an act is often associated with religious rituals, attributed to a painful subjugation of the body by denying it food, here it becomes associated with the ‘scientific’ regime of fitness and health. My interlocutor argued that fasting once a week helps keep the organs of the body at rest and thus contributes to the overall well-being of the body. My concern here is not to show how scientific this argument is but to understand the place of fasting in the everyday practice of fitness and health in *bayam*. Musurillo argued that fasting is one of the fundamental bases of ascetic life because food is conceived as fuelling “passion” and thus fasting becomes the “bridle for the monks” (Musurillo 1956: 54). Richard Finn discussed how there were different means to an ascetic life ranging from abstaining from food, sexual practices, sleep, etc (Finn 661: 2019). Considered as “pain through deprivation”, fasting also becomes part of asceticism (Mosoco 2012: 157). Talal Asad argues that this subjugation of bodies in ascetic practices can be seen as penance that follows a “ritual of steady repetition” (Asad 1993: 106). Similarly ascetic practices can be equated with *bayam* practices as I argue *bayam* also takes on the ascetic principles and ethos of cultivation of self as well as the body. Historically *bayam samitis* and *akharas* were initially predominantly associated with ascetic spaces and were places designated to ascetics that were transformed later into spaces of body cultivation (van de Veer 2000). Thus, today also these spaces of body cultivation resonate well with ascetic culture and ethos. The painful self-restraining activities either as penance in asceticism or “self-restraint” in the daily practice of *bayam* can also be read through the Hindu concept of *tapas* or “self-imposed suffering” (Kaelber 1979: 201). It is this concept of *tapas*, often referred to as the wilful subjugation of the body, that also emerges in the context of religious pain (Glucklich 2001).

Asceticism and Pain

Asceticism, religion and pain have a long history and can be understood through the concept of *tapas* (self-inflicted pain/efforts). Peter van de Veer argues for understanding the life of an ascetic through the pain involved in asceticism much similar to how Gandhi describes Brahmachari's pain (CW 32: 214). This form of pain that one encounters in ascetic lives gives us an alternative idea of pain removed from how modernity construes pain as sickness or illness needing "extraordinary interventions" (Morgan 2002: 313). This form of pain is also distinctive because it is everyday and ordinary. Asceticism is also about a continuous ritualistic engagement with the body and one's self. The basis of ritualistic practices is rooted in their repetition and thereby in their everydayness. As discussed above, fasting, celibacy or brahmacharya, taking ritual acts of penance and others form a crucial part of ascetic lives that results in a wilful subjugation of the body involving pain. James Mallinson in his talk discussed the history of yoga and the initial yoga practices performed by yogis which were directed at subjugating the body through painful acts of penance. He sees this form of yoga performed by *tapasvis* and *yogis* as an act of subjugation of the body and detaches it from the present idea of yoga that seeks to cultivate it. I, in turn, argue that cultivation and subjugation might not be opposed to each other in the field of body cultivation.

Pain associated with asceticism remains crucial in the context of religious rituals and pilgrimages. Although they take place once a year, pilgrimages also focus on the everyday lives of the pilgrims. One such pilgrimage is Sabarimala. Valentine Daniel's (1984) work on Sabarimala pilgrimage opens us to a form of pilgrimage that situates itself in the everyday life of the pilgrims. Although the pilgrimage is about travelling through the difficult terrain of mountains and forests to reach the Sabarimala Temple, the pilgrims have to specifically perform or live an austere life for 41 days, which is referred to as the period of "votive abstinence" before travelling for the pilgrimage (Osella and Osella 2006: 149). These austerities include fasting, walking barefoot, not eating eggs or meat, celibacy, and not sleeping on mattresses, all of which are everyday parts of living (Osella and Osella 2006) (Daniel 1984). This is a strict austere regime of cultivating detachment from comfort and an embracing of pain in their everyday lives before they embark on a further painful journey for the pilgrimage. This pain is both extraordinary and everyday. It is extraordinary because it is specifically directed towards a particular pilgrimage, a ritualistic engagement for a certain period. It is a special occasion under which the pain is demanded. However,

the pain is yet again everyday because it does not take the form of directly hurting the body through ritualistic means like other ritualistic practices, for example, walking on fire or piercing one's body. In turn, it makes men enter into leading an everyday simplistic life in a newer context and travel to the pilgrimage. Similar to *bayam* and ascetic practices, this also focuses on the everyday cultivation of a specific subjectivity of the pilgrims through bodily practices.

Religious Pain: Ritual and the Body

Patricia Lawrence (1997, 2000, 2003) and Jane Derges's (2013) show how pain and suffering through everyday religious rituals and activities become significant means to redefine or reclaim one's body that is disempowered by torture and state power. In both the context of asceticism and brahmacharya as well as in the spheres of religious activities and rituals, pain has played a significant role in the cultivation of body and subjectivity. The distinct nature of this form of pain is its everyday nature and context rather than its special nature as an exception/injury / medical emergency.

"Tamil people still living on the east coast of Sri Lanka are enmeshed in the strangeness of the ordinary in a world altered by violence, and these traumatic changes are reflected in the reworking of their local religious life" (Lawrence 2003: 102). Patricia Lawrence shows how the everyday lives of people living in the eastern zone of Sri Lanka are fraught with state violence where people's bodies become marked with state torture and pain. While pain and humiliation from the torture and prison detention emerge as an extraordinary form of pain that seeks to consume the life of the people, it is resisted and altered through a life dedicated to Kali Aamman (Goddess Kali) and painful vows and rituals associated with the Goddess. Lawrence's work on Srilanka's eastern warzone throws light on a different understanding of pain in an everyday war-prone context: state violence on one hand and religious ritualistic self-inflicted pain on the other. Lawrence argues, "These are historical moments when dissent is impossible, but inside the eastern war zone there is one distinct exception to the oppressive silencing: the emotional outpourings at local Amman temples" (Lawrence 2000: 179). The "changed" role of the Amman Temple is emphasized by her to discuss the way the temples have now become a "safe space" for the "outpouring" of emotions (Lawrence 1997: 221-222) (Lawrence 2013: 179). Pain emerging from torture or abductions is also countered by oracles who seek to go through a painful process of embodying *shakti* in the form

of the goddess in them and narrating the violence and atrocities of the warzone. The everyday role of the oracles thereby acts as a form of resistance, a resistance to political silencing of the everyday atrocities and violence. By narrativizing the pain, suffering and humiliation of the people, the forced political silencing is challenged which further helps in articulating grief as a community. Contrary to how modernity has “medicalized” and “privatized” pain according to Morgan, pain here becomes a means of bringing the community together (Morgan 2002: 307, 314). The rawness of pain experienced by the people is brought alive during such oracular performances. Although this warzone situation, torture and atrocities all seem to give us an idea of an extraordinary moment or time, I argue that Lawrence shows us how the extraordinary is countered by the mundane and everyday local practices of rituals, vows and oracular performances. This instance of religious and ritualistic pain in the everyday life of inhabitants of a war-prone zone speaks about a different idea or notion of pain. The victims of torture often keep vows of walking on fire or hot coal, and sometimes piercing the body. However, instead of conceiving this as a form of violence that is self-inflicted, this pain instead acts as resisting the violence and wounds from torture. The pain from vows and rituals seeks to alter the pain received on the bodies of men from torture. While torture pain acts as “demarcating boundaries” between violator and victim, pain from rituals acts as forming or forging a relationship with the Goddess (Lawrence 2003: 109). This is a pain that is lived and embodied to form a relationship with the Goddess that acts as a form of protection. While torture pain controls the body of the victim and consumes it, the pain from rituals and vows reclaims the state-tortured body and redefines it. Torture pain is extraordinary, and seeks to disempower while ritualistic pain seeks to empower the disempowered body.

These pain from rituals and oracular performances are not extraordinary but rather ordinary and everyday ways of dealing with the violence of a warzone. Jane Derges’s work on *Ritual and Recovery in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka* (2013) situates the body at the centre of the politics of the violence of war and the resilience through rituals, between “authority” and “agency” (Derges 2013: 218). Derges argued that the extreme violence done on the body is countered through rituals of, for example, *thuukkukkaavadi*, which seeks to reclaim the body by recognizing its “strength” and “resilience” (Derges 2013: 226).

This form of pain that we get to see here can also be read through the Hindu concept of *tapas*, meaning self-inflicted efforts or pain, to cultivate

a newer idea of body and self that has been tortured under state terror. The pain taken on the body of the people repeatedly, as a form of ritual, seeks to alter the pain given onto the bodies through state power. Not only does it lead to the resistance of state power but also seeks to renew or cultivate a distinct resilient body and thereby reclaim one's body and control over it. However, this reclamation happens through further pain and submission to the Goddess. Derges argues that self-infliction of pain that is spiritually motivated through acts of "penance" and "initiation rites" has always led to the formation of a relation between the Goddess and the worshiper (Derges 2013: 227) Following Glucklich (2001) Derges argues "there is some ambivalence in the experience of self-inflicted pain as opposed to pain that is external unwanted and beyond the individual's control. It restores balance and order, it repays a debt, it is a form of 'presentation' or exchange and an act of repentance" (Derges 2013: 227). This pain, Derges reminds us, is not merely done for completion but rather a continuous effort for continuous protection of devotees under the constant threat and uncertainty of everyday life in a warzone.

This extreme situation of a warzone oscillating between state violence and torture on one hand and the countering of it through religious rituals, vows and oracular performances I argue can be rethought through the everyday. Everyday is usually perceived through a lens of an idea of "banal", "ordinary" and "normal" yet this ordinariness is assumed to be a situation outside of pain. People's lives that are caught up in an endless repeated cycle of violence and torture pain, which according to Scarry (1985) has language destroying capacity, is countered by a pain that is ritualistic and embodied. The extremeness of torture pain is countered by ritualistic pain, which reduces its extraordinariness and negativity into a more acceptable part of life. Following Glucklich (2001), one can say that these forms of resistance can make us see pain anew, where pain instead of becoming a problem becomes a "solution", a method of resisting. He reflects on ascetic disciplines, pilgrimages, rites of passage, mourning, traditional forms of healing and vows as such contexts where pain becomes part of everyday life "worthy of understanding and cultivating" (Glucklich 2001: 13). Thus, everyday life in the war zone in Srilanka is lived through pain, but not merely as social suffering or social pain but a pain that is lived through the body and senses, in an embodied manner.

Conclusion

Dev Nath Pathak defends the ordinary by arguing “That which is supposedly ordinary is also often the most frequent, statistically speaking. The extraordinary, on the other hand, is not only a deviation from the “normal” and thus statistically infrequent, but it is also accorded value - either negative or positive—of a different kind than that accorded to the ordinary.” This defence of the ordinary helps in reclaiming the “ordinary pain” that is often dismissed as not “pain” for its ordinariness, its banality, and its frequent occurrences. Rather than overcoming the ordinariness, he urges us to rethink the possibilities of the ordinary (Pathak 2021: 3) (Sethi 2022). This article thereby has attempted to rethink pain as an injury or exception to think about it through its everydayness. The article tried to understand the everyday physical toiling in *bayam* practices, the everyday bodily practices of self-restraints in ascetic discipline, and the ritualistic vows of Kali or oracular performances in Sri Lanka’s eastern zone. All these, I argue, entail a form of pain that is everyday and ordinary which instead of subjugating or mortifying the body in turn cultivates it, revitalizes it, and seeks to in turn cultivate subjectivity whether for the war-affected victims, the ascetic monk or a *bayam* practitioner. According to Asad, pain associated with “passion” and “religious subjectivity” is considered to be “inimical to reason” and thus always lies outside of rationality (Asad 2003: 67). However, as Glucklich (2001) argues that pain (sacred/religious) can be worth cultivating and understanding as well as a method of resisting as Lawrence shows us.

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