

Comment on

“Culture and Governance : A Study of North Central Zonal Cultural Centres , Allahabad”

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This paper analyses the Indian's state's attempt to create a 'national culture' through development of new cultural institutions across India, the Zonal Cultural Centres (ZCC) and how such an attempt aimed to provide space and encourage 'people's culture' has only enabled state to meet out the demands of market economy and not pay attention to the multiple, varied and hitherto marginalised forms of cultures. According to the author, the state's attempt to govern culture through these new institutions is quite similar to the colonial government's attempts to survey, document, analyse and monitor the varied cultures of myriad communities in order to govern them. The continuity of cultural governance from colonial government to the Indian state offers the context for understanding the Indian's state's policies and programmes related to governing of cultures and communities.

In particular, the paper provides a detailed historical context, especially of the 1980s, in which the Zonal Cultural Centres were established by the government of India ostensibly to provide a new space for hitherto invisibilised popular art forms and to reconstitute the national culture as 'inclusive and expansive'. The political context of this new cultural politics that insisted on 'composite national culture' through creations of cultural institutions is quite well mapped out. The crisis in Punjab followed by the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the anti-Sikh riots, as the paper shows, provided the immediate context for the state to use culture not only to contain the 'national crisis' but also to justify the state's legitimacy to govern culture as part of nation building. The new urbanisation process along with mass migration of people across classes in search of new employment opportunities in the expanding urban sites, leading to state's concern for containing alienation, as the paper shows, offered another important context for creation of new cultural institutions that would appease the urban migrant masses. Citing the report of the high powered committee, the author discusses how the formation of Zonal Cultural Centres that coincided with the Rajiv Gandhi government's new economic policy moved away from the earlier state investments in 'production units of culture' to the 'distribution network' that adopted the market language. According to the author, unlike the earlier state promotion of composite culture through literary productions and promotion of handloom industries etc which were to stand for national culture, the post-1984, cultural promotion of the state comfortably adopted to the market idioms and ideologies of marketing culture to bring in harmony between the state and the market. In other words, for the state, marketing of culture became the way of managing cultural diversity. Therefore, as the author observes, the setting up of the Zonal cultural centre, has been more of a state project to create cultural market that has focused on visual aspects of the performing arts and that could be made into consumable 'national culture' for the growing middle-class in the urban areas. In other words, the new cultural centres have played a pivotal role in commodifying 'the other' cultures such as the tribal, folk and ethnic cultures which could then satiate the alienated and rootless urban population. The paper further discusses how this exclusive focus on visual aspects of 'national culture' as brought through the activities of the Zonal Cultural centres significantly marginalised the literary and 'other intangible forms of culture'. The author then discusses the politics of this new discourse of 'national culture' and its implications for the multiply marginalised communities and their cultures

especially of the religious minorities and indigenous people and terms this national project of cultural assimilation as hegemonic and as a process of 'internal colonialism'.

Through a detailed case study of the North Central Zone Cultural Centre at Allahabad the paper illustrates how this centre has exclusively focused on marketing visual and performing arts such as folk dances, songs and theatres etc through events like Shilp Mela and through launching of a cultural magazine which defined the new elements of national culture and how they became significant marker of the centre's activities. While critically analysing the cultural activities of the Centre the author observes that: a) the centre as a cultural institution has so far not been headed by artistes or cultural activists but has been directed by bureaucrats who were unimaginatively pursuing the market culture in distributing popular artifacts and craft ; b) only select art forms with a few selected artisans, performing artists and some small entrepreneurs and their products are repeatedly showcased and thereby it has evolved a vertical forms of programme that has significantly marginalised a vast number of artists, and varied cultural forms; c) Market, much more than the state determines the content of the national culture that has become more exclusive rather than promoting variety of cultural forms Therefore the agenda of dissemination of culture is a failed project of the state as these centres have not provided space for a variety of artists and artisans. To substantiate these claims the author provides a detailed account of Shilp Mela and how that has been vertically organised to gain profit rather than being organised as welfare measures for artisans and craftsmen and as a platform for wide variety of cultural productions. Citing the report of the high powered committee the paper argues that the monopolisation of shilp mela by a few craftsmen and artists have only led to repetitions and uniform patterns of show casing same cultural productions that merely take care of the consumer desires of the urban elites. In keeping with the market economy, the state promoted cultural centres such as the North Central Zone Cultural Centre not only continue to promote art forms that would meet the demands of the cultural elites in India but in the process significantly marginalise popular art forms and practices that are prevalent among the dalit community. While identifying some of the important art forms of the Dalits the author observes that the conscious exclusion of these subaltern art forms by the cultural organisations such as the zonal centre is mainly due to lack of representation of dalits in such high powered cultural bodies and also due to non-marketability of these art forms that do not cater to the demands of the urban Indian elites. Further he concludes that all the Zonal cultural centres being city-centric, mainly catering to the interests of the urban public, the promotion of folk arts etc through these centres has been very artificial rather "vibrant and alive".

This paper raises some interesting issues related to the cultural politics of the Indian State and how the latter has selectively used (abused?) particular forms of popular culture in its hegemonic project to serve the interest of the privileged groups. The paper also touches upon an interesting aspect of how the state has attempted to commodify culture to cater to the consumer desires of the urban population. Further it shows how, compelled by the market economy, culture has been extracted to be merely equated with external forms, symbols and artifacts, (the idea that the local culture could be purchased in the melas) and in the process completely marginalised the idea that culture is also about lived experiences and closely tied up with issues of citizenship and with the politics of exclusion and inclusion etc.

There are few issues that are raised in the paper require detailed discussion. For instance, the study often refers to the case of Shilp Mela to substantiate the claim that it has been a hegemonic cultural project of a market oriented Zonal centre. At the same time the paper also highlights how certain sections of the government itself had been (the high powered committee, for instance) taking cognisance of its market driven approach and its failure to be more inclusive and how unsuccessful these cultural interventions have been etc. In other words, this cultural project has failed to be a hegemonic one.. In this context, the zonal centres and its market oriented melas seem

to be marginal to the state's own attempt to use culture in 'nation building' as these activities are also marginal to the lives of a vast majority of Indian communities who do not participate either as suppliers or consumers. In this context, some elaboration on the importance of Shilp Mela and the responses of the spectators to the mela would be useful to understand its relevance in the context of state's attempt to promote it. Its marginality or otherwise could be understood if the paper could analyse this cultural politics in the context of the counter-cultural politics of the popular in UP, say for instance, the Dalit cultural politics and whether the latter has posed challenges to the state cultural initiatives such as the Shilp Mela ? Again, the author makes mention of the exclusion of dalit cultural practices and it may not be out of context to understand here the nature of cultural assertions by dalits and whether they have been in the nature of a response to the state's cultural politics of exclusion. That would also provide an idea of how hegemonic had been the state project of promotion of certain art forms and crafts.

Beyond the issue of governance, the paper offers possibility to explore the connection between culture and citizenship as the state attempts (though not always successful) to deny citizenship to certain groups like dalits by excluding their active participation in cultural projects and by marginalising their cultural forms. This would also allow us to understand and critically analyse state's engagement with culture not merely in terms of setting up of cultural institutions but in terms of its engagements with protection of rights of cultural groups such as the dalits and their claims to resources etc. Thus also enabling us to capture the nuances of how the state intervention in culture could become hegemonic and powerful.