Envisioning 'Prabuddha Bharat'*: A Discourse for Social Transformation

N. Sukumar[i], Kristina Garalytė[ii], Shailaja Menon[iii]

Introduction

The term 'Utopia' was coined by Thomas Moore in 1516, to christen the island mentioned in his book. It was rooted in the Renaissance, a historical phase during which the glories of ancient Greece and Rome were exemplars for the intellectual development of European society. Moore wrote his *Utopia* inspired by the letters in which Amerigo Vespucci, Christopher Columbus and Angelo Poliziano described the discovery of new worlds and new peoples; geographical expansion inevitably implied the discovery of the *Other.* And Moore used the emerging awareness of otherness to legitimize the invention of other spaces, with other people and different forms of organization.[1] Moore resorted to two Greek words—*ouk* (that means not and was reduced to *u*) and *topos* (place), to which he added the suffix *ia*, indicating a place. Etymologically, utopia is thus a place which is a non-place, simultaneously constituted by a movement of affirmation and denial.[2] For Karl Mannheim, utopia is something that 'is in incongruity with the state of reality within which it occurs'.[3]

[i]Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi
Email: skn70@yahoo.com

[ii]Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies at Vilnius University
Email: kristina.garalyte@fsf.vu.

[iii]Assistant Professor in History, School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University, Delhi
Email: shailaja@aud.ac.in

*'Prabuddha Bharat', or Enlightened India was a newspaper launched by B.R. Ambedkar on February 4, 1956 which continued till his death in 1956.
[1]For a detailed discussion refer, see Louis Marin, 'Frontiers of Utopia: Past and Present', *Critical Inquiry*, 19:3 1993, pp. 403–411, and Darko Suvin, 'Theses on Dystopia 2001', in Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 187–201.
[2]Fatima Vieira, The Concept of Utopia, p. 3, 88jNDbcMKtgYwBum3751sPEdukMaPsdfQ5unaT 2ZESWMHE5HwtMbKsCTNz9d1yNwRJBiBVqzddbufT4T9K9ThmD8DydUZK5
[3]Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1936, p. 216.

Thus, a utopia is an alternative means of organizing society; nurtured by the myth of the 'golden age' similar to many religious and mythical archetypes. Historically, the concept of utopia has been defined with regard to one of four characteristics: (1) the content of the imagined society (i.e. the identification of that society with the idea of 'good place', a notion that should be discarded since it is based on a subjective conception of what is or is not desirable, and envisages utopia as being essentially in opposition to the prevailing ideology); (2) the literary form into which the utopian imagination has been crystallized (which is a very limiting way of defining utopia, since it excludes a considerable number of texts that are clearly utopian in perspective but that do not rigorously comply with the narrative model established by Moore); (3) the function of utopia (i.e. the impact that it causes on its reader, urging him to take action; a definition that should be rejected as it takes into account political utopia only); (4) the desire for a better life, caused by a feeling of discontentment towards the society one lives in (utopia is then seen as a matter of attitude).[4]

One needs to keep in mind that utopias emerge out of human intervention, a result of concrete human action and not because of divine munificence. As argued by Karl Mannheim, the future came to be perceived as the time of fulfillment of ideas that was not to be faced as mere dreams or wishes, but as something that was to be achieved.[5] Thus, utopias are strategies which question the present realities and dream of future possibilities. It is a creative endeavour which influences multiple aspects of society and has implications on politics, economy, social relations and even pedagogies. At present, utopian imaginations are no longer confined to the literary or philosophical domains, but articulated in multiple genres; through pedagogies,[6] culinary traditions,[7] musical and cultural performances and individual forays towards emancipation. In many ways, it remains a work in progress, a gradual process of social transformation.

Thus, the aspiration for a utopia is not only universal but also perennial. The possibility of a new social vision has always enthralled humans from the biblical Garden of Eden to various philosophies and literary imaginations. Utopian visions have been largely analyzed through the Western philosophical traditions. What about similar ideas and expressions in societies, vastly different in social and cultural traditions, with diverse political and religious groups? In the Indian subcontinent, it is possible to find utopian lexis both in religious and secular terms. From the Buddhist idyll of 'Maitreyi' or fraternity to the Kingdom of Ram—'Ram Rajya' a mythical golden age to the more prosaic 'Begumpura', the City without Sorrow envisaged by Ravidas. Gail Omvedt observed that utopian imaginings are found at a lower level of society in her seminal work—'Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-Caste Intellectuals'.[8] Thomas Moore composed his work in Latin which is an exception. In the Indian context, utopian visions were seldom in Sanskrit but rather in the language

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[4]Fatima Vieira, op. cit., p. 4.
[5]Karl Mannheim, op. cit.
[6]N. Sukumar, Teaching Dalit Bahujan Utopias in the Classroom (in this volume)
[7]Kristina Garalytė, Imagining an Anti-caste Utopia Through Food (in this volume)
[8]Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-Caste Intellectuals*, Navayana, 2008, p. 7.

of the masses.[9] This also explains the lack of proper documentation as writing as a skill was not permissible to the common people in India. Many of these visions were in the form of poems, ballads and songs which were orally transmitted through generations. Often utopias were envisaged on religious lines, a heavenly city for the chosen few who remained faithful to all the sacraments. In the brahmanical vision of the 'golden age', humans need to pass through numerous cycles of birth and death to attain salvation. A Boddhisatta imagined 'Sukkavati', a land of joy in which all would find liberation. Likewise, Tukaram talked of Pandharpur and Kabir composed verses dreaming of Premnagar—a city of love or Amrapur where people will attain immortality. These musings transcended binaries of gender/language/geographies and social locations. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein imagined 'Ladyland' wherein women were well versed in science and technology, including armed conflict and their knowledge enabled them to control natural resources. Her evocative portrayal of a feminist utopia in 'Sultana's Dream' countered the fetters on women's access to public space during her lifetime. Similarly, Pandita Ramabai sought to create a community of women in her 'Mukti Sadan' or the abode of freedom wherein widows would farm the land, harvest crops, get educated and publish various writings. These autonomous spaces sought to re-imagine womanhood and their agentiality.[10]

The volume under review was originally proposed for a panel for the European Association of South Asian Studies Conference in Vienna in 2021. Some of the papers were presented as part of the conference and the rest were contributed through a special call by *J-Caste*. The contributions in this specific issue (**Historical and Contemporary Anti-caste Utopias: A Dalit Bahujan Discourse**) will touch upon the following questions: Did the idea of utopia vanish in the contemporary times? Are there any anti-caste imaginations in the experiences of various Dalit-Bahujan groups while they challenge the 'dominant' social order? What utopias are conceptualized through Dalit religious conversions? How can anti-caste utopias be part of the pedagogy? Is it possible to articulate utopias through everyday materiality of lived traditions? The contributors range from research scholars and faculty in various institutions. The articles are divided into following four themes.

Ideating Utopias

In the Indian context, many radical versions of utopia were conceived. The imagination of utopias located in the uncertain future carried within kernels of an alternative reality and a possibility of social transformation. Very often they inspired ordinary people to strive to create a better life for themselves. One such revolutionary thinker was Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy, revered as Periyar, who through his political ideas, writings and speeches, worked to create a discursive context which enabled women to be part of the public domain and express their politics in various forms. The article, *Periyar: Forging a Gendered Utopia* by Shailaja Menon reflects upon Periyar's

[9]Omvedt, ibid., p. 15.
[10]Refer, S Menon, Periyar: Forging a Gendered Utopia, in this volume

articulations on sexuality, masculinity, and the need for a new aesthetics which would prove to be more liberative for women. K.S. Madhavan and Rajesh Komath, in *Dalits and Discourses of Anti-caste Movements in Kerala, India* strive to locate various historical discourses of anti-caste imaginaries and articulations that are imprinted in the historical past of Kerala society. As ideologies and its consequent effects upon society are political, the article substantially makes interventions and interprets the Dalit-Bahujan world grounded on the lived experiences of Dalits in Kerala. It brings forth discourses of social movements, production of Dalit icons, critical narratives on untouchability and communist positions about the caste. Akanksha Sanil attempts to weave together an intertextual analysis on the case of the caste subaltern, through three widely acknowledged texts—'Laws of Manu' (*Manavdharamshastra*), Jyotiba Phule's 'Slavery' (*Gulamgiri*), and B.R. Ambedkar's 'Annihilation of Caste', through focusing on ideals of society and governance. In her article, *Revisiting Inequality and Caste in State and Social Laws* she argues that these texts are significant as they present a historical legacy into the origins of social hierarchy, its influence on the nature of nineteenth century colonial India, and the responses through constitutional values.

Understanding Social Movements

Anti-caste utopian imaginaries can be tied to the larger imaginaries of the pan-Indian Dalit community, but they can also stem from a very specific caste group experience. Many Dalit communities took the opportunity offered by the changing socio-political and economic scenario to better their situation. A few converted to different religions historically over a period of time, the state also helped Dalit groups through affirmative action policies and struggles over land reflected the changing aspirations of the once oppressed communities. Such counter narratives were also expressed through cultural idioms wherein once stigmatized habits/spaces were sought to be reclaimed with a sense of pride. While examining the instances of Dalit conversions that have taken place in independent India, L. David Lal, delves into three significant aspects: first, comprehending the acquired religious identity of Dalits; second, exploring the aspirations of Dalit converts; and third, examining the construction of a utopia within the context of the adopted religion. Additionally his article, *In search of a Utopian Society: Situating 'Dalit' Conversions in Contemporary India*, argues that Dalit conversions should not be regarded as an endpoint but rather as a transformative journey into an envisioned utopia. Similarly, the first novel in Malayalam by a Dalit Christian, *Pulayathara* by Paul Chirakkarode is the focus of Bincy Maria's paper. She notes that with the publication of his work, Chirakkarode heralds a shift in the literary representation of Dalit Christians in Malayalam novels. Until then, Dalit Christians were either embedded under the category of Dalits or completely ignored in the literary imagination. Significantly, it makes a departure from such erasures and marked a significant moment in Dalit writing in Kerala. Moreover, it is a discourse of discontent and dissent against Brahmanical Christianity.

Anand Mehra's article *The Bir Sunarwala: An Uncharted Dalit Land Movement of Haryana, India,* puts the land question at the centre of the anti-caste struggle. It begins with a discussion on B.R. Ambedkar's ideas on the necessity of land possession for the empowerment of Dalits. Then it sheds light on the various land movements across India since the second half of the twentieth century. The article culminates with the analysis of the six-year-long Bir Sunarwala land movement (back then Punjab, currently Haryana) to reclaim the land given to and then taken away from the Dalit community by the government. Anand reconstructs the political events enacted by those in power and the initiatives and sacrifices by the land movement activists that finally led to the successful outcome. Maya Suzuki's paper *Socio-spatially Segregated Experience of Urban Dalits and their Anti-caste Imagination* discusses the material reality of Balmiki life and the politics of Balmiki worship and identity in Delhi. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Balmikis have been closely related to the Indian state's social policy. Their employment in the government's sanitation sector led to the creation of profession-related caste colonies that, on their own, began forming their residents' identities. Central to the Balmikis' identity are professional occupation, shared segregated living space, and religious practices.

Since the 1950s, affirmative action policies by the state have ensured that the marginalized communities get access to education. Gradually, the first generation of educated SC/ST students began to critique the entrenched socio-economic and cultural hierarchies. This led to the emergence of a vibrant cultural movement on many campuses which countered the 'mainstream' habitus. In her article *Imagining an Anti-caste Utopia Through Food: Dalit Student Politics in Hyderabad, India*, Kristina Garalytė showcases the significance of the beef symbolism within the Dalit student movement in Hyderabad. She presents a detailed analysis of the Beef Anthem by Sharath Naliganti, incorporating her first hand observations during fieldwork and interviews with Dalit activists on university campuses. Her analysis reveals the complex interpretations and tactics associated with the beef issue as an integral symbol of the anti-caste movement. Though strongly rooted in the Madiga caste group experience and culture, the beef issue within the Dalit movement in Hyderabad was employed for the broader anti-caste alliance-making, including Dalits and other religious minorities, against the backdrop of the growing influence of Hindu Right politics. The beef issue allowed Dalit students to communicate the anti-caste sentiment among the larger social groups not limited to Dalits.

Subaltern Counter Publics

Throughout various historical junctures, Dalit Bahujans have strived to de-brahmanize the established knowledge traditions and in the process emphasize the 'politics of difference'. The articles in this section attempt to de-centre grand narratives and create a subaltern public which exhibits its own agency to negotiate the world. Chandraiah Gopani's essay, *Democratizing Spiritual Sphere: Radical Bhakti Traditions in the Telugu-speaking Region in India* focuses on the radical bhakti traditions led by Yogi Vemana, Pothuluri Veerabrahmam and other thinkers in the Telugu region which

shaped new value systems, cultural practices, language and other art forms, etc. These subaltern saints created a new phase in the socio-cultural history of India. Their critique against Brahmanism, caste discrimination, social inequalities and the rejection of Vedic scriptures have created a foundation for the modern anti-caste consciousness of subaltern communities in the Telugu region. Similarly, K. Kalyani in *Repertoires of Anti-caste Sentiments in the Everyday Performance: Narratives of a Dalit Woman Singer* attempts to read Dalit women through their lifeworld and life-narratives. This enables one to understand the caste relations that they negotiate with in their everyday life. Resistance in the everyday life of Dalit women includes how they challenge the existing public spaces, cultural norms, and practices through the creation of a 'subaltern counter-publics' space. This space involves collective actions like popular writing, singing, theatrics, etc., to confront the 'normalised' caste relationship that prevails within Indian society. The cultural performance becomes the narrative of this counter-publics space in which they intend to reassert their lost identity and dignity.

Reclaiming Epistemic Agency

The production of knowledge in India operates within a rarefied domain enclosed within the structures of caste, class, ethnicity and gender. This has enabled the unabashed peddling of one-dimensional epistemology of glorifying the past, justifying the prevalent social hierarchies and manufacturing consent for the existing social order. Periodically, the status quo was interrogated and the resultant debates are secreted within the pages of history. Rarely if ever, these contestations become a part of the pedagogy thereby igniting a quest for a more emancipatory social apparatus. The articles in this section reflect on how the marginalized social groups contest entrenched knowledge production. N. Sukumar's *Teaching Dalit Bahujan Utopias: Notes from the Classroom* is based on discussions with various stakeholders—academic committees who decide on pedagogy, feedback from students and classroom engagements for more than five years. The pantheon of thinkers who advocated an Indian version of liberation theology was never engaged with at an ideological level. The everyday engagements with the students who joined the course/s and their interactions in the classroom provide a multi-layered understanding of negotiating Dalit-Bahujan utopias.

Smita Patil in *Raving with Equality? On Protean Forms of Caste and Gender in the Women's/Gender Studies Departments in India* continues the discussion. She points out that caste operates as a social and political category that regulates any form of change. It persists as a constant threat to the right to education of the oppressed castes in general and the women from the oppressed castes in particular. Her work explores the experiences of Dalit women who are working as academics in the Women's and Gender Studies departments in Indian educational institutions and reflects on the prevalent caste and gendered hegemony.

The Scheduled Caste identity is a legal entitlement and the reservation policy has further institutionalized this identity in academia and other spaces. Various surveys by government departments[11] reflect the gains made by SC girls to access education due to different provisions made by respective governments; scholarships, bicycle schemes, hostel facilities and implementation of reservations which created an enabling environment. Anusha Renukuntla and Ashok Kumar Mocherla in *The Caste of Campus Habitus: Caste and Gender Encounters of the First-generation Dalit Women Students in Indian Universities* attempt to unravel the lived experiences of the first-generation Dalit women students while navigating through the campus spaces. Here, caste acts as a strong cultural capital for certain individuals while marginalizing the other. Their educational trajectory present unique challenges as they confront the process of learning, the significant role of non-academic spaces in reinforcing inclusion and exclusion, survival strategies of negotiations, and social agencies in contesting the conventional glass ceilings through the acquired cultural capital are significant lines of inquiries which this article aims to cover.

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As mentioned earlier, the idea was originally proposed for a panel for the European Association of South Asian Studies Conference in Vienna in 2021. Many scholars had evinced interest in the panel and eventual publication of all the papers but some backed out due to various reasons related to the pandemic. Later, many other scholars contributed during a special call for papers and finally after two years, the final publication is coming out. We are extremely grateful to all the contributors who are part of this journey to reflect on utopias and their role in our lives.

In addition, four articles showcase the results of J-CASTE's Bluestone Rising Scholar Competition 2023. The competition recognizes individuals who show great promise to make outstanding scholarly contributions in their future careers to the study of caste. The 2023 prize have been awarded to two early career scholars.

Sephora Jose in her article, *When Fists Write (of) the Past: Conceptualising Dalit Historiography through the Cultural Productions of Dravida Varga Aikya*

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[11] All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) of 2011–12 and 2018–19, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India.

Munnani attempts to theorise Dalit historiography as a resistance epistemology by outlining its methodological and thematic aspects. Second winner, Sandhya Balasaheb Gawali in her article *Narratives from the Margin: Sexual Harassment and Strategies of Resistance* argues that mainstream discourse on sexual harassment does not acknowledge experiences of women from the bottom of the socio-economic margins and it is a caste-blind gender discourse.

Bluestone Rising Scholar Honorable mentions have been awarded to two outstanding scholars: Saroj Shinde's article, *"Our Poverty has No Shame; the Stomach has No Shame, so we Migrate Seasonally": Women Sugarcane Cutters from Maharashtra, India* and Jatin's *Utilizing Dalit Autobiographies in History.*

The issue also includes the review of the recently published book, *Scheduled Castes in the Indian Labour Market: Employment Discrimination and its Impact on Poverty.*