

How to move a mountain

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[Seven decades after Independence, the massive obstacle of caste is still difficult to dislodge](#)



[At a recent lecture-demonstration of Koodiyattam, a complex form of Sanskrit theatre practised in Kerala, one of the leading exponents of this beautiful art, Margi Madhu Chakyar, performed an episode from the epic literature titled "Kailasodharanam", the lifting of Mount Kailasa. Ravana, finding Mt. Kailasa in the way of his chariot, asks the mighty peak to step aside for him. As Siva's abode, the mountain refuses. Ravana climbs down from his vehicle, and by sheer physical prowess shifts the colossus. In the complete story, after an angry altercation, Siva, placated, bestows upon Ravana the indestructible weapon Candrasana, a gleaming curved scimitar. At the University of British Columbia \(UBC\), in Vancouver, Canada, on July 12, Margi Madhu performed only the act where Ravana encounters Kailasa as an obstruction, lifts it, and sets it down elsewhere. Madhu's ability to conjure the incalculably heavy weight of the mountain, the supra-human strength of Ravana and the clash of two titans, one animate and the other inanimate, had many spectators in tears. In the larger Ramayana Ravana may be the anti-hero, but in "Kailasodharanam", he is undoubtedly the hero. The intensity of the actor's facial expressions and the taut muscles of his limbs conveyed the unsurpassable difficulty of the task and the enormity of Ravana's will. Madhu's arms flexed, his eyes bulged, his forehead creased, his calves pulled, his spine bent backwards. He trembled with concentration, his slender body stretched tight like a bowstring. Those watching believed he would collapse with strain. Koodiyattam's expressive drums raised the crescendo of stress to an almost unbearable level. But Ravana's determination allows him to succeed in his impossible goal. He hoists up the mountain with his bare hands and hurls it away like a mere rock. Viewers were overwhelmed with empathy for Madhu's protagonist. This episode raised the question for anyone facing an enormous obstacle: How to lift a mountain? How to get something humongous, static and immovable out of one's way? If the obstruction presents itself as organic and immutable, a very fact of nature, to what inner reserves of courage can one have recourse? Who is more obstinate, our adversary or us? How can we achieve what is apparently outside the purview of our capacities? The Koodiyattam was staged at the 17th World Sanskrit Conference in Vancouver. I was scheduled to speak in a public forum on caste and gender in Sanskrit studies, along with Kaushal Panwar, who teaches Sanskrit at a college in Delhi University. We were to tell the 'story of our Sanskrit' \(the title of the event\) to Mandakranta Bose, a senior Sanskritist at UBC. We were asked to both share our experiences and draw on our expertise. The conversation took up from Marathi Dalit academic Kusum Pawde's classic essay, "The Story of my Sanskrit" \(1981\), Prof. Panwar's moving and inspiring account of her own journey from manual scavenger in rural Haryana to Sanskrit professor in the capital, as told on the television show "Satyameva Jayate" \(2012\) and my column echoing Prof. Pawde's piece \(2014\). That night Prof. Panwar analysed the low status of women and sudras in the Manusmriti and the Rig Veda. I discussed Sanskrit as a philological resource and a tool of historical research, which nevertheless presents peculiar challenges to women scholars on account of the deeply entrenched orthodoxy and patriarchy of Sanskrit pedagogical environments. Prof. Bose described how as a young student in Kolkata, she was forced to switch from the study of Mimamsa \(Vedic Hermeneutics\) to Natyasastra \(Performance and Aesthetics\), because the former was considered a prestigious subject reserved for male scholars, while the latter was a lesser topic open to females. Caste, gender and Sanskrit The large audience, consisting mostly of Indian scholars, including women, attacked us vociferously. The Western academics present maintained an uncomfortable silence, as though passively witnessing an internal dispute among Indians. The disrespectful behaviour of the learned assembly was appalling. Our testimonies were not controversial; we presented genuine and truthful personal observations gathered over decades of study and reflection. As invited speakers, we told our story of Sanskrit calmly and authentically, despite grave provocation and repeated interruption. The low status of women, sudras and communities considered polluted was raised systematically by Jyotiba Phule, B.R. Ambedkar and E.V. Ramasamy 'Periyar', as also other significant thinkers in the Hindu reform sects of Bengal, Punjab and Maharashtra, and the non-Brahmin discourses of the south, throughout the colonial period. The combined legacy of modern India's critical anti-caste and feminist thought stood solidly behind our remarks. Yet we found Sanskrit professors at leading universities making absurd claims, for example that caste is unrelated to birth; that Hindu society is inherently gender-blind; or that if the term "varna" does not occur, there is no discrimination. The evening hit significant roadblocks: one, the meaning and provenance of the word "Harijan"; and two, the question of equality and inequality in the Hindu Vedas, smritis and sastras, versus the Indian Constitution. Great Sanskrit pundits found it politic to lecture us about the grammatical rules by which "Harijan" can mean "child of god" in Gujarati \(as envisaged by Gandhi\) or "embodiment of god" \(in Sanskrit\), disregarding the Dalit movement which has unequivocally rejected this label for its patronising tone. We did not expect to hear this moniker uttered and defended. Many colleagues identified themselves as Hindus, giving primary allegiance to their "sacred texts", not as Indians committed to egalitarian citizenship guaranteed by the laws of the land. They did not treat Sanskrit texts critically, as scholars, only as unquestioning believers. Some claimed that reservations policy discriminates against Brahmins whilst encouraging undeserving SCs, STs and OBCs. Others alleged that India's Constitution favours minorities, leaving Hindus exposed and vulnerable. The resentment and bitterness of an empowered and dominant majority was disturbing to see.](#)

[Dislodging Caste](#)

[After this troubling encounter with the regressive face of Indology, watching the Koodiyattam performance inevitably recalled the mountain that is caste. The founders of the republic thought they would dislodge it through Herculean efforts, but generations later, citizens still find it unshaken and their fundamental rights obstructed. Not to suggest that caste society is some holy mountain, a divine abode of the gods, no. But our collective political will to remove this massive social structure has to be profound, shattering and furious. Alas, the unfortunate reality is that prevailing forces of orthodoxy and reaction will demonise, humiliate and attempt to subdue whosoever confronts the gigantic caste system. Periyar and Ambedkar set fire to the](#)

[Manusmriti](#)

[in their radical protest against caste almost a century ago. But in the age of Hindutva, outdated injunctions glorifying a hierarchical and unequal social order have risen again from the ashes. We must be ready with our torches, and our resolve to move mountains.](#)

