Can the Precariat Sing? Standing in Lotman's Light of Cultural Semiotics

Ariktam Chatterjee & Arzoo Saha

> In the most Biblical sense, I am beyond repentance
> But in the cultural sense, I just speak in future tense
> (Gaga 2011, n.pg.)

In his preface to the Bloomsbury Academic edition of *The Rise of the Precariat* published in 2016, Guy Standing observes:

> …more of those in the precariat have come to see themselves, not as failures or shirkers, but as sharing a common predicament with many others. This recognition – a move from feelings of isolation, self-pity or self-loathing, to a sense of collective strength – is

> a precondition of political action…It is organizing,
> and struggling to define a new forward march. (x)

This is a noteworthy evolution in Standing's formulation from the time this influential study was first published in the form of a book in 2011, and later in 2016, where the precariat was seen to be too diverse and divided to consolidate themselves into a class. It was calibrated repeatedly as a 'class-in-the-making'. The group was never a homogenous one. Constituencies were numerous and except for an exploitative and alienated relationship with a neoliberal global economic structure (itself in various degrees of gradation), there was no platform of shared interest. In many ways, it seemed to subvert the notion of shared interest, which was a hallmark of all prior class formation – or what constituted class formation. However, Standing's present observation betrays a sense that the class has become consolidated. That it is organized implies that it has somehow, imperceptibly, agreed on certain common shared signs of identification – that it has developed, in other words, its culture. Any agency is built around its culture, defined by its cultural signs, which it imbibes and produce in turn. This paper is an attempt to look at the precariat as a cultural group, and look at some of its cultural expressions. Later, it also ventures to expose the other side of this cultural consolidation – the possibility of the state's use of culture to anticipate and forestall the political action stated above.

Max Weber was one of the earliest theorists to understand that the question of class and culture go hand in hand. One is defined by the other, and in turn, defines the other. Often the culture and the class become isomorphic since the class is often identified through its perceptible cultural signs. If the precariats can be identified as a culture group, then what are the typical manifestations of its culture. Since the question of culture comes up, it leads us like many questions related to culture do, to the question of methodology. Culture is identified by signs, and a sign by definition is something that stands for something else. A culture converts a sign into a symbol, a function sign, which takes on meaning generated within the cultural system itself. A symbol is difficult to define, since every epistemology, every discipline, defines it according to its convenience to serve its precise epistemological purpose; 'symbol as an indefinable term is suitable for conveying the cognition of the incognizable' (Torop 2005, 161). The symbol in Saussure's linguistics, for instance, is different from Tillich's understanding of religious language as 'symbolic'. Then precisely what definition of a symbol will we station ourselves in? In other words, with what definition of culture will be followed in our investigation and draw our conclusions? My answer would be to consider culture as a semiosphere as proposed by Yuri Lotman, one of the central cultural theorists from the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics. The reasons for choosing this model over others is something I will try to explain below. But before that, it would be appropriate to present in brief Lot-

man's understanding of culture as 'semiosphere' as first presented in his influential 1990 book, *The Universe of the Mind.*

Yuri Lotman: Culture and/as Semiosphere

The Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics is one of the prominent schools in studying culture, one of whose most representative works is Yuri Lotman's detailed exposition of cultural semiotics published in 1990, *The Universe of the Mind.* The particular significance of this text concerning our present enquiry resides in the fact that like Standing, Lotman often employs a spatial metaphor in isolating his culture group. Deploying a spatial metaphor automatically entails the factor of spatial demarcation, the forming of an 'inside/outside' paradigm. Standing is insistent that there is an 'outside' to the precariat 'inside', from where it is demarcated; and there are 'insides' within the 'inside', stressing that the precariat is not after all a homogenous group. It is not very different from the way Lotman's description of 'culture' as 'semiosphere', a term that Lotman adopts from Vernadsky's biosphere, as a space that is defined by signs, informed and is informed by signs (Lotman 1990: 123). The relationship of a cultural text and its participants in a semiosphere is analogous to the definition of an organism and its surrounding habitat, forming together the biosphere. Tartu-Moscow semiotics simultaneously refers to a noosphere, the pure world of ideas. A semiosphere can be understood as occupying the space between the two.

Thus, with the biosphere, it shares a relationship both of an analogy as well as a gradation. Any mutual transaction has meaning because it is always/already being performed within a cultural set-up, it is 'immersed' in it – and what it is immersed in is the semiosphere. Regarding the structure of the 'semiosphere', Lotman states:

> Throughout the whole space of semiosis, from social jargon and age group slang to fashion, there is an also a constant renewal of codes. So any One language turns out to be immersed in a semiotic space and it can only function by interaction with that space. The unit of semiosis, the smallest functioning mechanism, is not the separate language but the whole semiotic space of the culture in question. This is the space we term the semiosphere. (Lotman 1990, 125)

It must be obvious by now that the question that is being asked is whether the precariat can be understood as a semiosphere? To answer this question satisfactorily, we can first take an overview of Lotman's theory of semiosphere as a cultural unit, and then see whether it matches our understanding of the precariat or not.

Not unlike the Russian Formalists, who can be stated to be their theoretical predecessor, the Tartu Semiotics school applies communication theory as its point of departure in understanding language and then culture. This position is based on the premise, that language – as a model through which reality is understood and commu-

nicated – provides the model for all epistemology. Communication, in its simplest and most basic sense, is the transmission of information. The first important step in defining culture is to ascertain the channel through which its information – the aggregate of the information that it provides in the form of heritage, and the forms it constitutes – is communicated. Lotman states that communication can be initiated and carried out through two channels. The first is the classic Jakobsonian model of the 'I-(s)he' communication, which can be pictorially represented as:

Message

Addresser ——————————— Addressee

The scope of such a communication, where the entire message is with the 'I' and will be completely received by the (s)he is rare, and is carried out only at the most basic level of information gathering in natural language. At the other end of this communication, resides the situation where the communication takes place through a collapse of the distinction of the addresser and the addressee, in what is termed communication through the 'I-I' channel. Here the listener is in complete acknowledgement of the information which is being given by the addressee. An extreme form of this communication is poetic language. Let us stress here that this is not actual 'poetry' which is more complicated because it releases communication on both levels simultaneously. But as of

now, the working of the 'I-I- communication needs to be analyzed at some depth, following Lotman's understanding.

The I-I communication (auto communication), typically takes the I – s(he) communication (natural communication) as carries out a rhetorical shift. It is symbolic where the first is semantic. It translates the purely semantic into the symbolic. In many cases, this shift can be so complete, that the semantic is completely obscured by the symbolic – as we can find in abstract art. Rhythms, repetitions, patterns and symmetry are the impositions of auto communication over natural communication. In a cultural expression, the addresser typically distances herself from herself as the addresser and carries out this shift by putting the economy of natural communication into the rhythmic necessities of auto communication. However, in its entirety, this auto communication needs to be again presented as a natural communication to the addressee, who is now a third party to the process, the listener, audience – the recipient of this production, who needs to be familiar with the cultural code of this artefact to decode it. Thus, culture typically operates by simultaneously deploying its communication in the auto and the natural axes.

Of the many ways to define culture, one prominent direction has been considering it as a constituent of "patterns, explicit and implicit of and for behaviour acquired

and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas, especially their attached values; culture systems many, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand, as conditioning element for future action" (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952, 151). This has been generally summarized as something learned, shared, transmitted and shaping perception by Paul M. Collins. However, there is a rejoinder to this view from the Semiotic side of Cultural studies, which stresses that "culture is a series of inter-worked systems of construable signs (or symbols), which do not deliver up power but provide a context for human existence (Collins 2006, 23). For Geertz, therefore, the job of culture is not to provide answers to existentialist questions but to identify how, in a given context, answers to those questions have been provided by those in the cultures themselves. That is summarily the job of the cultural analyst. To quote Geertz:

> Culture is best seen …as a set of control mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers calls 'programs') – for the governing of behaviour (Geertz 1973, 52).

We can isolate two strands from Geertz's formulation and then introduce Lotman's semiotic understanding

into our analysis. First, there are set of programs which are implemented through a metaphorizaiton of meaning and are transmitted through the form of a book or a handbook. Secondly, there is a context within which meanings are made and each meaningful act contributes to that context. Third, and most importantly, Geertz emphasizes the fact that culture presents a plan to provide answers to questions it raises or designs for itself to answer, and is thus, self-referential.

Lotman's view of culture has been observed as a self-referential system. However, that does not necessarily turn it into a closed system. On the other hand, influences seep within its threshold, giving it a controlled dynamism within a perceptible stasis. To quote Lotman:

At all stages of development (of culture), there are contacts with texts coming in from cultures which formerly lay beyond the boundaries of the given semiosphere. These invasions, sometimes by separate texts, and sometimes by whole cultural layers, variously affect the internal structure of the 'world picture' of the culture we are talking about. So across any synchronic section of the semiosphere, different languages at different stages of development are in conflict, and some texts are immersed in languages not their own, while the codes to decipher them with maybe entirely absent. (Lotman 1990, 151)

This influence is all the more pronounced under the neo-liberal setup since the economic boundaries have

become diluted. The reason for that is obvious. With the vouching of neoliberal ethics of economic propagation leading to a rentier economy and the emergence of the silicon revolution, it has become possible to shift jobs to sites where labour is cheapest. The proximal necessity of the capital and the labour force necessary to carry out its mode of production has been annulled. Thus, invasion of extra cultural text within a given cultural threshold has become more possible now than ever before.

Yuri Lotman and Guy Standing: Thinking in Space

Yuri Lotman and Guy Standing come from different academic interests to study human action through different methodologies. However, they have worked at the same time more or less, and have observed common phenomena. On close reading, there are overlaps in the spheres of their study. What we need here is not an account of the ontological overlaps between Lotman and Standing, but certain areas that will justify the application of Lotman's cultural model to study Standing's category of class in the making about to turn into a class. Peeter Torop considers the concept of semiosphere to be necessarily meta disciplinary. Although proposed by Lotman, its potential has been realized through creative application in fields which are diverse and often quite remote from Lotman's immediate field of argument (Torop 2005, 161). That would connote that its application in analyzing, at least identifying, the cultural space of one of the most significant emergent classes of our

time would not be out of place. It would yet, not be quite impertinent, to schematize at least some ways in which this trans-disciplinary method can be justified.

1. The most important point of commonality is the spatial metaphor that they both employ in their methodologies. For Standing, the precariat, which is a class defined in its relationship to economy is continuously explained and deployed in a spatial metaphor, which like all spaces is defined by a boundary. This boundary is constantly restructuring itself, accommodating new influences, turning the 'outside' into the 'inside', and at times may churn out the 'inside' to the 'outside' – but the inside/outside is still at least cognitively maintained – as a prerequisite to be defined as a 'space'. Standing, in defining the precariat, asks a question: 'who enters the precariat?' and then answers it by saying, 'One answer is everybody, actually' (Standing 2016, 69). The application of the italicized verb makes it quite clear that he conceives of the group as a space that can be intruded in, or which can exclude part of its member. Inclusion is easy – since anybody who enters into a precarious relationship with the economy which is ultimately exploitative turns into a precariat. The exclusion is more subtle, but the stakes are higher. The eradication of the entire class is the objective of this class – which, according to Standing, is the peculiarity of this class (2016, 69-70). More and more are being included to garner force for an

ultimate exclusion. Either way, we cannot work our way out of a spatial metaphor while defining the precariat in spatial terms. Similarly, Lotman's understanding of the semiosphere as a cultural space has been often noted. The spatial metaphor in Lotman is strong, and that too as a self-referential space (Noth 2006, 149).

2. Both Lotman and Standing stress the need for a boundary, the threshold of confinement of the onto-logical space. At the same time, they both assert the ever-changing nature of this boundary (Standing 2016: 69, Lotman 1990: 136). For both Standing and Lotman, the boundary is a locus that delineates the constituent space but is at the same time the most vibrant site of activity. As a result, it is the most unstable.

3. For Lotman, as well as for Standing, the constituent space is not homogenous. There are cultures within a culture. For example, Lotman comments on the cultural space:

> At all stages of development (of culture), there are contacts with texts coming in from cultures which formerly lay beyond the boundaries of the given semiosphere. These invasions, sometimes by separate texts, and sometimes by whole cultural layers, variously affect the internal structure of the 'world picture' of the culture we are talking about. So across

> any synchronic section of the semiosphere different
> languages at different stages of development are in
> conflict, and some texts are immersed in languages
> not their own, while the codes to decipher them with
> maybe entirely absent. (Lotman 1990, 126)

Thus, we can understand that the cultural space of the
precariat is a semiosphere with all its characteristic fea-
tures intact. It is within this semiosphere that the cultural
texts will be produced, which will, in turn, develop a se-
miosphere, resulting in the formation of other cultural
texts.

A common aspect of spatial thinking that brings both
Lotman and Standing together is that just as on the one
hand they think the internal spatial orientation as varied
and non-homogenous, they also consider the semiotic
threshold of the space as one that is continuously re-ori-
ented. This reorientation can affect the spatial extension
– it can be resized. Influences that are considered 'for-
eign' can be appropriated within a cultural space thus
resulting in an extension and adding to the textual rich-
ness from which the semiosphere gains its semiotic sig-
nification. Since we have already brought in the term of
'textuality', it is, therefore, important to understand the
precise way in which Lotman uses the term in reference
to the semiosphere. Culture is based on transmission
on one hand, and addition on the other. It inherits and
passes certain core signs within itself, and uses that sign

to produce new artefacts, which in turn becomes a part of the cultural space. Lotman's theory of culture gives great importance to cultural transmission, which means the way in which a particular text-type exists as defining factor of a semiosphere, and inspires similar text types which in turn define the semiosphere. There are two modes of cultural transmission, according to this theory. There are texts, or books, which provides the model of the culture. Then there are sets of rules which the culture produce which retain the established position of the given text. These are handbooks. They lay down rules. Together, texts and handbooks define the cultural modality of the semiosphere.
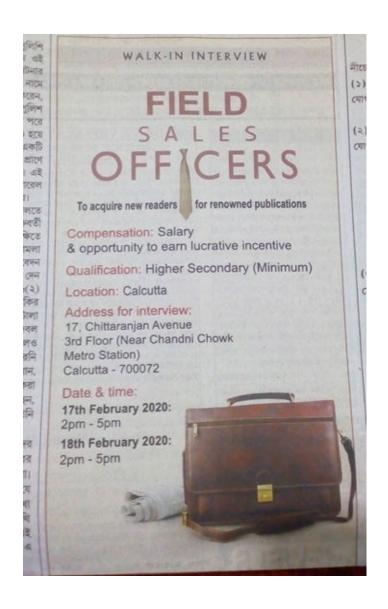
To come back to the question of the precariat cultural space, we, therefore, need to asks, what is the tradition that it is using, what are the texts on the basis of which the actual cultural handbooks or precise works are being produced? The next part of the article will show how nuanced and problematized the precariat cultural space can be. On the one side, there is an attempt to deliver signs from completely different dimensions to make that particular semiosphere 'known' and thus controllable. These attempts are both on the part of the state and the private agencies, who together carry out the precariatising process, albeit in different ways. However, we will also see how the semiosphere will be extended to include forms considered foreign, like rap, wall art or stand-up comedy, to create the precariat voice of resis-

tance, thus working towards a distinct cultural identity. Here, we will concentrate only on Indian rap as a cultural expression of the Indian precariat.

Signs of Control: Private and State Appropriation of the Constituency

The precariat in India began to emerge very much along with the global precariat, with the introduction of global neoliberal policies in India. Their formation is not different from what constitutes the global precariat. Standing stresses that one of the main features of the neoliberal economic policy is the convenience it has delivered in waylaying production to wherever the labour is cheap in a global scale, with the development of Big-Tech and Big-Pharma groups. Since India, along with China, has been the greatest providers of cheap labour around the world, it has one of the largest groups of precariats – as short term contract workers, workers in Call centres and outsourcing firms who could be hired and fired at short notices, a large number of underpaid women employees at low-end desk jobs, migrants and minorities who have been subject of often shameless vote-bank oriented politics, a large poor section who live in pitiful conditions within urban spaces in a consolidated and ghettoised manner, seniors getting into consultancy jobs due ever-lowering pension interests, private tutors, contractual employees in various government departments to hedge unemployment, workers who have been sublet by rec-

ognized government agencies, interns and the educated who are repeatedly trying and failing to enter into the salariat. It is a clear participant in the rentier economy by ensuring that a large portion of its resource is dependant on its monopoly on its asset (here intellectual asset) which it rents out to whoever is willing to pay the price, rather than the introduction of any reusable capital. By placing itself on one extreme, India is one of the biggest sustainers of the rentier state economy. Now, with such a substantial precariat population, the question is what are the cultural texts they will produce? What will be the cultural signs they will rally behind? And what will be state's response to it?

The precariat, as we have seen till now, is a varied group with constituencies as varied as educated interns to incarcerated prisoners. They are often made subject to cultural appropriation, for which the symbols are borrowed from completely different spheres of identity. The first example that we will look at is an advertisement. The picture was published in one of the leading Bengali Daily newspapers on 15.02.2020 (Anandabazar Patrika 7). It is a clear instance that brings into play some of the major cultural signs related to the growth of the precariat and its encouragement on the part of the market.

The precarious nature of the job is brought to fore by the sheer absence of any identity of the employer. The ambiguous term 'renowned publishers' denies the potential employee of any clear idea of the firm or the group she is going to work for, and thus robbing her of any possibility of appeal and placement of rights, making herself already a part of an exploitative system. The next sign is the complete overlapping of the categories of salary and compensation. Classically, compensation is provided to an employee in the case of some misfortune that occurs at the time of providing service to the employer and is generally provided once in a lump sum, while salary indicates a continuous liability. Salary is the amount rendered in exchange of service on, usually, a monthly basis. Colliding the two has been a notable feature of the neoliberal economy, and is now commonly used by all private agencies and corporate. The irony, missed upon by the employee who has become culturally ingrained in obfuscating the difference, is perhaps not missed upon by the employer. By colliding the two and making salary itself a compensation, as in here, the hiring agency clearly moves out of any responsibility of continuous employment, unless ironically indicating that working in the company itself is a misfortune where the salary must be understood as compensation. An opportunity to earn lucrative incentive makes clear that payment will be on a commission basis, and the employee will be continuously pressurized to perform out of her skin to meet targets, which are often unrealistic and stressful, resulting in anxiety for the employee.

If the signs of the advertisement are analyzed, we see that they are drawn from images of the salariat. The ubiquitous office bag, the tie and the scroll of paper presumably provide a promise of a class identity, which hedges the precarious nature of the opportunity. It is clearly an attempt to appropriate the cultural identity of the precariat through icons that are borrowed from elsewhere, a different semiosphere altogether, from a different and more stable time. Its promise is a promise of a different time, its call is a call for the precariat to deny its class identity – to deny the identity of the class itself as distinct. It is a subtle 'nudge' from the corporate to the precariat to define itself in borrowed cultural terms. In reality, it immerses the precariat more within its precariat identity through cleverly negotiated semiotic mediation. The second instance that we have is from a State point of view.

Standing has considered criminalization as one of the chief characteristics of the neoliberal state. In designating the criminalized as precariats from behind the bars, Standing states:

> A feature of globalization has been the growth of incarceration. Increasing numbers are arrested, charged and imprisoned, becoming denizens, without vital rights, mostly limited to a precariat existence. (Standing 2016, 102)

It has been observed by many that more and more people are being incarcerated, and the number of inmates has gone up manifold in many European and American correctional houses. The November 2006 report of 'Research from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency' reports incarceration rates in the US are four times the world average. Compared to India, it is 550% higher, as from Nigeria, which proves that India and Nigeria are almost equal in terms of imprisonment. Significantly, the report mentions that if the rest of the world followed the US lead incarceration policies and practices, the total number of incarceration worldwide would increase fivefold from 9.2 million to 47.6 million. Alfred Blumstein and Allen Beak examined the near tripling of the prison population during the period 1980 – 1996 and concluded that changes in crime explained only 12% of the prison rise, while changes in sentencing policy accounted for 88% of the increase. Of the many causes that explain the US system's overreliance on imprisonment, are 'public perceptions, political opportunism, and misdirected laws, as well as media coverage of worst cases – which negotiate the understanding of the relationship between the prison and the public'. This is an interesting observation since while Standing considers this as an ill-effect of the global economic policy, other related reasons include the images of prison and crime-punishment paradigms that the popular media has fed the public in such a way that the dramatic and immediate is highlighted over the stratified and layered legality

that goes into the process of incarceration and criminalization, and is a central aspect of prison life. Anderson states,

> Inside prison, people live outside the media's unblinking eye, and the general public probably knows less about imprisonment than about any other stage of the justice system. Because the majority of people have never been to a prison, either as visitor, 'resident', or staff member, other sources need to be drawn upon for understandings about the prison system. A wide range of cultural products "feed the popular imaginary with representations of life in prison", and Hollywood especially can be viewed as a discursive practice that fixes the meaning of prison itself. (Anderson 2015, 431)

Given the great influence of mainstream cinematic entertainment in India, the meaning may not be very different in this case. 'The mass media play a decisive role in the formation of punishment among the public; the increase in incarceration rates in Britain and Europe has been linked to media reporting of high-profile dramatic and isolated events. Media coverage of prisons and prison life is often inadequate and sensational; mass culture seems to make it easier for those in power to disseminate their views "but harder for marginal voices to talk back". (Anderson 2015, 432)

The state has always been systematic in absorbing the precariat through symbols of its own, to make its fail-

ure as a class an excuse for its success in administration. Standing refers to the large number of contractual jobs given out by the government without the benefits, protections or rights of the salariat, and present it as employment. This phenomenon is widespread as is often referred to as hedged unemployment. Yet, there are other modes of appropriation too. One can take a look at the various self-improvement programs introduced in the correction houses. Recently, the Dumdum Central Jail in Kolkata has also introduced its own radio station.

Standing stresses how the prisoners are used as a precariat force in the labour market. He states:

> ...countries as dissimilar to the United States, United Kingdom and India are moving in similar directions. India's largest prison complex outside Delhi, privatized of course, is using prisoners to produce a wide range of products, many sold online, with the cheapest labour to be found, working eight-hour shifts for six days a week'. (Standing 2016, 102)

This use of the labour from the inmates is coupled with the self-improvement programs that are introduced by the authorities to improve the lives of the criminalized, and with the intention of making them more suitable to jobs once released. Often these self-improvement programs take the form of cultural interactions and inculcations. In replacing the classical idea of the Foucauldian *panopticon*, it introduces the idea anew with the feel of

freedom. How the employment of self-improvement projects on the part of the authorities can benefit monitoring, as well as control, is evident in the research of Adeyeye and Oyewushi carried out in the female correctional homes in Lagos State Nigeria. The inmates were divided into two groups, one below 17 and the others above it. They were given books by Nigerian authors to read, and it was found that 'after reading and discussion of themes in the book, the participants had more understanding of what good behaviour entailed. They became remorseful and sober which was evident during the discussions'. (Adeyeye and Oyewushi 2017, n.pg.)

While bibliotherapy has been the method in the above-mentioned case, where the books and the values that they promote are carefully chosen by the state or its designated agents to promote good behaviours and conformity that it desires, one of the most nuanced usages is that of the 'prison radio'. This can be differentiated from the prisoner's radio, which are programs aired by radio stations outside that cater to requests and needs of the prisoners. They have been an avenue of communication between the 'inside' world of the prison behind the walls and the world 'outside', which also includes the prisoner's family and loved ones. 'Prison radio' is run and operated by the prisoners for the prisoners. It is proving to be an effective tool for controlling prisoner behaviour through a subtle imposition of state cultural values.

Due to the isolation and secrecy associated with prisons, there is hardly anay available research on prison radio. However, like the book clubs, the prison radio, it can be presumed, make the precariat voice operate within a close structure of state control and monitoring. It is an imposition of a culture borrowed from a different time – a time when the precariat did not exist – on the group. Of the many things that it does, it erases the formation of a precariat cultural identity, by creating a network for it to be divided into borrowed cultural terms. By giving a voice, it takes away a voice.

Can the Precariat Sing?

And yet, the precariat sings and finally gets a voice. Culture is both a passive reception and an active resistance. This survey will end by looking at one of the many ways in which the modern Indian precariat is expressing itself, which is through the medium of Indian rap music. A detailed semiotic analysis of rap music demands a completely different space. In this article, we will forego the musical discussion and confine ourselves to the lyrics. Since the groups that constitute the semiosphere of the precariat are multiple, it is futile to look for common and agreed-upon modes of expression that can define its cultural expression.

Standing has categorized the four A's- "anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation" as telltale signs of the precariat

psyche (Standing 2016, 19). The fact that this category has now consolidated as a class presupposes the fact that it has a distinct culture of its own. The next possible step is its cultural expression. The already existing art forms are redundant for this purpose because they have already been appropriated and hegemonized by the centre. In the Indian context, that lacuna has been filled by rap. It has entered the precariat semiosphere from outside. As an art form, rap owes its origin to the Bronx of 1970s where racially and economically disadvantaged young Black boys used this expression to document their protest against the systematized violence and discrimination faced by their community. Since then, rap has crossed over from the US and become one of the most popular musical genres worldwide. Akhila Shankar, associate director of brand and communications at Saavn said that analyzing the top 50 songs on the streaming app in July 2018, hip-hop is its third-biggest genre after Bollywood and electronic pop music (2018, n.pg.). This reveals a subtle intrusion of a form within a cultural space. It also shows how the young Indian precariat has owned it as its own form of expression. As a genre, rap in its thematic exploration is as various as the precariat is as a class. It deals with themes of unemployment, precarious employment, communal and racial marginalization, political and social decentralization, caste, aimlessness and isolation.

Dino James is a rapper from Bhopal. He takes his inspiration from his time as a struggler in Mumbai, where

all he could manage were bits and pieces jobs that he landed after hobnobbing around the film and modelling industry. He started writing his lyrics after returning to Bhopal. The fact that he has emerged as one of the most loved rappers among the present generation attests the fact that his lyrics have amply caught the voice of his generation. In a son significantly titled 'Loser', Dino raps:

"Yeh duniya ek sabse bade loser ki hai dastan
Usko tha vardanfatti rahegi
Aur hamesha rahega who pareshan
Struggle aur kangaali mein hi
Nikale gaus ka sara jeevan." (James 2016, n.pg.)

(This is the story of the greatest loser in the world, whose only blessing is his fear and anxiety. Restlessness is his constant companion. Ever a struggler, he knows not on whom to throw his anger. Translation mine)

The Indian overeducated, underpaid precariat is made to feel like a 'loser' because, in the neo-liberal society, self-worth has been equated with labour. This feeling of hopelessness and alienation is a regular trope in Indian rap.

The image of the defeated precariat is also visible in the works of the Mumbai rapper, MC Mawali, an alias which translates to 'loafer'.

"Jyada darno jawan uterte jub sadak pe
Har din ek score karte majbooran chor bunte
Bhatke disha vo jaise ghumai galli ke raste
Lagte nashe ke chaske, chakke wo khote hosh."
(Mawali 2018, n.pg.)

(Most of the youth are out on the road. Out of desperation, scoring dope is his everyday work. Stealing is his everyday work. He wanders the street, aimless, senseless. Translation mine)

The increasing commoditization of education is another issue that Standing deals with while discussing constituencies of the precariat. This is coupled with the increased debt culture that goes hand in hand with the rentier economy conspiring with the neo global neoliberal economic orientation that is responsible for the growth of the precariat. The 2018 music video titled "Shaktimaan" released by the hip-hop duo Seedhe-Maut, features a young man who is repeatedly overworked and humiliated by his boss. The video ends with the young man helping two masked robbers steal from his boss. This clearly indicates that if the concerns of the precariat are not addressed, then they can be mobilized towards what Standing calls "a politics of inferno" (2016, 132). The isolation that the precariat feels is a result of the "seething resentment" that originates out of a lack of occupational identity.

"Kya hai tera naam, kya teri pehechaan hai?
…
Tujh jaise yaha dhool hai
Ye registaan hai!" (Maut 2018, n.pg.)

(What is your name and what is your identity? You are like a grain of sand and this is a desert)

Alienation is another feeling which Standing asserts to the precariat. In his isolation, the precariat feels adrift from public life and the apathy felt by him can be best expressed in the following lines by the Chennai rapper, Madara:

"Ayyash naujawaan mobile pe khelta taash hain
Twitter pe chillata kyun nahi hota yahan vikas.")
(Madara 2019, n.pg.)

(The lazy youth play cards in their cellphones, while complaining in twitter on the lack of development. Translation mine)

Madara attributes this inaction to the dual threat of internet and dead-end jobs. This view echoes Standing's postulation that the connectivity of the internet, which is a predominant feature of the precariat, paradoxically contributes to his isolation.

"…Aandolan mein shant, aur facebook mein shor
…Sadta kar gulaami jiski timing 9 se 5" (Madara 2019, n.pg)

(Shouting on Facebook but quiet on movements, rotting by slaving from 9 to 5. Translation mine)

Standing had asserted that the precariat "does not feel part of a solidaristic labour community" (2016, 12), and that was one of the reasons that it was yet to be a class-for-itself. He had also claimed that it is the youth who would have to take the lead in forging the identity of the precariat. The Indian precariat, through rap, is now ready to reclaim its identity.

Conclusion

Culture, as a class determinant, plays a liminal role. John Holden observes how culture is both a constraint and liberation (2010, 27). It is a mediation of a class with everything that defines it, and everything that goes into defining that definition, including all that, lies outside it. The threshold of the semiosphere defines the semiosphere. However, the dynamic nature of culture ensures that nothing is quite outside and nothing is inside except in a synchronic moment of consideration. Diachronically, the inside/outside binary is problematized, as what is 'outside' can be accommodated, redefining the semiosphere. Since the neoliberal economy has redefined social classes in a way that is different from everything that has preceded it, therefore it is imperative that culture formation will look for influences and create negotiations that were once considered well outside its purview.

The inclusion of those forms, through appropriation, are already taking place. The precariat, it is clear, is consolidating itself culturally, and it would not be far-fetched speculation that political resistance is in the offing unless a different political ethic intervenes.

Works Cited

Adeyeye, Sophia and Fadekemi Oyewushi. 2017. "Effect of Bibliotherapy on Unruly Behaviour of Young People in Correctional Homes in Lagos State Nigeria." IASL (International Association of School Librarianship) Conference Proceedings 2017. California: Learning Without Borders.

Anderson, Heather. 2015. "Prisoners' radio: Connecting communities through alternative discourse". In *Rutledge Companion to Alternative and Community Media* edited by Chris Atton. Oxon: Rutledge.

Collins, Paul M. Context. 2006. *Culture and Worship: The Quest for Indianness.* Delhi: ISPCK.

Gaga, Lady. 2011. "Judas". *Born This Way.* Interscope Records. Compact Disc.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretations of Culture.* New York: Basic Books.

Holden, John. 2010. *Culture and Class.* London: Counterpoint.

James, Dino. 2016. "Loser". YouTube video. 4.28. Uploaded on October 17 2016. Accessed February 27, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I63RkF-dgjos

Kroeber, Alfred and Clyde Kluckhohn. 1952. *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions.* Cambridge: The Museum.

Lotman, Yuri. M. 1990. *The Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. Translated by Ann Shukman. London: IB Tauris & Co. Ltd.

Madara. "Siraj-Ud-Daulah". YouTube video, 2.38. Premiered on November 20 2020. Accessed February 28, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27Wl_93o070

Maut, Seedhe. "Shaktimaan". YouTube video, 3.15. Pemiered on August 30 2018. Accessed February 28, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfqZ-9R1pK-w

Mawali, MC. "Mumbai Aamchi". Youtube video.,3.06. Premiered on November 16 2016. Accessed February 27, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAFKGr3Csu4

Noth, Winfried. 2006. "Yuri Lotman on metaphors and culture as self-referential semiospheres." *Semiotica* 161 – 1/4: 249-263.

Shankar, Akhila. 2018. "The rise of Indian hip-hop: There's going to be a huge opportunity…" Mu-

sic Ally. September 6 2018. Accessed February 28, 2020. https://musically.com/2018/09/06/indian-hip-hop-huge-opportunity/

Standing, Guy. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Torop, Peeter. 2005. "Semiosphere and/as the research object of semiotics of culture." *Sign System Studies* 33 no. 1: 159 – 173.