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The Brahmanical Panopticon: History of Reproduction of Caste and Sanitation Labour in India

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Abstract

This study draws on oral histories from those engaged in caste-based sanitation work in Mumbai for many generations. We conceptualise and argue that Dalits are "trapped" in the basement of a—'Brahmanical Panopticon'—with entrapment mediated through *dharma*, *karma*, and rebirth. This study brings Michel Foucault in critical conversation with Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and makes four key theoretical and methodological contributions to Surveillance, Critical Caste and Migration Studies. First, the study contributes to ongoing debates on historical surveillance; we look at one of the earliest models of biometric surveillance (ways in which power and control is exercised on bodies and spaces) that was imposed on Dalits by the privileged castes. Second, centring caste in our analysis, we demonstrate how Dalits were forced into "dirty" and precarious labour through caste slavery and were geographically othered. Third, we show migration induced through caste-based incentives. Finally, we make a unique methodological contribution combining community research approach with autoethnography, drawing on the lead author's family's past. Community researchers were also involved to provide an insiders' understanding. Overall, this paper presents a Brahmanical Panopticon model which can be seen replicated across multiple areas (education, livelihood, access to basic amenities, etc.,) to keep Dalits severed from opportunities to progress and dignity. This panopticon further exemplifies why there is a contemporary rise of surveillance on Dalit sanitation workers across India.

Keywords

Dalits, Oral histories, Incentivised migration, Surveillance, Brahmanical panopticon

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Introduction

Across South Asia, caste-based labour such as sanitation work was imposed on Dalits[1] (Butt, 2019; Cawood & Mishra, 2025; Chaplin, 2011; Darokar, 2020; Guru, 2011; J. Lee, 2021a; Pais, 2021; Prashad, 2000; Sreenath, 2023; Thorat, 2021), creating what scholars such as Ambedkar (2014a, p. 47) refer to as a "division of labourers." This division of labourers is "the dogma of predestination" (Ambedkar, 2014a, p. 48) and not a matter of ability or skills. The caste system is a fixed or frozen class system within which Dalits have continued to be the outcastes (Ambedkar, 2014a). To date, there is limited research on caste and sanitation work that builds on insiders' knowledge—specifically research led by a person who is from a Dalit community and has worked as a sanitation worker. I[2] am from a Dalit sub-caste, and I am a fourth-generation ex-sanitation worker employed by Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) for over 12 years. This study, using a constructivist grounded approach, demonstrates how Dalits remain trapped in what we conceptualise as the "Brahmanical Panopticon." Brahmanism is an ideology that legitimises and enforces the caste-based division of labour leading to practice of structural birth-based inequality and rigid untouchability and discrimination.

Exploring the past of Dalits who are forced to live under constant surveillance and violent disciplining is critical because it elucidates the contemporary rise of surveillance on Dalit sanitation workers in India (Hafiz, 2023; Inzamam & Qadri, 2022; Khaira, 2020). Thus, this paper takes a historical approach and draws on oral histories to demonstrate how privileged castes imposed one of the earliest biometric surveillance methods on Dalits (discussed in section four). It also highlights how the Brahmanical Panopticon functions, and how caste inequality is reproduced and maintained through surveillance. This study is crucial because caste has not only transcended religious boundaries in South Asia (Butt, 2019; Jeremiah, 2019; J. Lee, 2018, 2021a; Mosse, 2012) but has crossed over regional boundaries as well. Yengde (2025), through his archival and ethnographic work, traces the presence of caste-

[1]The word 'Dalit' was first used by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule in the 19th century. It was popularised by Dalit Panthers in 1970s (Narayan, 2006). It means, "oppressed or broken," so it is contested among scholars. However, constitutional term, "scheduled castes" does not include people who converted from ex-untouchable castes to other religion, like Dalit Christian and Dalit Muslims. I use the word Dalit in this study because most respondents used it to self-identify, including Dalit Muslims. Furthermore, Guru (2017) rightly mentioned that the word "Dalit" is a proper noun, but scholars have started using it as an adjective. Dalit is a proper noun, but I personally feel that it can be used as an adjective only by Dalits because the aim is to not to other, like privileged castes/outsiders usage of "Dalit Scholar" or "Dalit Activist." The word Dalit can only be used as an adjective, to highlight a problem or otherwise, if at least one author is a Dalit.

[2]"I" or "My" is used throughout this paper to refer to the lead author and Principal Investigator of this research. We reflect further on author positionality in the methodology section.

based social order across the world. Dutt (2019) shows how caste affects Dalits in Silicon Valley, USA, and Kanjilal (2024) discusses how untouchability—a practice linked with the caste system—has gone beyond physicality to replication in virtual and digital spaces through evidence from Singapore and India. Furthermore, studies have shown how caste and caste-based discrimination have travelled to the UK (Dhanda & Waughray, 2014; Mosse, 2020). Across the globe more than 270 million people are affected by caste and caste-based discrimination (Mosse, 2018; Waughray, 2009), most being in India. Therefore, we trace the history of reproduction of the caste system through oral histories of Dalits living in one of the largest cities in India—Mumbai—to demonstrate how they are trapped in the basement of the Brahmanical Panopticon.

This paper makes four key theoretical and methodological contributions to existing literature on surveillance, critical caste and migration studies. First, it brings Foucault into conversation with Ambedkar to explain the historical reproduction of caste through surveillance—we conceptualise this as the Brahmanical Panopticon. We claim that, throughout history, systemic surveillance has trapped Dalits in their caste location and reproduced and maintained the caste-based social structure. Therefore, combining Foucault's theorisation of the panopticon with Ambedkar's understanding of the caste system provides a new conceptual framework that explains the reproduction and continuity of harmful practices within the caste system through surveillance. Surveillance has been studied from a racial, gender, religious, and class perspective (Anand, 2022; Browne, 2015; Dubrofsky & Magnet, 2015; Gill, 2024; M. Lee & Yazici, 2023; Lyon, 2008; Marx, 2016; Monahan, 2022; Stevens et al., 2023), but it has not been explored enough through a critical caste lens. This study addresses that gap by highlighting the critical intersection and transition of societal, human, digital factors that can exacerbate surveillance and its deployment.

Second, drawing upon nuanced literature from Dalit-Bahujan[3] scholarship on caste, this study contributes to the emergent field of Critical Caste Studies (CCS). Ayyathuria (2021, para. 3) defines CCS as, "an interdisciplinary field in which caste is seen as an entrenched social crisis. From its inception, caste has become a primary contradiction, i.e., *othering* fellow women, men and children." Our contribution to CCS is identifying and theorising the presence of caste in modern day and highlights how it adapts itself to newer systems and changing social relationships despite law, affirmative action and better understanding of its damages. Furthermore, caste has largely been studied from a class or race perspective, which is understandable as there are similarities in their systemic oppression (Wilkerson, 2020; Yengde, 2022), but they are not the same. Caste system in India can be traced back to over 2000 years ago, with the practice of untouchability being its primary *modus operandi* (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012); The caste structure stands on rigid and punishable conformity of people within

[3]Ilaiah (2000) uses this term, "Dalit-Bahujan," which includes Dalits, Tribals and Other Backwards Castes (OBCs)

one single religious group (Sanatan Dharma/Hindus); the discrimination met out is meticulously outlined in religious texts in vivid details. Even today, caste in India is reproduced through affect, be it through reinforcing of inferiority amongst Dalits via clothing or even diminishing dignity through otherization in public spaces; it is systemic, consistent and violent in its delivery (Bhoi, 2025, 2026; Bhoi & Gorringe, 2023). Therefore, by centring caste in all its forms and specifically using insiders' knowledge, we present the unique ways in which Dalits continue to be systemically trapped in sanitation work despite India's socio-political and economical advancements.

Third, some studies have explored reasons that triggered Dalit migration to the urban—such as natural calamities, famine, industrialisation (Kidambi, 2007; Pankaj, 2023; Shaikh, 2021; D. Solanki, 2016)—while others show how Dalits were specifically "obtained by recruitment in the mofusil" (mofussil in this case refers to rural Bombay Presidency) (Masselos, 1982, p. 109) to build the urban sanitation system by replicating the existing caste-based occupation in the rural (Cawood & Mishra, 2025; Mirza, 2018; D. Solanki, 2016). Interestingly, this migration of large numbers of Dalits to the urban only to systematically end up in sanitation labour has not been explained in its entirety. Our third contribution is to chart how Dalit migration to Mumbai city from the rural was encouraged through a local and strategic incentive system which has been undertheorized till now. The Brahmanical Panopticon can migrate with people across geographical location through caste and kinship network.

Fourth, we combine Community Research Approach (CRA) with autoethnography to build a framework grounded in detailed empirical fieldwork from insiders' understanding. We hired community researchers (CRs) from the communities involved in this study and they identified respondents for oral histories in Mumbai. This is critical because most studies on caste in Mumbai and across South Asia have been conducted by privileged castes or outsiders—without any participation of the communities at the heart of the research. By combining CRA with autoethnography, our study offers a novel approach rooted in insiders' understanding. Moreover, tracing oral histories from Mumbai is crucial because the city's populace—except the tribes in Aarey forest and the Kolis (a fishing community)—migrated or were brought to the present-day city (Kidambi, 2007; Pankaj, 2023; Shaikh, 2021; D. Solanki, 2016), which was built by connecting seven islands during British colonial rule (Chopra, 2011; Riding, 2018). This paper is part of a larger study that explores contemporary surveillance and the resistance against it.

We have divided this paper into seven sections: Following this introduction, the second section elaborates on the Brahmanical Panopticon. The third section outlines the methodology and approach chosen. Next, we highlight how Dalits were enslaved and othered historically. Subsequently, we explore segregated residences and the system of caste slavery based on their caste positioning in the village. The penultimate section explores how the Brahmanical Panopticon was replicated in the urban setting

by luring Dalits through dubious social and financial incentives. We then conclude with a reflection on avenues for further research into the contemporary impacts of the Brahmanical Panopticon.

Conceptualisation of Brahmanical Panopticon

Foucault (1991, p. 204) notes that, "the panopticon is a privileged place for experiments on men, and for analysing with complete certainty the transformations that may be obtained from them." Foucault's (1991, p. 205) panopticon functions as "a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization," and it is "polyvalent in its applications." Foucault's application of panopticon was limited to physical institutes, like a prison, school or hospital. Before going into this reformulation through a critical caste lens, it is important to understand the caste system and how it is used to other Dalits.

The caste system, also known as the *varna* system, is a rigid structure of social hierarchies. It consists of five major hierarchical categories: brahmins,[4] kshatriyas, vaishyas, Shudras, and Ati-shudras (Ambedkar, 2014a); brahmins are on the top—self-proclaimed gods on earth—the "knowledge producers"; then, kshatriyas as "rulers and warriors"; finally, vaishyas were traders and merchants. These three castes are referred to as *dwijas* or twice born, once during physical birth and another time through a religious ceremony (Müller, 1967). Many scholars have referred to the twice-born as "upper" or "higher" castes indicating a natural superiority. However, we use the term "privileged castes," and it is a more accurate description. Fourth, Shudras, now known as Other Backward Castes (OBCs), were peasants and workers such as potters, goldsmiths, farmers, shepherds, etc. (Ilaiah Shepherd & Karuppusamy, 2021). Finally, Ati-shudras or Ex-untouchables, now known as Schedule Castes or Dalits, were the outcastes. They were forced into cleaning all types of waste (Chaplin, 2011; Guru & Sarukkai, 2012; Pais, 2021; Walters, 2019).

The caste system is further divided into sub-castes or *jatis* in all five categories. Each Dalit sub-caste was ascribed one or two specific types of labour religiously linked with some form of impurity, including cleaning human excreta, picking-up dead animals, producing leather and leather goods. Scholars, like Omvedt (1994) and Darokar (2018, 2020) have used terms like caste-based occupation to explain this predetermined division of labourers. Mirza (2018) has preferred the term "hereditary occupation." We will use caste-based occupation or caste labour interchangeably because the word "hereditary" has a neutral connotation.

[4]Following Gajendra Ayyathurai (2011, p. 20), who used lower-case "b" for brahmins "to problematize the legitimacy that this category has gained among English speaking writers, academics, and the public (of brahmin caste origin mostly) as well as the dictionary meanings that occlude the domineering power behind it." We use lower cases while mentioning all privileged castes (brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya). We further attempt to reverse this domineering power by using upper-case "D" for Dalits and lower cases for privileged castes.

In the Indian context, a different panoptic model can be illustrated through Ambedkar's metaphorization, "Hindu society is just like a tower which has several stories without a ladder or an entrance," (Ambedkar, 1920, para. 5). For Ambedkar, the caste system is like a four-storey building, where each varna occupies one floor on the basis of birth or caste order, without any possibility or access to upward movement or inter-mingling. We expand Ambedkar's imagination of the caste system by combining it with Foucault's theorisation of the panopticon to show that the Dalits were and are still trapped in the basement of this four-storey building. The Brahmanical Panopticon functions through rigid religious principles of *dharma*, *karma*, and rebirth to consistently reproduce the caste-based social order. As indicated in Figure 1.



Fig. 1: Brahmanical Panopticon

Source: Created by Preeti Kuber in Collaboration with Authors

The Brahmanical Panopticon is a half luxury apartment—top three floors, for privileged castes, and the other half, including the basement, for Dalit-Bahujan—with hierarchical prison cells as per their sub-castes. The privileged castes on the top three floors comprise around 10-15 per cent of the total population living in the luxury building. The first guards of this panopticon are 33 million Hindu gods, then the brahmins, followed by other three caste groups. The floor, that is, the base, of the third

and fourth storeys are made up of see-through glass, so privileged castes can share amongst them their knowledge generated through constant surveillance of those below to maintain their hegemony over this building.

The hierarchical prison starts from the first—referred to as the ground floor throughout the paper, wherein OBCs (50-60 per cent of the population) reside. The floors of the second and ground storey are one-sided see-through glass, allowing visibility only from the top. Similarly, each sub-caste is in a cell—one above another—with one-sided see-through glass. There is a strict division of castes and sub-castes on the four floors based on caste labour and endogamy (Ambedkar, 2014b). Dalits are separated from the top four by one additional aspect—untouchability—that connects to politics of purity and pollution (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012). We show how each sub-caste within Dalits are confined to hierarchical cells in the basement with one-sided see-through glass, here the visibility also exists only from the top. This is so that each sub-caste and individual above and below truly feel that their position is predestined by God; and that if they fulfil their caste labour in this life, then in the next, they will be born into a privileged caste, as espoused in the principles of *karma* and rebirth.

The Brahmanical Panopticon is dictated by *dharma*, *karma*, and rebirth—foundational principles of Hinduism. Ilaiah Shepherd (2000, p. 86) writes:

> It was in defence of brahminical ideology that he [Krishna] taught,[5] as is evident in the Gita,[6] the theory of violence, varnadharma and karma. This is the reason why Krishna was so acceptable to brahminical forces. After the defeat of the majority in the struggle for land the Gita was used to create a much stronger consent system to ensure that no serious revolts emerged from the Dalitbahujan social base.

Ilaiah Shepherd's explanation of *varnadharma* (law or duty attached to one's caste) and *karma* (deeds from current or past life/s) is central in the Brahmanical Panopticon. Ambedkar has extensively written on *dharma*, *karma*, and rebirth to explain how untouchables were subdued and controlled under Brahmanism. "If a man is born in a poor family it is because of his past bad karma. If a man is born in a rich family it is because of his past good karma… Everything is predetermined for him by his past karma," wrote Ambedkar (2014c, p. 339). In this way, being born as Dalit is justified as a punishment resulting from *karma* from the past life. So, *dharma* works as Foucault's sovereign power, used to punish, and *karma* as a disciplining tactic with conformity being rewarded in the next life—an illusion of upward social movement.

Though Sonavane et al.'s (2023, under building a digital caste panopticon) "digital caste panopticon" framework creates "encoding of casteist carceral spatiality",

[5]One of the Hindu gods

[6]One of the Hindu religious texts

it does not consider core Hindu principles that the Brahmanical Panopticon does. Furthermore, it builds on Cawood et al.'s (2025) concept of "entrapment", experience of being trapped with escape being difficult. In the Brahmanical Panopticon, Dalits are systematically entrapped in the basement through Brahmanical Surveillance[7] and Brahmanical Governmentality. Brahmanical Surveillance connects to societal, human and digital surveillance, where top four castes and their sub-castes keep watch on Dalits to prevent escape. It works toward reproducing caste and caste-based labour in a systematic manner to maintain the structural and fixed caste inequality, with use of *dharma*, direct violence, against those who resist these inequalities. Brahmanical Governmentality is Dalits self-disciplining via fear created through Brahmanical Surveillance because the cost of trying to break the panopticon is severe and permanent. This fear of retaliation maintains Brahmanical Governmentality. Chandrashekhar (2023) combines Ambedkar's concept of Brahmanism with Foucault's Governmentality to demonstrate how it is perpetuated by the State. We extend their theorisation to claim that Brahmanical Governmentality is not just created and maintained by the State but also society. Thus, Dalits are confined in the basement of the Brahmanical Panopticon not only conceptually, but with real and lived implications through Brahmanical Surveillance and Brahmanical Governmentality. In the later sections, we show how Brahmanical Surveillance and Brahmanical Governmentality function in the village model, and how it was brought in the urban setting. Before elaborating on this, we first outline the methodology.

Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative research conducted from June 2024 to January 2025 in Mumbai, India. This included recording of nine oral histories of four major Dalit sub-castes: 1) Rukhi, derogatorily called Bhangi;[8] 2) Rohit, Ravidasiya, or Chamar; 3) Mahar, now converted to Navayana Buddhism (NB); 4) Meghwal, Vankar, derogatorily referred as, Dedh; that historically engage in sanitation work, specifically in the Solid Waste Management (SWM) department in Mumbai—previously known as Bombay (Pradhan, 1938; Masselos, 1982; Mirza, 2018). Through oral histories, we trace the past of these communities from before and after their migration to the city and provide a deeper understanding of caste and surveillance. Oral histories are important because many sub-castes within Dalits do not have any written history associated to their existence, and the archives only show partial truth. So, centring these voices in the

[7]Abhinaya Ramesh used the term 'Brahmanical Surveillance', cited by Rege (2013). She writes, "Ramesh pointed to the limits of border crossing through a detailing of structures and process of Brahmanical Surveillance" (Rege, 2013, p. 21). However, we could not find the details regarding Brahmanical Surveillance is and how it functions, but we want to give her credit for her work.

[8]We use the derogatory name only because respondents used it to highlight discriminatory practice.

paper along with autoethnography brings out insiders' knowledge, which has been overlooked till now.

The background of the researcher/s plays a key role in data collection and generation, and wider knowledge production, especially in an ethnographic study. Scholars have talked about reflexivity in research, but positionality—especially in the South Asian context—is not highlighted enough. Scholars in/from the Northwest region also largely fail to problematise the dominance of privileged caste/outsider researchers who "study" marginalised communities in South Asia. Privileged castes, regardless of their religion, are still the direct oppressors of Dalits in South Asia. Therefore, when working with marginalised communities, positionality of the researcher/s must be mentioned upfront, with details of their caste and sub-caste. This gives the readers a clear view of who is conducting the study and on whom, and how the researcher/s have navigated their positionality—especially if they are privileged caste/outsiders. Most importantly, privileged castes and outsiders studying marginalised communities, like Dalits and Tribals, without meaningful collaboration is a form of epistemic violence. We call for providing researchers with lived experiences from marginalised background opportunities to theorise from their unique positionalities, which this study does.

I belong to a Dalit sub-caste called Meghwal-Vankar. I am a cisgender man. My ancestors were forced to migrate from Gujarat[9] to Mumbai during *Chappaniyo Dukal* (famine of 1899-1900 in western India). The second and third authors do not come from the communities under study and are privileged by race and their position within UK's higher education. We wish to openly acknowledge and reflect critically on the historical harms and inequalities arising from these positions and hope that centring voices via oral histories and a Community Research Approach (CRA)—elaborated below—can start to address some of these central ethical dilemmas in regard to how lived experience is "captured" and wider knowledge production and circulation.

We used CRA approach to provide a holistic view by including all sub-caste narratives via CRs.[10] CRA "ultimately involves collaboration between professional social researchers, funding agencies and the group or organisation being researched" (Goodson & Phillimore, 2012, p. 4), and "a fundamental requirement is that community researchers belong to, or at least share common ground with the intended participants" (Goodson & Phillimore, 2012, p. 4).

To start, we selected three BMC staff quarters in Mumbai. CRs were hired from these staff quarters. They are all from Dalit sub-castes,[11] and our team was mixed

[9]From Saurashtra region.

[10]All CRs ancestors, grandfather or someone from their family, came to Mumbai pre- or post-independence and ended up in sanitation labour

[11]One female CR from NB background had left in the starting phase, and due to time constraints, I was unable to get someone else. To cover that, I did one extra interview with a scholar from

gender. We wanted to cover diverse narratives and experiences through oral histories. CRs were given salaries for participating in the evidence-gathering for this research. Barring one respondent—Vishwas (see Table 1)—the family members or extended family members of all respondents and CRs still work in BMC. Though this paper largely uses oral histories, the wider study includes focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews, and participatory observations to understand the past and present of surveillance along with resistance.

Table 1: Respondent Details

No.	Respondent details	Names (Pseudonym)	Background Information of Respondents
1	Male (Buddhist)	Siddharth	Started as a sanitation worker, now supervisor. Family came to Mumbai pre-independence (1947) from rural Maharashtra.
2	Female (Buddhist)	Sandhya	Started as a sanitation worker, and now she is Junior Oversees officer. Family came to Mumbai pre-independence (1947) from rural Maharashtra.
3	Male (Sub-caste Rukhi)	Ramesh	A sanitation worker in the BMC. His grandfather came to Mumbai pre-independence (1947) from rural Gujarat.
4	Rukhi Female (Sub-caste Rukhi)	Savitaben	Retired sanitation worker. Her husband's family came to Bombay approximately in 1920's from rural Gujarat.
5	Male (Sub-caste Vankar)	Ravi	Grandfather joined BMC during Chappaniyo Dukal (famine of 1899-1900 in western India), who came from rural Gujarat.
6	Male (Sub-caste Vankar)	Prakash	Retired BMC officer. His family came to Mumbai pre-independence (1947) from rural Gujarat.
7	Female (Sub-caste Rohidas)	Jiviben	Retired sanitation worker. She joined BMC in late 1950's as a sanitation worker. Family came to Mumbai during Chappaniyo Dukal (famine of 1899-1900 in western India) from rural Gujarat.
8	Male (Sub-caste Rohidas)	Dhanji	Retired sanitation worker. He joined BMC after 1947. Family came pre-independence in Mumbai from rural Gujarat.
9	Male (Scholar, Buddhist)	Vishwash	Researcher studying caste in urban (Mumbai).

Source: Authors Own

CRs used a snowball sampling method to find respondents, and later I deployed purposive sampling to conduct oral histories. We consciously selected one male and one female respondent for oral histories from Rukhi, NB, Rohidas communities and

NB background.

two males from Vankar community. This is because I also use the oral history of my family through my grandmother's narratives, recalling her stories from my memory. She was the head of my family, thus, her narratives are central to the autoethnography.

A total of nine oral histories, six male and three female respondents, age range 30-95 years, were conducted. Two from each community and one of a scholar.

All respondents' names are changed to pseudonyms to protect their identity. This project received ethical approval from the university and, permission from BMC officials was taken.

Enslaving, Controlling, and Surveilling: Bodies, Souls, and Shadows

"Aryans enslaved the indigenous community of this land… They created the caste system and destroyed the indigenous community and their culture," said Ravi whose family also migrated to Mumbai more than a century ago. Phule (2002), in his book *Slavery*, wrote about the Aryan invasion. According to this, privileged castes came from the West and enslaved Dalits and Tribals, who were the indigenous people of South Asia. This was later theorised by Thapar (1996), who called it Aryan Invasion Theory providing archaeological evidences. This theory was contested among scholars, but recent studies of genetics show that Aryans migrated from the West to South Asia around 4000 years ago and strict endogamy started approximately 2000 years ago (Joseph, 2017; Narasimhan et al., 2018; Reich, 2018). Studies of genetics also highlights that privileged castes have higher steppe genes while Dalits and tribals have low (Debortoli et al., 2020), indicating a clear relation between privileged castes and Aryans. Siddharth said, "Privileged castes after establishing Shunga dynasty [185 to 78 BCE] made four restrictions on the indigenous people: [1] *roti bandi* [restriction on food], [2] *bheti bandi* [restriction on meeting them] and [3] *beti bandi* [restricted on marriage; endogamy], and [4] *looti bandi* [restriction on water]." Ambedkar (2014e) has extensively discussed the Shunga dynasty and how it led to a strict caste-based social order. Ambedkar disagreed with Aryan invasion; rather for him, the birth of the caste system was from the struggle between Buddhism and Brahmanism.

In both the Aryan invasion or cultural colonisation, Dalits were enslaved with laws and restrictions by the *Manu Smriti*—which is a Hindu law or rule book—put in place by privileged castes around 2000 years ago. As shown above, genetic studies also found that strict endogamy began around 2000 years ago. This was the first colonisation, physical or cultural, that created the structure of the Brahmanical Panopticon, where Dalits were outcasted and othered. In the racial context, Fanon (2008, p. 90) defines othering as "[f]or not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man." In the Brahmanical Panopticon, Dalits must not

only be Dalits but in relation to everyone above them to do their menial jobs as slaves of the caste system. For implementation of this, it required perpetual and systemic surveillance and disciplining. Siddharth notes:

> We had a broom tied to our back, so when we walk our footprints would be wiped out. There were no concrete roads at that time, and we were not allowed to wear footwears… From the footprints, privileged castes living inside the village would know, was it a monkey, a lion, or a Dalit that had entered the village…

Here, Siddharth explains one recurring narrative that all respondents talked about. For example, Vishwash said, "There was broom on the back and pot on the neck, they were the clear identifiers of Mahars and Mangs."[12] Another respondent, Jiviben explained the used of the pot. She said, "Pot on the neck because we cannot spit on the ground as it would pollute the entire area. So, we were not allowed to spit anywhere but, in the pot, tied to our necks."

Historically, Dalits have always lived outside of the village (Ambedkar, 2014d, 2014f; Ramaiah, 2017), which we will discuss in the next section. Dalits were not allowed to enter villages without a broom and a pot (Ambedkar, 2014d). With the broom tied low on the back, the ground would be marked as one walked to show their trajectory to the rest of the privileged castes so they would know where Dalits had crossed. Jiviben further added before the broom, they used to "tie branches of tree around the waist." In Foucault's (1991) understanding of the panopticon model, an individual, in the cell would feel that he is always being watched. For Dalits, the village itself becomes a panopticon, where they, not just feel that they are being watched in real-time, but they also fear that they could be tracked through the marks from the broom. The broom on the back worked like a Global Positioning System (GPS) tracker attached to Dalit bodies. The pot was to humiliate and punish them, symbol of untouchability. It made visible and concretised the idea of purity and pollution.

Ravi, whose ancestors were from Gujarat, said, "We also had a 'Shingi' tied to our neck, it is a whistle… This whistle was to notify the privileged caste that we are coming." Ambedkar (2014d, p. 720) notes, "In Gujarat the Untouchables were compelled to wear a horn as their distinguishing mark". The horn was not just a distinctive identifier on Dalit bodies but also worked as a notifier.

Browne (2015) discusses racial surveillance through Lantern Law in New York City in the eighteenth century, where Black, mixed-race, and Indigenous people had to carry lanterns with them after sunset. She referred to this practice as one of the first biometric model of surveillance. The broom, pot, horn on Dalit bodies pre-date the Lantern Law and has been understudied to date. These tools were the earliest biometric tools that were attached to Dalits to identify and track them.

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[12]Mang is another sub-caste within Dalits from Maharashtra, India.

This practice was eradicated with the Indian Slavery Act (ISA) (Indian Slavery Act, 1843, 1843). Post that, privileged castes used other bodily identifiers to locate and track Dalits. One of them was the use of threads and bangles. Siddharth said that "black threads on the arms, waist, and ankles were there to identify us. This is not just about Mahars, but most Dalits like those from Gujarat, had a different kind of bangle from which they were identified." Savitaben, shared about such bangles and also differences in the attire of men and women used for surveilling them. She said, "There were bangles on the arms of the women from my community [Rukhi]. There were also, 'Ughdi,' metal bangles on the ankles. For men, the head must be covered with white cloth all the time." The pot and broom were inhuman universal markers—for both men and women—were replaced by more subtle and gendered identifiers by privileged castes. These threads, bangles, and coverings of the head with white cloth though enforced socially in the past became systemic biometric tools during the British colonial period and were recorded as such. Some of these practices continue to exist, for example, in the documentary *India Untouched* (Stalin, 2007), Dalits in some villages of southern India are still not allowed to wear footwear in specific sections of the village where privileged castes reside. This demonstrates how the Brahmanical Panopticon is adaptive, and it constantly works toward finding new ways to monitoring Dalits, to keep them in their places.

Ambedkar highlights the importance of punishment in reinforcing the caste system, noting that "for only by punishing the outcast[es] can the caste system be maintained," (Ambedkar, 2014e, p. 304). Punishment links with *dharma* and is crucial for maintaining the Brahmanical Panopticon. Prakash shared an incident of his uncle—who was still living in a village in Gujarat—from the 1980s. Prakash said,

> A son of a Darbar [kshatriya caste], hardly 7-8 years old, was walking half-naked on the road… My uncle came out of his house, which was on the road that went to the village. Darbars lived separately from us. They lived inside the village, but the road was one to go in and out. They came near our locality to shit. This child saw my uncle coming out of his house and that his head was not covered. The child picked a stone and hit my uncle. My uncle got hurt badly on his head… This child then went home to complain to his father, that this Dedh disrespected him… My uncle was in his late seventies.

Even a half-naked child knows well that a Dalit must cover his head in front of him. This is how the concept of *dharma* works; it is the use of violence to protect one's caste superiority.

In the Brahmanical Panopticon, not just Dalit bodies were monitored and controlled, but also their reflection falling on the ground was seen as impure and polluting. So, privileged castes found a way to prevent shadows of Dalits falling on them through

time restrictions on entry and exit in the village (Ambedkar, 2014d). Siddharth said, "In the past, we were not allowed to enter the villages in the afternoon because our shadows would be long and were considered polluting." Another respondent, Ravi said, "Our entering in the village had specific timings and, in some villages, there were separate roads."

In the Foucauldian (1991) analysis of the body and soul—monitoring of the physical body and to modifying its behaviour—the aim is to produce a certain kind of human being. However, in this Panopticon, the Brahmanical Surveillance techniques were deployed on natural and uncontrollable things such as shadows which cannot be modified. The end goal is not to modify the behaviour of Dalits in this life but to make them suffer for any reason that the privileged castes can make up to justify their violence. The punishment is not to change or improve their behaviour; rather, being born as a Dalit itself is a punishment based on the deeds or *karma* from a past life. So, the life of a Dalit is ordained to be full of suffering without any escape—based on the cyclical principles of *karma* and rebirth. The hope and methods sought to escape this loop result in establishment of self-disciplining behaviours, which result in obedience towards Brahmanical Governmentality. Each Dalit sub-caste was systematically divided, separated and monitored in the basement not only in terms of bodily markers and through their shadows, but they were also separated and divided residentially and occupationally.

Art of Distribution of Caste and Sub-castes: Divided Residences and Labour

Foucault's (1991) art of distribution is where each individual is confined in a cell, essential for disciplining by keeping them separate. In the Brahmanical Panopticon, these cells or distribution is done through sub-castes within Dalits. To implement this, first, Dalits should be separated at a certain fixed geographic location, then divided further into different cells. Ravi said, "We were forced to live outside of the village. We were called '*Simaliyas*,' *sima* means boundary or limit of the village." Ravi is explaining how residences of Dalits were othered to make them outcastes. Geographically, Dalits have historically been kept outside of the Indian village. Even at present, in my grandfather and grandmother's ancestral village in Gujarat, Dalits still reside outside of the village. This has been studied by scholars like Ambedkar (2014d, 2014f), Thorat (2009), and Ramaiah (2017). Ravi added a nuanced perspective, "Dalits in the villages [in Gujarat] also have had their houses on the side from where sun rises… The wind flows from west to east." Dalits were not just forced to live outside but were assigned a specific geographic location to reside. Furthermore, each sub-caste of Dalits was systematically divided to create separation, like the cells in the basement of the Brahmanical Panopticon.

Ramesh said, "In Mehsana [Gujarat], Vankar and Rukhi live outside of the village but separately." My grandmother used to narrate how in her village Vankar, Rohidas, and Rukhi lived separately. Another respondent, Sandhya explained how, "Mahar and Mang used to not live in the same part" outside of her village. Here, each sub-caste was provided a cell by the privileged castes to live in isolation with each other. This shows how the caste cells were finely engineered—confining each sub-caste in space and time—outside of the village.

Furthermore, each sub-caste was also provided a particular caste-labour. For example, Savitaben said, "When a dog dies, they [villagers] say, 'call a Bhangi, they will take it out.' If a cow or bull dies, they will call Dedh." One of the occupations of Vankars and Mahars was to remove the dead domesticated animals, like cows, bulls, and goats, from the village (Parmar 1987). However, "wherever they [Rukhi community] were not there in any village, their work was imposed on us [Vankars]," said Ravi. Dhanji provides insights linked with caste-labour and untouchability. He said, "We [Rohidas] used to make and stitch footwear [for privileged castes] … They would sprinkle water on the [new] footwears as it has got impure [by our touch], and then only wear it." Thus, Dalits were forced into a strict residential boundary with dualistic occupational structure dictated and controlled by *dharma*, *karma* and rebirth with the practice of untouchability attached to all Dalit bodies. Creating a systematic way of exploiting and controlling Dalits through the system of caste slavery.

> An Untouchable must not own and cultivate land and lead an independent life. For his livelihood he must depend upon stale remnants of food left over by the Hindu households and upon meat of cattle that die in the village. These remnants of food he must collect from door to door. (Ambedkar, 2014f, p. 134)

The above quote explains the systemic oppression of Dalits without formal payment or ownership. Vishwash talked about *Maharki*, where leftover food was given as part of the payment. In all four sub-castes, giving leftover food as payment was common. Another respondent, Ramesh talked about *Waalu.*[13] "Suppose I am working in a *Wadi* [a piece of land] … Then the privileged caste owner will say, 'At night, take food after people finish eating.' After that, they give us the leftover food. This is Waalu." Vankars and Rohidas called this *Veth.*[14] "The meaning of Veth, is to not give money, if one feels he should give some bread… If anyone tried to refuse, they would beat them to death. The whole family would face a social boycott," said Ravi. This highlights a system of caste slavery with punishment of death or social boycott for a simple refusal. One does the hard labour and then, must beg for leftover food in their own utensils as payment. Three different names for the system of caste slavery. This shows how Dalits

[13] *Waalu* also means as dinner as mostly they get leftover food in the evening.

[14] *Veth* translates as suffer, and *Vethvanu* as suffering.

only had right to exist to perform their caste duty or slavery, as this life itself becomes punishment, with hope of betterment only in the next life through *karma* and rebirth. Singh (2014) shows how this practice is still ongoing across India, where manual scavengers, mostly Dalits, are given tiny payment with leftover food. Lakra (2025) highlights that the present precarious situation of Dalits is linked with their past, where they were denied access to basic resources.

If Dalits tried to break out of the Brahmanical Panopticon, they would also be punished via violence by anyone above them, as defending their *dharma*. Vishwash explains, using contemporary example of atrocities against Dalits,

> There is a saying in Marathi, "*Payari ne waga*." *Payari* means *dehliz* [threshold], means caste here. One must behave as per their caste lines. If you cross the line or ask questions, you will be punished. This is the main reason, if we look at the Khairlanji Massacre. Because that family had land, their children were studying, and they were not listening to the privilege castes [and OBCs] in the village because they were not dependent on them anymore… They were not listening to the village, which is why they were punished.

In the Khairlanji Massacre, 2006, four members of a Dalit family were killed by a mob of OBCs (Khandizod, 2024). Historically, the power of violence in the Brahmanical Panopticon always flowed vertically, meaning the residents of the same cell cannot use direct violence on people in their cell or above. Therefore, Dalits were divided and trapped in their hierarchical cells with systematic surveillance and governmentality deployed on them through principles of *dharma*, *karma* and rebirth with the practice of caste slavery, so they could never be free. The next section shows how privileged caste along with British created a replica of the Brahmanical Panopticon in the urban setting.

A Collaborative Effort of Colonisers: Creation of an Urban Model of the Brahmanical Panopticon

Industrialisation in India came alongside urbanisation (Davis, 1951; Chandavarkar, 1994), and it required sanitation labourers. In the nineteenth century, British administration created a new post called Mukadam[15] to recruit and discipline Dalit sanitation workers in the city. Prashad (2000) discusses the same post in Delhi, where Mukadams were called Jamadars, ex-army men, who were hired to discipline sanitation workers. This post of Mukadam or Jamadar marked the formal creation of human surveillance systems to oversee and monitor sanitation workers in the city.

In 1865, Bombay, "the labour for urban sanitation was recruited on the basis of existing caste structures, where cleaning was a traditionally hereditary occupation

[15]The term Mukadam comes from village, where it meant a village headman.

performed by castes such as Dheds, Mahars, Mangs, and Bhangis," (Mirza, 2018, p. 81). In 1866, Mahars "were obtained by recruitment in the mofussil," writes Masselos (1982, p. 109). Masselos's archival work is valuable, but does not provide answers to how and who brought Dalits into sanitation labour in the city—something we explore further here. Masselos also does not see caste as a central form of entrapment, which we see as fundamental.

From 1860s to 1880s, Bombay's sanitation was handled via the contractual/ outsourcing system and it was in crisis (Masselos, 1982). In 1888, the Municipal Corporation Act was passed, where the corporation took complete control (Masselos, 1982). After that, wages, especially, of sweepers' that were already low, were further reduced. So, 1899 marked the first major strikes by BMC sweepers', dominated by Mahar sub-castes (Masselos, 1982). The Municipal Servants Bill, in 1890, was passed to curb strikes, with legal action used to threaten strikers (Masselos, 1982). Also, sweepers from Kathiawad or Saurashtra region of Gujarat were "slowly brought into the force from the 1890s to counterbalance the Mahars," (Masselos, 1982, p. 129). My ancestors and sub-caste were brought from the Kathiawad region and are referred as Kathiawadis in Mumbai, even today. In other words, Mahars were united fighting till 1889, and so other Dalit sub-castes, like mine, were "brought" from Gujarat to break the unity, utilising and reinforcing the art of division—central to the functioning of the Brahmanical Panopticon.

During that period, most of the contractors, Mukadam, and other higher officers were from privileged castes. "In the past, BMC officers and Mukadams were from privileged castes," said Ravi. These officers systematically recruited only Dalits for sanitation work. "They [Mukadams] gave some money to workers to bring their friends and family [caste members] to join this work," said Ravi. Other respondents, Jiviben, Savitaben, and Ramesh also talked about the incentive system. Like, Ramesh said, "Mukadams gave money, if we brought others [from same caste] to work." Privileged caste Mukadams created an incentive system to bring and trap Dalits into this caste-based occupation. This system worked towards bringing those who were uneducated and unemployed from untouchable castes into sanitation work. This was the first incentive model that was used to reproduce caste and caste labour in the urban setting.

In the past, another way of alluring Dalits into sanitation was to give them housing attached with their caste-based occupation. Siddharth talking of the past said, "our people also joined this work because of the house." My grandmother's elder brother joined BMC as a sweeper. Her brother had no intention of joining BMC but one of his friends took him by saying, "Mukadam was saying that, they will also give us house with the job." Dalits were thus lured into sanitation work with incentives and BMC housing by privileged caste officers. This housing was and is intrinsically linked with the job, like in the village (D. Solanki, 2016). For instance, if the family wish to live in the residence, then one person has to become a sanitation worker. Even today, many families are trapped in sanitation labour because of this.

From 1889 to 1922, a new category clubbed under an umbrella of *Safai Karmacharis* (sanitation workers) emerged, which exists today. Jiviben said, "We had identity cards on our necks by which they [people in the city] would identify us all as zaaduwala [people of broom]. They gave us BMC uniform as well." The broom and pot, and then threads, bangles were replaced by the identity card and uniform in the city. This new technique of Brahmanical Surveillance reinforced the unified identity for both genders, like broom and pot. Here, Dalits and sanitation labour became synonymous in the city.

Caste slavery was also reinvented, where Dalits sanitation workers were provided tiny amounts as salaries in the city (Masselos, 1982; Pradhan, 1938), which meant they had to rely on leftover food. Ramesh said, "Here, also, we were given leftover food as part of our work." Similarly, in terms of untouchability, "In this, Mumbai! For our caste people the teacups were separate, and this was not just in the Hindu hotels [Hotels means restaurants] but even in Irani hotels and Muslim owned hotels," said Ravi. Savita noted that, "There were separate cups outside of the hotel in which we were served in them from a distance." Like the caste-based labour and caste slavery, untouchability also found its way into the city. Siddharth concluded by saying that, "Exploitation and forced labour for generations has conditioned Dalits to think that sanitation work is their [only] occupation," linking it to contemporary realities of Dalit sanitation workers—a form of Brahmanical Governmentality. Overall, privileged castes systematically worked with the British to create an urban model of the Brahmanical Panopticon to maintain their hegemony.

Conclusion

At present, India is utilising the world's largest biometric surveillance system, that is, Aadhar (Solanki, 2019; Masiero & Shakthi, 2020). The Indian government, under Swachh Bharat (clean India) Mission, is deploying biometric surveillance by using smartwatches and face recognition system to track Dalit sanitation workers (Hafiz, 2023; Inzamam & Qadri, 2022; Khaira, 2020) which are also linked to Aadhar. Furthermore, a recent report by National Campaign Committee for Eradication of Bonded Labour across 19 states found that every 2 out of 3 bonded labourers are Dalits (Handa, 2025). The report specifically mentioned that this is not just an economic but rather a structural issue linked with the historical oppression of Dalits (*The Hindu*, 2025). Hence, exploring the past helps us understand the present realities of Dalits in India and across South Asia. This hierarchical structure of caste is being reproduced across the globe through endogamy and kinship networks (Dutt, 2019; Roohi, 2017; Yengde, 2025), making caste a global problem, and the implications of this study significant beyond India alone.

Dalits are one of the earliest communities on whom biometric surveillance was deployed. They were not just othered physically, outside of the village, but were also

separated psychologically; making them believe that their caste location is the result of their deeds from a past life, through *dharma*, *karma* and rebirth. Each sub-caste was given a cell and a specific caste-based labour to maintain the hierarchy, where the village itself became a panopticon for them. *Dharma* worked to punish them with physical violence and assault, where being a Dalit itself became a punishment—a result of deeds from one's past life. Here, Dalits were treated worse than animals through caste slavery; they were forced to survive on leftover food as payment, forcing them to become and remain socially and economically marginalised. This system migrated to the city, where privileged caste Mukadams and higher officers worked to systematically maintain the hierarchy by reproducing the old social order in new territories, such as Mumbai. In Mumbai, Dalits became synonymous with sanitation labour.

The Brahmanical Panopticon model—bringing Foucault into conversation with Ambedkar—provides a new way of understanding the reproduction of the caste-based social order through surveillance and governmentality. Brahmanical Surveillance and Brahmanical Governmentality provide a more nuanced lens to understand how social hierarchies are replicated and maintained. This was possible by centring caste in understanding the past of Dalits engaged in sanitation work. Methodologically, it combines CRA with autoethnography to generate a multifaceted insiders' narratives. It calls for ending the epistemic violence against marginalised communities and providing them space not just in South Asia but also in the Northwest region. Furthermore, it provides a detailed insight that contributes to migration studies where we show how privileged castes, the first colonisers, used the financial incentive model to bring Dalits to the city along with luring them with housing. The Brahmanical Panopticon provides a new and more nuanced lens to understand the past and present of Dalits.

The framework introduced here opens new avenues to understanding the reproduction of caste through surveillance. Moving forward, there is a crucial need for further research by insiders' and/or in collaboration with Dalits to explore and understand the marginalisation through reproduction of caste and caste-based labour, how Dalits are fixed in their location, more importantly, ways in which Dalits were and are resisting.

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