Caste, Materiality and Embodiment: Questioning the Idealism/ Materialism Debate

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Abstract

Exploring the contingencies and paradoxes shaping the idealism/materialism separation in absolutist terms, this paper attempts to analyze the problems of such separatist tendencies in terms of dealing with the question of caste. Engaging with the problems of separating 'idea' and 'matter' in relation to the three dominant aspects that shape the conceptualisation of caste—origin(s), body, and society—the paper presents caste as an enmeshed idea-matter embrace that gains its circulation in practice through embodment. Aiming to counter caste with its own logic and internal contradictions, the paper further proceeds to show that these three aspects that had otherwise been seen for a long time as shaping caste also contradict their own efficacy and logic. With such an approach the paper presents caste as a ghost that feeds on our embodied ideas. Further, bringing in the trope of (mis)reading, the paper tries to examine the intricacies haunting any attempt to deal with the ghost. The paper therefore, can be seen as a humble effort at reminding the necessity of reading the idea of caste in its spectralities and continuous figurations.

Keywords

Caste, idealism, materiality, touch, embodiment

Introduction

Despite all diverse attempts to get rid of caste, its persistence reminds us continuously of its haunting spectrality that even after so much beating refuses to die.[1] It haunts us like a ghost whose origin and functional modalities continue to baffle us with its shifting trajectories and (trans)formative capacities, and thus continuously challenges our approaches to exorcise it. Under such a situation, where neither the problem nor the solution is immediately identifiable, the question of approach acquires a central focus forcing us to reconsider the conceptual tools

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by which we have tried to solve the problem. One such area has always been the tendency to dissociate approaches marked otherwise in terms of theory and practice, idealism and materialism, imaginary and real. The elementary aspect within such differentiation remains the conceptual tendency to separate idea and matter. Since caste operates always as an idea-matter entanglement any such approach to dissociate theory and practice into clear cut absolute segments can, therefore, only produce newer forms of exclusion in some way or other, and separation of 'academia' and 'activism' has emerged as one such area in the recent years. With such tendencies when one turns at Ambedkar, how does one read him and his approaches: as an academic or activist, theoretical or practical, idealist or materialist? The question of approach, I submit, then remains always linked with one of reading: how one reads caste, how one reads Ambedkar, and how one reads the concept of reading itself. Reading is not just about printed letters, reading as an act(ion) also involves reading the world around us, reading behaviours, reading norms and so on; in other words, we continuously try to read the material world around us and as we try to read it in our attempts to access it we try to constitute it in our own terms. Reading, then, is always a constructive process and I call this the mattering of reading by which the idea (of the world, life, reality, etc) gets materialised as matter. However, since the matter that one attempts to read never remains available in its entirety for our reading, every singular attempt at the mattering of reading remains always already partial and contingent. Any attempt to think caste too remains an act of similar constructive yet contingent reading whereby the idea of caste gets materialized into its diverse forms of material practices. Exploring the question of approach in this case, therefore, remains always linked with those of embodiment, entanglements, corporeal figurations, and latent tendencies that enable caste to take newer directions. The paper, therefore, attempts to dig deep into the conceptual layers that enable the embodied eruptions of caste discriminations in continuously shifting trajectories, layers that often haunt our approaches of understanding itself. Such an approach, therefore, demands to examine the most elementary forms that enable the functional modalities of caste. Emphasising on the idea-matter embrace that shapes the circulation of caste, the paper, therefore, attempts to trace the internal contradictions characterising the diverse figurations of caste that operate in relation to three dominant aspects: origin(s), body, and society. The specific focus remains to read the internal contradictions haunting the elementary aspects of thinking caste: purity and touch.

Thinking the 'social' in relation to the question of caste always demands examining the embodied ideas that materialise sociability. The idea of 'social,' if it has to exist, cannot exist in any singular universal form, and in the Indian context, it seems to have been split into two registers often clashing with each other in terms of asserting its superiority: tradition and democracy. Tradition (which is often added to the question of religion) may be seen as one of the registers that one turns toward in order to justify the continuity of some ongoing practices. Tradition, carrying with it the weight of pastness, enables emphasis on the question of origin. The idea of tradition, when it gets coupled with a religious emphasis, gets transformed into a source of metaphysical assumptions by which the idea of caste and its religious character comes to acquire its normative force, thereby transforming caste into an unavoidable religious 'law.' This can be called the ideological (con)figuration of caste. Such linking of tradition with a religious character of caste may be marked by many as a process of idealism whereby the idea/l of caste comes to be embodied in the thinking of existence and 'social,' the traces of which can be traced as recently as in Narendra Modi's (the present prime minister of

India) assertions made in his book *Karmyog* wherein he compared manual scavenging by Dalits to a 'spiritual experience.' To counter such metaphysical justifications, often a specific brand of materialistic approach is invoked to assert the questions of democratic rights and economic equality. Thus, the cited example of Modi's embodied idea also faced severe beating on materialistic grounds, just as Gandhi's similar assertion about sweepers had faced from Ambedkar.[2] However, as stated already, has all such beating in all these decades enabled us to get rid of caste? Modi's such remarks make it clear too nakedly how the normative casteist thinking not only continues to travel through time but also tries to assert and legitimise itself under the umbrella of religion. The material conditions of Dalits and the continuous exploitation of Dalit labour are symptomatic of the continuity of such embodied ideas that enable and justify the material conditions of exploitation. As one small example, one may turn towards the 2007 Tehelka story wherein Siriyavan Anand brought shattering facts regarding the material conditions of Dalits who, forced to turn towards manual scavenging as the only available job, die in thousands every year without anyone's notice:

> At least 22,327 Dalits of a sub-community die doing sanitation work every year. Safai Kamgar Vikas Sangh, a body representing sanitation workers of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), sought data under the Right to Information Act in 2006, and found that 288 workers had died in 2004–05, 316 in 2003–04, and 320 in 2002–03, in just 14 of the 24 wards of the BMC. About 25 deaths every month. These figures do not include civic hospital workers, gutter cleaners, or sanitation workers on contract. *Compare this with the 5,100 soldiers—army, police, paramilitaries—who have died between 1990 and 2007 combating militancy in Jammu and Kashmir.* [emphasis added]
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> (Anand 2007)

Ranging from popular advertisements to everyday newspaper reports, one may find uncountable similar instances of caste discrimination every day.[3] The question still remains, what keeps caste alive even after so many attempts to get rid of it? Asserting from material grounds the question of injustice and protest is obviously necessary but it also demands a cautionary awareness of not falling into a similar discriminatory logic that it aims to fight against. The ghosts of the long continuing embodied religious misconceptions, the co-constitutive internalisation and circulation of which gives it its commonsensical assumptions, cannot be exorcized with the simple assertion of material conditions of exploitation but also must be addressed on the basis of ideas that shape the material practices of such thinking. Such an attempt demands engaging with two crucial aspects: exploring how ideas too have a historicity that is not simply hegemonic but also contingent, and how certain normative ideas constitute the dominant material relations shaping the general thinking of society that acquires its collective form as common-sense. Attempting to do the first in relation to tradition unavoidably forces one to re-turn to the question of originary moments of caste, while we keep engaging with the latter approach in relation to the question of democratic for the later sections.

Caste and its Pre-colonial Origin(s): Idealism or Materialism?

The question of origin has always haunted the various attempts to read caste. In its generality, any attempt at turning towards the origin remains always paradoxical since on the one hand such re-turning expects an attempt to read the 'truth' in its factic

emergence and becoming, while on the other hand, such re-turn operates as an attempt at conjuring that which is no longer available. In other words, such turn towards the originary remains always operative as part of a reading process that constitutes the materiality of a past by relying on specters. This remains the case applicable to any attempt at re-turning to the originary moments of caste as well. As emphasised already, reading 'caste' in its spectrality demands reading the entanglements that constitute the idea-matter embrace in myriad and contingent ways, and as such any singular approach labeled in terms of idealism or materialism cannot be considered as the universal solution. Idealism (emphasised usually and reductively under the umbrella of German idealism) as a concept comes to be labeled in a derogatory and generalised way only through comparative reading approaches where, by contrast, a specific brand of materialism comes to be emphasised. If one tries to assert similar materialistic approaches to caste, for example, modeled after a Marxist understanding of materialism (Srinivas 1962; Kosambi 1962; Omvedt 1994), then one also needs to be cautious of Marx's own orientalist ideas on India and caste.[4] Besides, one may find innumerable contradictions within Marx's own views on materialism, especially when one sees the wavering movements between early and later Marx, between his attacks and indebtedness to Hegel, between his advocacy of a materialistic methodology on the one hand and return to philosophy and poetry on the other .[5] To reflect on such contingent tendencies to read 'idea' and 'matter' as separate one may turn towards Engels as well, especially in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*.[6] One may also be reminded of the many internal contradictions that haunted the existing approaches to read caste through the Marxist lens, such as substituting the caste question with working class question, addressing the caste question by an approach dependent on the Cominternian cause and the Soviet Union, etc[7] (Nigam 1999, 41). In a discussion on caste one may therefore posit such western views of materialism as inadequate (a claim which obviously has its own validity) and assert the necessity of viewing the materiality of caste from Indian materialistic approaches. Such a demand for reading caste through Indian philosophical roots and not 'borrowed' Marxist views of materiality may be again reductively read as a nativist approach, but the topographical specificity that is assigned with caste also demands reading it in terms of its own specificity. All such issues remind us continuously not only of the necessity of reviewing our approaches but also of the aporia of re-turning. Since any attempt at reading the past remains always a form of constitution of the past (the is-ness of which is never available in its entirety for reading), attempts to read the origin of caste, I submit, also remains part of the same process. A reading that attempts to engage with the idea of caste with such awareness thus realises the futility of trying to read an idea in its absolute singularity. Every single act of reading continuously betrays the normative expectation of submitting to its own absolute singularity but remains always enabled by the assemblage of the multiple; in other words, every singular act of reading is always already entangled, by whatever term we decide to call it, materialism or idealism.

Exploring the question of originary moments of caste in relation to the idealism/materialism debate, I decide, therefore, to turn towards *lokayata* not simply to establish caste in some new (factic) historical light but to remind the contingencies that haunt any such attempt. The previous attempts to turn towards ancient philosophical approaches to caste (for example, Kosambi, 1962; Bhattacharya , 2008; Guru &

Sarukkai, 2012, among others) have always tried to read it in terms of some form of constructivism or other, and as such, even though their approach was materialistic it cannot detach itself entirely from some form of idealism. Trying to engage with the contingencies haunting the discussions of idealism/materialism in Indian philosophy, I therefore, turn towards an approach that is otherwise marked as materialistic but in an unreliable way. *Lokayata*, often labeled as a materialistic approach, has always been read in opposition to the Vedic approach which too has been marked as idealistic (Chattopadhyaya, 1959; Bhattacharya, 2011). However, without the availability of any original text of *Lokayata*, all such assertions turn into assumptions only. In other words, based on its treatment in other texts, or by other philosophical schools of thought, the reading of *Lokayata* as a specific type of materialism thus suffers from a certain form of constructivism that attempts to idealise a version of materialistic approach within the framework of *Lokayata*. To use Debiprasad's own words, the reader is a thinking being and as such he will have to read with a mind having a system of beliefs, and from a standpoint which he happens to occupy at the time of his reading activity, and thus the 'objective' reading is as much 'subjective' (Chattopadhyaya 1959, xi). Similarly, it remains applicable with any approach to turn towards the originary moments of caste, just as it remains the case with any approach to assert a certain version of materialism as the absolute truth. Turning towards *Lokayata* thus enables us to explore not only the pre-Vedic ideas on caste but also reminds us of their aporetic spectrality.

As asserted already, in the absence of any remaining material record of *Lokayata*, reading its origin and nature through its references in the later Buddhist and Upanisadic sources not only makes it pre-Buddhist and even pre-Upanisadic[8] but more importantly dependent on its various forms of re-presentation and therefore, always partial and conjectural. Besides, since all pro-Vedic schools of India, particularly *Vedānta*, *Mīmāṃsā* and *Nyāya* among the orthodox (āstika) systems and the Buddhist and the Jain among the heterodox (*nāstika*) ones tried their best to refute both the Pre-*Cārvāka* and the *Cārvāka/Lokāyata* views, it becomes also unreliable to read the origin and ideas of *Lokayata* through its references in their works (Bhattacharya 2011). Etymologically meaning 'that which is prevalent among the people' and also 'that which is essentially this-worldly' (Chattopadhyaya 1959, xvii), *Lokayata* refuses to subscribe to any singular grand-narrative or transcendental idea(l) as its originary centre but celebrates the body in all its multiplicity, irreducibility, and openness as the microcosmic reflector for the world. As such, *Lokayata* is also often associated with another term called '*dehavad*' because of it sole reliance upon the material human body (*deha*) for all outlook or conceptualisation of the world. In other words, such outlook reflects a form of practice that doesn't assert any allegiance to any universal order or common theory and even if it subscribes, because of its essential reliance on what is prevalent, such allegiance remains always momentary and shifting. This leads Ramkrishna Bhattacharya to assert that materialism in India had a 'popular' origin (Bhattacharya 2011, 27). Such shifting trajectories also make it impossible to assert that such outlook emerged as a dominant form of philosophical worldview that had a definite idea regarding how to practice a certain specific philosophy of *dehavad* (Chattopadhyaya 1959, xvii). Needless to say it separately, this is absolutely different from what will be later marked into closed and antagonistic terms as 'idealism' and 'materialism.' It is from a much later point onwards, specifically by reading it in contrast to what is later called spiritual idealism (namely '*vedanta*'), that *Lokayata* comes to be seen as materialistic philosophy opposing all forms of transcendental

idealism. In other words, what is often marked today as one of the earliest germs of proto-materialism in Indian philosophy was never a self-conscious approach, it's identification with a certain concept of materialism was a later product of comparative reading by which its significance was asserted always in opposition to a similarly constructed idea of idealism. Such attempts at comparative reading to assert a certain supremacy of one section, I submit, is not something immediately new and one can find such traces even in the early trends of reading *Lokayata*.

Since *Lokayata* was placed in opposition to transcendental ideas like *atma* (roughly translated as soul) and *dharma* (essential spiritual duty), it was quite obvious that they refused to accept any transcendental views on caste as well. To justify that often a famous passage is quoted from a later medieval compendium titled *The Sarva-Darsana-Samgraha*[9] or *Review of the Different Systems of Hindu Philosophy* by Madhava Acharya (that was later translated by E. B. Cowell and A. E. Gough in 1882 as part of the colonial reading). The point here is not to turn towards *Lokayata* in search of some messianic possibility to dismantle the presumed origins of caste; one can find innumerable traces of contradictions even within later Vedic views of caste (which I will discuss in the later sections on touch). The point rather is to emphasise that the tendency to divide idealism and materialism into absolutely detachable categories is a later product and in the earlier philosophical approaches the divisions are not available in such simple binaries. Even when one turns towards transcendental ideas[10] like *atma* (soul), *dharma* (spiritual duty), *moksha* (salvation), *paralok* (afterlife), etc. that are associated with Vedic literature, one needs to realise that even as ideas they cannot be established without any relation to the corporeality. Similarly, asserting a certain type of materialism as the only approach to engage with the real also remains a form of idea since neither the real nor the matter (we may use the same with 'truth' as well) is accessible to us in its entirety, just as we cannot ignore the fact that our assertion of the material world remains after all our ideas of the material world. Instead of fixing our focus on *Lokayata* as an instance of early materialistic approach to caste, I submit, it can offer us certain significant aspects to explore the obscure roots of caste (especially in relation to the question of tribal) without reducing it to the idealism/materialism division. Debiprasad reminds us that if one focuses on the essential characteristics that characterize the caste system it becomes extremely problematic to separate it from a tribal society since it too shares most of the similarities: both are endogamous, with numerous subdivisions; the members share a strong belief in common descent; the original ancestor is usually imagined to be a plant or an animal from which the clan borrows its name (therefore totemic identification and practising taboos); laws are strictly maintained by a council where expulsion and excommunication is the major punishment (Chattopadhyaya 1959, 203). Not only the confusion between caste and tribe makes it problematic to assert the originality of caste,[11] the assertion of the claimed superiority of the Brahman caste also remains obscure and arbitrary since such early times. Apart from its claimed lineage of divine origin, one of the common ways by which the comparative superiority of the Brahman caste is asserted is by placing the other castes involved in non-religious activities at a 'lower' position by a derogatory reading of the idea of tribal. In other words, the 'tribal' (and its associated works of manual labor) is placed as the 'other' of a constituted body of the 'civilized' Brahman (associated with the regulation of the 'sacred'). However, such views lose their legitimacy when one realises that even upper castes, as it is with the thinking of any modern 'civilized' society, stand upon structures which were once tribal. One may

turn in this regard to the system of '*gotras*' (subdivisions of a caste into smaller groups) that remains even today the basis of debate concerning the lineage and authenticity of one's caste identity:

> A Brahmana, for example, is supposed to belong to the Kasyapa gotra. The name of this gotra is derived from the tortoise. That is, all the members of the Kasyapa gotra are supposed to be the descendants of an original ancestor who was a tortoise. As belonging to this tortoise-group, he is supposed to live under two very strict taboos. First, he must never eat tortoise. Secondly, he must not marry any member of the same gotra, that is, of the tortoise-group. This obviously shows that this Kasyapa gotra is but a survival of the tortoise-clan in which his ancestors were living when they were still to outgrow the tribal stage of social organisation
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> (Ibid, 207).

Such references not only show how the *gotras* of the higher castes were survivals of the clan-system of the tribal society but also reflect on the continuity of 'tribal' elements as the basis of what is otherwise differentiated as 'modern' civilized society. As such, the reading of *gotra* in its absolute singularity remains extremely problematic since it comes to be read as synonymous with multiple aspects like *santati* (lineage), *janana* (race), *kula* (family), *abhijana* (descent), *anvaya* (progeny), *vamsa* (race), *anvavaya* (lineage) and *santana* (family offspring) (Ibid, 208). The members of the various Brahmana *gotras* always prided themselves as having their origin from *rishis* or ancient sages which too remains quite obscure when one traces the confusions presented in the later religious texts. For example, while the *Matsya Purana* identifies the seven *rishis* or sages born from Brahma as Bhrigu, Angiras, Marichi, Atri, Pulaha, Pulastya and Visvamitra, the *Satapatha Brahmana* on the other hand provides us with the seven other names of *rishis* as the original ancestors which are Gautama, Bharadvaja, Visvamitra, Jamadagni, Vasistha, Kasyapa, and Atri. To this latter list even another name is added later, Agastya, thus making the number of *gotras* eight. The inconsistency in the number of *gotras* too remains a relevant issue to be found in such texts: the *Asvalayana Srauta Stttra* identifies the *gotras* to be 49, the *Kuladipika* mentions the gotras to be 40 though only names 32, and the *Gotra Pravara Nibandhana Kadambam* mentions the number to be even 73 (Ibid., 209). Not only the commonly held view of the origin of Brahman *gotras* from ancient *rishis* remains arbitrary and obscure but also shows its links with totemic animals and plants which is otherwise attached with 'savage' tribes, as in the case with Brahman *gotras* like *Vatsas* (calves), *Sunakas* (dogs), *Riksas* (bears), *Bharadvajas* (a species of birds), *Mudgalas* (a species of fish), *Kapis* (monkeys), *Ajas* (goats), *Renus* (pollens), *Venus* (bamboos), *Kasyapas* (tortoises), *Sandilas* (a species of birds), *Gotamas* (cows) etc. (Ibid., 210). The assertion of the essentially spiritual character of caste system draws mainly from the reading of Brahmanical literature like the *Dharma Sastras* and *The Laws of Manu*, however, and even if one decides to avoid the innumerable internal contradictions within such texts regarding the idea of caste, turning towards ancient approaches like *Lokayata* remind us continuously of the obscurities that constitute the originary roots of caste, its problematic linking with spirituality, and its confused claims of auto-generativity especially in relation to the continuation of tribal qualities within caste.

Turning towards *Lokayata* we may be reminded therefore not simply of the diverse materialities that constitute the emergence of caste as a 'system' but mainly of the exclusions, obscurities and arbitrariness that characterise the 'idea' of caste in its originary emergences. *Lokayata* reminds us of a society that takes the physical body as the only reality and therefore outside the politics of ideological regulations that enable caste discriminations. Debiprasad sums this in a very articulate way:

> …so long as human consciousness retains its moorings in manual labour, it remains instinctively materialistic. For there is a sense of objective coercion about the labour process itself… This is negatively substantiated by the fact that the emergence of the idealistic outlook in the human consciousness presupposes a separation of thought from action—of mental labour from manual labour—along with a sense of degradation socially attached to the latter. The result is an exaltation of the spirit or consciousness—of pure thought or pure reason—to the status of a delusional omnipotence having, as it were, the power to dictate terms to reality. And this is the essence of the idealistic outlook… this idealistic outlook did emerge on the ruins of a primitive proto-materialism, representing the consciousness of the primitive pre-class society in which manual labour and mental labour were not dissociated from each other
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> (Ibid., xxii-xxiii).

Though identified today as primitive or proto-materialism, *Lokayata* reminds us of a materialistic worldview that refuses to submit to any theory (even adhering to a normative theory of practising materialism remains an essential paradox for the materialists),and rather takes the primacy of living body in all its multiplicity as the sole reality, a view that takes the human body and earth as co-responding, inter-acting and inter-dependent. In Debiprasad's words, with all its ignorance about nature as well as the human body, it thus marks a stage where human consciousness remains yet to be emancipated from the world and proceed to the formation of the spiritualistic or idealistic world-outlook (Ibid, xxi). It is also asserted that the *Lokayata* outlook believed the human body as entangled with nature in its four essential elements i.e., earth, air, fire and water, and thus refused to accept the later transcendental ideas of the Vedas, especially *Ṛgveda* that presented an ideal supreme person called *purusha* whose body parts were divided into four castes: Brāhaman or the priests (his mouth), Rājanyas or the warriors (his two arms), Vaiśya or agriculturists and traders (his two thighs), and Śūdra or (manual workers (his two feet) (Ibid, 5).

While all these may be used as factic signs of asserting some 'truth' about the arbitrary origins of caste and its inconsistent ideas, such a reading, though may be materialistic in a self-declared way, too participates in latent forms of idealism. In ancient times, these thoughts attributed to the *Lokayata* outlook were read with certain comparative negativities to construct the spiritual worldview proposed by the Vedas as essential and unavoidable, just as the *Lokayata* outlook to establish their views ridiculed the Vedas continuously (one may find a similar antagonistic situation between idealism and materialism as well). Under colonial governance reading such ancient views was an inextricable part of the colonial epistemological politics, while the rise of anti-colonial and nationalist ideologies found in such readings a way to assert India's spiritual difference against West's material prosperity. Similarly, in the contemporary times as well, re-turning to *Lokayata* remains always enabled by some form

constructive reading, be it to assert the ancient materialistic roots of Indian philosophy or to counter caste arguments. While such approaches like that of Debiprasad's has its own unavoidable significance in their attempts to critique ideological constructions from material vantage point still such materialistic approaches too always depend on some form idealism regarding their own embodied ideas on what they decide to consider as 'materialistic approach.'. In this respect, quite interestingly, without any definite textual or factic center to hold on to, *Lokayata* reminds us continuously of the contingencies of any attempt at constructivism, whether we re-turn to it with the aim of asserting a definite materialistic approach or to assert the originary roots of caste. This gets further emphasis when we realise that the ideas associated with *Lokayata* were also similar to many other schools of the both 'pre' and 'post' *lokayata* times. For example, many thinkers during the time of Buddha and Mahāvīra (sixth/fifth century BCE) and even after, had also asserted about the primacy of matter (consisting of five basic elements, namely, earth, air, fire, water and space) over consciousness, futility of performing sacrifices (yajña) and post-mortem rites (śrāddha), and offering gifts (dāna) to Brahmanas (Bhattacharya 2012, 1). Similarly, the problem also emerges from the identification of Brihaspati, since the name which is associated with *Lokayata* is also associated with other schools of thought which are not always exactly similar to that of *Lokayata*, and as such reading all these Brihaspatis as one may constitute a severe form of reductionism. All these reminds us that while every single attempt at reading *Lokayata* has its own significant contribution in (re)presenting this ancient outlook in its newer and shifting trajectories yet one cannot also ignore the latent forms of constructivism that always haunt any such attempt to return to it. My approach here is also not outside the boundaries of constructive reading since after all the main aim remains to connect the question of the materiality of caste with its originary idealism/materialism debates so as to trace the inconsistencies and obscurities characterising the idea of caste since its earliest emergences. These factors— emphasizing the originary roots of caste, and reading it with a tendency to separate idea and matter—remain two dominant registers even today to read caste, and as such turning towards *Lokayata* enables us to understand not only the internal contradictions haunting any attempt at conjuring an orignary past of caste but also to reflect on the acts of reading itself whereby such conjuring comes to be justified.

Practicing Un/touch-ability: Within the Body or Without?

After tracing briefly the obscure roots of caste and materialism in Indian philosophy let us turn towards two of the most elementary conceptual aspects of caste: body and touch. What happens when we touch bodies, do we really have access to the material bodies that can be touched in their entirety, or do we think that we have access to the material bodies and therefore we can in a self-conscious way practise touch? Any attempt at thinking 'touch' demands conceptualising it in its entirety, however, thinking 'untouch' on the other hand demands engaging with the impossible task of conceptualising that which is not-yet-touched and/or that which cannot be touched. This leads us, therefore, to an irreconcilable (non)position of conceptualising touch-in-itself. To elaborate it further I am turning towards an extract from one of my earlier papers:

> …before one can explore the question of untouch-ability one needs to first explore the thinking of touch-ability. Since touch always remains one of the crucial aspects of the various senses that help us to conceptualise and connect

with the material world, thinking the specificity of touch thus always already remains linked with thinking the specificity of the body. However, if touch remains always partial, then it also brings us back to a non-position and inability to conceptualise the body in its entirety. If a 'touch' of Dalit violates the body of the upper castes then the bodily composition of Dalit and other castes has to be different. If the touch is that which violates, then touch must be seen as carrying a transgressing potential beyond the body; in other words, the location of the touch cannot be within the body only. If the Dalit's touch violates the body of other castes then touch cannot be identified within the material body of the toucher only (then how can one project the Dalit's body as 'polluting'?), and if it remains always connected with the originating body then how can it affect other bodies? This brings us to an irreconcilable problem of locating touch: within the body or beyond it? If one is never able to locate touch, then how can one identify that touch as always already corrupting?"

(Saha 2019, 44-45)

Since caste as a 'system' has always been associated with universality based on elementary understandings of creation, bodily compositions and functions, any attempt at exploring 'touch' also demands such necessity of engaging with the elementary forms of cognition that enable collective participation. Since we always conceptualise touch in relation to or in terms of other things, any attempt at thinking touch also remains dependent on other things. Not only in the early views of *Lokayata* outlook such metaphysical ideas on touch remains absolutely rejected, the later philosophical views since Vedic times also remains filled with innumerable contradictions regarding the idea of touch. Sarukkai, for example, tracing the diverse approaches to touch that can be found in the various Indian philosophical trends, reminds us of the necessity to conceptually differentiate "touch" (*sparśa*) and "contact" (*saṁyoga*):

Each sense organ is composed exclusively of one of the five elements – smell of earth, taste of water, touch of air, sight of fire, hearing of ether… Touch is a *guna* – quality, like taste, smell and contact. It is a quality only for earth, water, fire and air whereas contact is a quality for all the nine substances including ākāśa, time, place, self, and internal organs. Furthermore, touch is perceived only through one sense organ but contact can be by two sense organs. Also, contact produces a variety of qualities including pleasure, pain, aversion, merit, and demerit. However, touch does not produce these which contact does…The notion of contact suggests something broader than touch: 'contact is a quality that is present in the 'toucher' and the 'touched'… If two bodies are in contact with each other, then that contact is a symmetrical relation – each body is in contact with the other. However, in the case of touch, there seems to be an asymmetry since the person who touches is at the same time not being touched by the object. So when I say I am touching a chair I do not at the same time say the chair is touching me (although Merleau-Ponty would disagree!). Touch in this sense is a specific human sense unlike contact which is a specific kind of relation between any two entities

(Guru & Sarukkai 2012, 40).

This further reminds us of the problematic question of materially locating untouchability: first, if the Brahmin touches the Shudra or vice versa then the *toucher* should remain

untouched; secondly, if the *touch* affects the *toucher* then the relation is rather of a mutual relationship of 'contact' between the toucher-touched; and thirdly, and most importantly, the untouchable is able to manifest a certain sense of 'untouch' within the person whereby the body itself becomes untouchable irrespective of whether or not the person comes in contact with another person (Ibid., 41). The body in different Indian philosophical traditions (for example, *The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika*, *ṚgVeda*, *Buddhism*, etc) involves a relationality: between being and world, locatedness and transcendence, physical and metaphysical, material and ideal, internal and external, specificity and generality. As such, even in the attempts to engage with the material body like that in *Āyurveda*, we see Suśruta, the famous surgeon of ancient times, classifying the body into seven layers of skin (Ibid), thus exposing us to the unavoidable question: if skin is the organ of touch as we understand it now then which of these layers of skin are actually involved in the experience of touch? (Saha, 2019). Such irreducibility of the material body can be traced in other philosophical trends as well (for example, Sānkhya and Advaita Vedānta), thus reminding us again that even within the search for origins of material traces of caste one ends up with an irreducible and entangled past where certain forms of constructivism or other always haunt even the most materialistic approaches. Turning towards *Lokayata* we are reminded with one such small example to realise the contingencies that always haunt attempts to search for origins, whether we call it a search for origins of idealism or materialism in Indian philosophy.

Specters of Caste and the Betrayal of the Promise of Democracy

The projection of Dalits as untouchable bodies, I submit, always remains symptomatic of such long continuing circuits of misreading on which the ghost of untouchability feeds itself. While we continue to discriminate and attack each other in terms of our different approaches to fight casteism (idealism versus materialism, Savarna versus Dalit, theoretical versus practical, academic versus activist, etc), the ghost of caste that continues to paralyze us is continuously evolving ways. Ambedkar was aware of such haunting spectrality of caste and therefore was critical of any immediately available approaches to exorcise it:

> I may seem hard for Manu, but I am sure my force is not strong enough to kill his ghost. He lives, like a disembodied spirit and is appealed to, and I am afraid will yet live long.
>
> (Ambedkar 1917, 21).

For Ambedkar, caste was essentially undemocratic in character since it takes inequality and hierarchy as the governing principle and even forecloses the possibility to do away with it:

> One European solution was to respect the rights of others (because one thought one had rights; therefore, others too must have them), so that others respect our rights in turn; a certain reciprocity is assumed (never fully proved). This is where the problem crystallizes itself. This is about the so-called idea/l of democracy: We are all equal and therefore must be treated equally.
>
> (Ambedkar 1936 (2014), 172)

In the question of caste this idea/l of democracy too is not available in the thinking of a common society. Caste constitutes the thinking of society only in separatist terms. While the hegemonic forms of brahminical social organisation come to be internalised as the only access to think the social space, it also displaces the possibilities of other potential inter-acting social spaces that the other castes share within themselves. Besides, it also reminds us that attempts to radically overturn such an organisation of the social space may not get away with casteist social separation, and the recent exclusionary emphasis and hatred against what is identified as 'savarna' can be seen as symptoms of such reverse mechanism by which the discriminatory logic of caste continues to shape even counter politics. In a different register, this is a similar paradox that one may trace within proletarian revolution as well if the proletariat claims to overturn the class hierarchy which doesn't ensure getting rid of a discriminatory class-structure but rather continue as reconfigurations of it in newer and latent ways. Ambedkar was well aware of such possibilities of continuity of caste structure even within attempts to get rid of it, and thus for him a complete annihilation of it demanded a complete annihilation of the conceptual structures that enable its circulation, and the embodied ideas of Hinduism were one such breeding ground (Ibid). In his celebrated *Annihilation of Caste* when Ambedkar reminds us continuously that political and democratic reform cannot be asserted without social reform it becomes evident that he indirectly talks about the necessity of getting rid of the embodied ideas of caste in order to ensure their annihilation from material forms of practice: "…let political reformers turn in any direction they like, they will find that in the making of a constitution, they cannot ignore the problem arising out of the prevailing social order' (Ibid, 178). For Ambedkar caste forecloses the capacity to constitute collective community based on equality and fraternity, and practicing *a priori* discriminations based on identifying 'savarna' seems to continue in a paradoxical way the emphasis on 'varna.'[12] Ambedkar had repeatedly asserted that the assurance of democracy must be the assurance proceeding from a much deeper foundation—namely, the mental attitude of the compatriots towards one another in their spirit of equality and fraternity (Ibid, 183), and the question of 'savarna' versus 'dalit' seem to reflect a relation of antagonism (instead of brotherhood and equality) and therefore an inversion within counter-politics whereby caste and its reliance on '*varna'* discrimination continues to live. Ambedkar was perhaps aware of such possibilities when he asserted:

> The caste system prevents common activity… One caste enjoys singing a hymn of hate against another caste as much as the Germans enjoyed singing their hymn of hate against the English during the last war.
>
> (Ambedkar 1936 (2014), 191)

By keeping apart people of the same society into different irreconcilable segments caste therefore stands against what democracy stands for, and as such, for Ambedkar caste was by its essential nature 'anti-social.' Doing away caste demands doing away all its conceptual registers, and attempts of annihilating caste that continue to rely on the memories of an old order cannot think of an entirely caste-less future. Therefore, for Ambedkar, annihilating caste demanded an absolute overthrow of the conceptual structures (of Hinduism) on which caste breeds itself. In a similar way, among the most recent approaches, Jaaware too attempts to refuse caste its unavoidable essence which it has enjoyed for a long time and instead transfers all emphasis from caste to

touch as the principle register. This is what Jaaware calls 'oublierring' or 'deliberate forgetting' (Jaaware 2019, 13-15).Bringing in the subtle differences between western ideas of 'society' (derived from 'socius' which stands for companion, follower, etc.) and the Indian 'samaj' (which also stands for caste, clan, community, etc), Jaaware points at the innumerable contradictions that caste brings into the thinking of a common society: while caste is segmentalist (in the sense that it aims to cut apart), society aims at unifying all into one (Jaaware 2019, 171-189). However, this is an intimate cut that caste brings in within the thinking of a common *samaj*: 'We interact with but will not relate to that other samaj. The members of that samaj are not from ours' (Ibid., 171). Thus, at the unavailability of a common society (since to take the fourfold division as unavoidable 'law' also expects the constitution of four different societies), to identify oneself with a common society demands the invention of *an idea of a common society* that one may identify with, and this is what Jaaware decides to call sociability (Ibid., 172). With the persistence of caste, not only the idea/l of a common society remains a foreclosure, practising different forms of autonomous individual sociability also remains a prohibition. In other words, the persistence of the embodied idea of caste within a democratic system operates as mutually contradictory since neither the individual nor a common singular unity can survive under the caste structure; the latter must replace the former according its ways of hierarchical social organisation and as such equality remains an impossibility.

The specters of caste always operate with an inextricable idea-matter embrace, and not idea/matter separation, that enable the figurations of the idea of caste into everyday forms of practice. While turning towards *Lokayata* not only reminds us of the problematic roots of idealism/materialism separation in Indian philosophy, it also reflects on the various forms of constructivism that always haunt the approaches to caste, as it is with our conceptualization of idealism and materialism. Besides, it might also enable one to develop an immanent critique of caste that doesn't attempt to read caste through other registers like equality, society etc (which the limits of this paper prevent me from further elaborating). The point however that has been emphasised here by turning towards *Lokayata* is the obscure and contradictory origins of caste. It reminds us of the continuities in mis-reading since earliest times; a cautionary reminder that any attempt at getting rid of ideas that had *enabled* the embodiment of caste into practice for generations call for an attempt at exorcising a ghost whose origin, form(ation) and effect is continuously changing, and so must change our ways to approach it. Such continuous becoming, in the case of caste, thus involves a hauntological becoming[13], one that acquires its functional modalities by a simultaneous working of past and present, idea and matter, ontology and epistemology (Das 2010). However, this hauntological becoming of caste also exposes its own fissures and herein lies the paradox that even the ghost cannot escape: while the ghost cannot be conceptualised without being corporealised, on the other hand the performative corporeal body cannot stand entirely for the ghost, and through such fissures emerge the disruption within the ghost's own functionality. It is within such contingent becomings of the ghost that the possibilities of its own disruption lies, and an approach failing to realise such idea-matter embrace that characterises the ghost of caste thus fails in its initial conceptualisation of both the problem as well as the solution.

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Endnotes

1. Influenced by the rise of Marxism in India the caste question has often been seen in terms of class question (obviously not without contradictions), which, coupled with the embodied lens of colonial modernity, comes to see caste as only a pre-colonial, ignorant, irrational obstacle in the nation-making project. A similar tendency can be found in Srinivas' study as well, where he makes the famous assertion: "Caste is an institution of prodigious strength and it will take a lot of beating before it will die" (Srinivas 1962, 72).

2. To Gandhi's description of scavenging as "the noblest service to society" Ambedkar responded with question "How sacred is this work of cleanliness!": "To preach that poverty is good for the Shudra and for none else, to preach that scavenging is good for the untouchables and for none else and to make them accept these onerous impositions as voluntary purposes of life, by appeal to their failings is an outrage and a cruel joke on the helpless classes which none but Mr Gandhi can perpetuate with equanimity and impunity. In this connection one is reminded of the words of Voltaire ... 'Oh! mockery to say to people that the sufferings of some brings joy to others and works good to the whole. What solace is it to a dying man to know that from his decaying body a thousand worms will come into life'" (cited by Gatade 2015, 33)

3. The indifference of the upper-castes becomes too evident when one realizes that not only the suffering of Dalits (who are forced into manual scavenging) remains unaddressed but it becomes an object of fun and entertainment. Take for instance, a popular *Radio Mirchi* television commercial thatwas aired a few years ago for almost two years, wherein a man was heard (and not made visible in his body) inside a manhole gaily singing a song—— then, a man chewing betel alights from his car t wondering what keeps the man down in the manhole so happy. And the advertising tagline emerges: *Mirchi Sunnewaale… Always Khush!* (People listening to Radio Mirchi are always happy)The question to focus is obviously not simply the advertisement but the fact that it went on for many years without a murmur of protest from viewers or civil rights groups, and is still available on Youtube (https://youtu.be/6aSjcixHJI4; accessed on March 25, 2019). Similar stories of discrimination one can find almost every day in newspapers. For example, 'Dalit boy denied water from hand pump, drowns while drinking from well' (Hindustan Times. 2016-03-09. Retrieved 2018-11-14: https://www.hindustantimes.com/bhopal/dalit-boy-not-allowed-water-from-school-hand-pump-drowns-while-drinking-from-well/story-9KLdKKDT9BazWAPy56ZxDP.html), or 'Dalit girl attacked by priest for trying to draw water from temple well' (https://www.firstpost.com/india/dalit-girl-attacked-by-priest-in-uttar-pradesh-for-trying-to-draw-water-from-temple-well-2946630.html).

4. For further details, see Marx's "The British Rule in India" (1853) and "The Future Results of British Rule in India" (1853).

5. For further details on Marx's engagement with poetry, social structure and revolution, see "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte".

6. Here is one such section from the text: "The great basic question of all philosophy, especially of modern philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking and being. From the very early times when men…came to believe that their thinking and sensation were not activities of their bodies, but of a distinct soul which

inhabits the body and leaves it at death…The question of the position of thinking in relation to being, a question which, by the way, had played a great part also in the scholasticism of the Middle Ages, the question, which is primary, spirit or nature — that question, in relation to the Church was sharpened into this: 'Did God create the world or has the world been in existence?' The answers which the philosophers gave to this question split them into two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature and, therefore, in the last instance, assumed world creation in some form or other . . . comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism. These two expressions, idealism and materialism, primarily signify nothing more than this; and here also they are not used in any other sense.' (Engels 1886, 21)

7. Nigam cites how directly Mikhail Borodin's influence was on M. N. Roy's *Manifesto of the Indian Communist Party* that promised to free the emergent nation from its pre-colonial allegiances to caste that the Indian National Congress was not able to eradicate. Thus, though Roy realised that a typical two-class party model of orthodox Marxist approach was not effectively applicable in the Indian context, rather it demanded a multi-class party model, he was expelled from the Comintern for violating their one party, one class motif. It was also the same dependence on the Cominternian motif that led Muzaffar Ahmad in 1926 to change the name of Labour Swaraj Party to 'The Bengal Peasants' and Workers' Party' (Nigam, 1999).

8. The earliest Buddhist sources repeatedly mentioned the *Lokayata*, and further, as already argued by Dasgupta and others, even the older Upanisads mentioned it—though under the name of the Asura-view—it is natural to presume therefore that the *Lokayata*, in its original form, must have been very ancient; however, it is certainly impossible to fix any singular date as to how very ancient it was. (Chattopadhyaya 1959)

9. Here are some excerpts from the most commonly cited section: "There is no heaven, no final liberation, nor any soul in another world,/Nor do the actions of the four castes, orders, &c., produce any real effect./…/If a beast slain in the Jyotishtoma rite will itself go to heaven,/Why then does not the sacrificer forthwith offer his own father?/…/While life remains let a man live happily, let him feed on ghee even though he runs in debt;/When once the body becomes ashes, how can it ever return again?/If he who departs from the body goes to another world, How is it that he comes not back again, restless for love of his kindred?/Hence it is only as a means of livelihood that Brahmans have established here/All these ceremonies for the dead, there is no other fruit anywhere./The three authors of the Vedas were buffoons, knaves, and demons./All the well-known formulae of the pandits, jarphari, turphari, &c./And all the obscene rites for the queen commanded in the Aswamedha,/These were invented by buffoons, and so all the various kinds of presents to the priests,/While the eating of flesh was similarly commanded by night-prowling demons" (Cowell & Gough 1882, 10).

10. Being specifically linked with the cultural and linguistic history of India, these terms and their associated concepts remain always untranslatable if one tries to capture in English language their essence in entirety, just as it remains the case with translation of some culturally specific terms from French or German. As such, any attempt at translation of such concepts always remains partial. For further details,

see Barbara Cassin ed. *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004).

11. Ranging Manusmriti to Mahabharata the confusion between caste and tribe, especially in English translations remains a recurrent issue. Since the confusion between 'caste' and 'tribe' was never addressed properly, and since colonial epistemology was not always aware of the various complexities and intricacies of the native social organisation, it remains a recurring aspect also in the colonial readings of caste ranging from as early as Sherring's study in 1872, Russell and Hiralal's study in 1916, to as late as Crispin Bates' study in 1995. For further details, see Chattopadhyaya 1959, 202-203.

12. One may re-member here the words of Ambedkar: 'The first question I ask is: Will the proletariat of India combine to bring about this revolution? What will move men to such an action? It seems to me that, other things being equal, the only thing that will move one man to take such an action is the feeling that other men with whom he is acting are actuated by feelings of equality and fraternity and—above all—of justice. Men will not join in a revolution for the equalisation of property unless they know that after the revolution is achieved they will be treated equally, and that there will be no discrimination of caste and creed' (Ibid, 182).

13. I use this concept from Anirban Das' use of it in his book, where he writes: "This body, thus not only material, has the ghost's spectral corporeality. It haunts as it becomes. But what is the dynamic of the process through which idea is materialized and matter (of the body) gets haunted by the spirit? A structure of iterability is presupposed in this 'hauntology' of the body. A structure that gets displaced as it becomes. It gives place to the 'other' deep within it" (Das 2010, 04).