The Promise of Memory: Politics of Memory and Caste Inequality in Collective Memory Consolidation

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Abstract

In the generic description of Indian society, the question of memory is about passive recollection of past. But in the caste-system based Indian experience, memory is also an active source of transforming one's condition in the present and reshaping the understanding of past. Based on the fieldwork conducted on the sites of important Dalit monuments in Uttar Pradesh with a focus on the process of memory consolidation in individual and collective entities, the role of memory in mobilization of political narratives and inter-group inequality is examined. The core argument is that Dalits are unequally placed as an entity in the caste-based memory structure of collective memory; this unequal placement of Dalits is carefully constructed and mobilized by the dominant castes. In the anti-caste struggle of Dalits, collective memory consolidation has played a vital role in ideologically creating counter-memories to challenge the Hindutva meta-narratives. Yet, there continues shaping of collective memory of Dalits by dominant castes by appropriating Dalit icons. Thus, the collective memory of creating an integrated Hindu identity as the only source of identifying with the past recently has led to the marginalization of Dalits' collective memory. Overall, this article highlights the role of collective memory for a meaningful understanding of the caste politics.

Keywords

Memory, Caste, Dalit, Mnemonic Injustice, Political Mobilisation, Uttar Pradesh

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Introduction

Memories are indeed personal; however, at the same time, they are also social, shared with our family and friends, received from our elders, and told to our young ones. But collective remembering is subject to the constraint of resources and control over media, leading to an uneven distribution of memories in 'mnemonic traditions' of any given society.[2] As a consequence, memories remain unequally distributed at the collective level.

Globally, there is interest and attention from various disciplines in the study of memory.[3] However, there is a notable dearth of studies addressing memory's political uses, functions, and relevance, primarily in a non-European context. In the Indian context, the relationship between memory and caste has not been thoroughly investigated too. Recently, social psychologists (Cotterill et al. 2014; Jaspal 2011; Jogdand et al. 2016) have attempted to examine caste from a psychological perspective. However, there has been scant focus on memory and collective remembering in this literature. Therefore, this article examines how memory plays an active role in transforming one's current conditions and reshaping the understanding of the past, against the backdrop of the caste-system. Specifically, drawing from existing literature and fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh (UP) conducted in November 2022 and April 2023, the connection between collective memory consolidation[4] and caste consolidation is explored. The primary goal here is to investigate memory as an analytical category capable of elucidating the distribution of power in a social and cultural context.

Process of Collective Memory Consolidation

Neurobiologists and neuroscientists, who have recently provided some important insights on memory, have built upon the foundations laid by developmental and experimental psychologists. Their recent work underscores the classification of

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[2]Eviatar Zerubavel uses the term 'mnemonic tradition' and explains that "a mnemonic tradition includes not only what we come to remember as members of a particular thought community but also how we remember it" (Zerubavel 1999: 87).

[3]The field of Memory Studies has progressed from introducing key concepts like cultural memory, collective memory, folkloric memory, digital memory, and communicative memory to its recent engagement with disciplines like disability studies, animal studies, ecocriticism, new materialism, and critical race studies (Craps et al. 2018; Knittel & Driscoll 2017). So far, the field of memory studies has well recognized three waves (Erll 2011). However, Olick et al. (2023) have observed a fourth wave, urging the field to transcend anthropocentrism and embrace ecological thinking (Olick et al. 2023). This transcending of the memory beyond Anthropocene in my understanding can be thematized as omnipresence of memory. For an overview of memory studies see Bond et al. (2017), Kattago (2015), Mendels (2007), Olick et al. (2011), Radstone and Schwarz (2010), and Tota and Hagen (2016).

[4]Thomas J. Anastasio, Kristen Ann Ehrenberger, Patrick Watson, and Wenyi Zhang in their work 'Individual and Collective Memory Consolidation: Analogous Processes on Different Levels' (2012) have dealt with individual and collective memory by analogically comparing the process of memory consolidation. Their work demonstrates the functional aspect of collective memory and explains its consolidation process. Based on content of memory, they note that "memory for facts and events is declarative, whereas memory for skills is procedural" (Anastasio et al. 2012: 37).

memory into two distinct types: 'declarative' and 'procedural' memory.[5] Declarative memory "essentially comprises" those memory that "can be enunciated" (Anastasio et al. 2012: 37) whereas procedural ones are related to skills such as driving a vehicle. In this article, the focus is on the process of consolidation of collective declarative memory (hereafter collective memory).[6] Moreover, this article adopts, in part, Sarah Gensburger's (2016) perspective on inquiring about memory, aligning with her assertion that memory should be examined not as a distinct research topic but rather within the broader framework of general sociology, "using the standard tools and methods of this discipline" (p. 2). However, our approach expands beyond Gensburger's suggestion, encompassing a broader viewpoint that not only emphasizes any one discipline but adopts an interdisciplinary lens. In this broader context, the article incorporates insights from the psychological, sociological, historians, political scientists, etc., perspectives to explain memory's consolidation to discuss political uses.

Further, among psychologists William Hirst and David Manier have noted that "collective memories may not always behave according to the rules that govern individual memory" (2008: 185). I acknowledge that the gap between individual and collective memory is difficult to bridge within the scope of this article. This article's treatment of the relationship between collective and individual memory comes close to the existing research of Anastasio et al. (2012) who have argued that "the brain is the medium for individual memory, society is the medium for collective memory" (2012: 55).

Anastasio's work has explored the impact of social phenomenon on collective 'entities' in memory consolidation. In their memory consolidation model, three zones are identified: the "buffer," "relater," and "generalizer". The "buffer" temporarily stores memory items, the "relater" identifies relationships, and the "generalizer" stores them efficiently for long-term memory (2012: 79). This model draws an analogy between individual and collective memory consolidation.

Before concluding this section and transitioning to our examination of memory for analysis, there is one point I would like to clarify regarding the conceptual limitations of scrutinizing memory for political analysis. It is the viewpoint that collective memory is primarily shaped by racial and cultural characteristics. The study does not follow the logic of memory's inheritance in a racial and xenophobic sense.[7]

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[5]Further, various contributors have added sub-classifications in the aforesaid two broad categories: as noted by Joseph LeDoux, "psychologist Endel Tulving proposed an influential distinction between two kinds of explicit memories—semantic and episodic." Further LeDoux explains Tulving's categorization by elaborating that episodic memories are autobiographical, but not all autobiographical memories are episodic. Tulving emphasizes the acquisition of factual (semantic) information during specific episodes. He introduces a crucial distinction: conscious experiences of semantic and episodic memories rely on different conscious states—noesis for semantic and autonoesis for episodic, the latter involving personal awareness in the memory experience. (LeDoux 2019: 306–308)

[6]Though our focus is on collective memory but an analysis of the impact of collective memory on individual life experiences as well as on individual memory is also provided.

[7]Anastasio et al. (2012) highlights that proponent of organic memory link memory and heredity, suggesting humans inherit memory from ancestors and society inherits the memory of

Identity, Memory and 'Counter Memory'

Scholars of memory studies have noted that "(c)ontestation clearly is at the centre of both memory and identity" (Olick & Robbins 1998: 126). Eviatar Zerubavel has discussed a wide range of concepts such as 'mnemonic communities', 'mnemonic socialization', 'mnemonic lenses', 'mnemonic synchronization', 'mnemonic transitivity', 'mnemonic others' 'mnemonic decapitation' and 'mnemonic sanitization'(Zerubavel 1999).[8] These concepts are important to what scholars have identified as the possibility of bringing together different memories into hegemonic memory or in other words "achieving mnemonic consensus" (Olick & Robbins 1998: 127).

Within the caste system the nature of contested struggle for memory depends on the extent of mnemonic socialization, presence of mnemonic tradition, choice of mnemonic lens, the process of mnemonic synchronization, how 'mnemonic transitivity' occurs, who are the 'mnemonic others', what is the impact of 'mnemonic decapitation' and how dominant mnemonic forces are undertaking 'mnemonic sanitization' within the society. Collective memory in its capacity to shape identity has been also explored as 'community of memory' or 'mnemonic communities' (Bellah et al. 1996; Zerubavel 1999). While explaining the notion of 'community of memory' in their work, Bellah et al. have emphasized on the importance of stories of those remarkable individuals who have embodied and exemplified the community's stories (Bellah et al. 1996). Exemplary figures in Dalit mnemonic struggle include figures such as Dr Ambedkar, Savitri Bai Phule, etc., and constitute a significant aspect of the tradition central to a Dalit's community of memory.

Foucault used the term 'counter-memory' to describe those memories that dissent with the dominant history (1977: 160). He acknowledged that memory is contested from below, from the non-periphery. It is within these dynamics of memory contestation that I will discuss how different castes and sub-castes[9] are mnemonically

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previous generations. This concept, when stretched, can lead to racially segregating ideas and predetermined identity that could result in xenophobic and prejudice believes among ethnic groups, For more on this see (Anastasio et al. 2012: 43–45).

[8]Eviatar Zerubavel has explained all these term in detail in his book I will briefly try to summarize all these terms in Zerbavel's words. On mnemonic communities, Zerubavel notes that "much of what we seem to 'remember' we did not actually experience personally. We only do so as members of particular families, organizations, nations, and other mnemonic communities" (Zerubavel 1999: 90). On mnemonic socialization Zerubavel notes that "we usually learn what we should remember and what we can forget as part of our mnemonic socialization" (p. 87). Whereas mnemonic lens is explained in context of role of family, Zerubavel describes "mnemonic lenses (are) provided by our immediate family" (p. 88). Further, mnemonic synchronization happens when memories are "not only commonly shared but also jointly remembered (that is, 'commemorated')" (pp. 96–97). Zerubavel explains mnemonic transitivity as the "social preservation of memories in stories, poems, and legends that are transmitted from one generation to the next" (p. 93) and mnemonic others as those who can "block our access to certain events in our own past, to the point of actually preventing some of them from becoming memories in the first place" (p. 83).

[9]By sub-caste, I mean that, according to the mnemonic logic of political mobilization, caste groups with characters in famous mythologies, epics, and stories—such as Nishad Raj or

at loggerheads and compete to have a definitive say in controlling the process which consolidates collective memory in the political arena. But before delving into the discussion on the politics of memory, it's crucial to note that applying Foucault's counter-memory framework though aids in comprehending the politics of memory has its own paradoxes and challenges. Foucault not only questions dominant historical narratives but questions the very capacity of social sciences which tends to generate knowledge that reinforces existing power relations. Following Foucault's call for research to be "provocative and complex" (Pignatelli 1998: 418), Pignatelli (1998) advocates a research approach that exceeds conventional expectations. This approach, based on Foucault according to Pignatelli, surprises and engages researchers, subjects, and readers, encouraging exploration beyond established distinctions of reality and imagination. The goal is to open new ways of approaching and understanding longstanding problems. In this context, the research attempts to discuss the problem of caste from a new and complex perspective, yet it remains limited within the paradigm of social science that Foucault questions.

Scholars using Foucault's ides of counter memory have explored it to rethink about time and history that goes beyond traditional dialectical frameworks (Tello 2022). Verónica Tello emphasizes that counter-memory, as conceived by Foucault, is non-dialectical and holds multiple histories together without reducing them to oppositional binaries. In the Indian context we will limit our discussion to the appropriation of counter-memories and different understanding of history that Dalit mnemonic tradition offers. The politics of appropriation for fulfilling majoritarian Hindutva project has been noted by various scholars (Berti 2006; Berti et al. 2011; Kanungo 2011; J. Lee 2021; Michelutti 2008). Joel Lee has highlighted a historical shift where, prior to independence, the ancient Sanskrit poet Rishi Valmiki (a crucial figure for Dalit Valmiki community), initially without influence among sanitation labor castes, was later acknowledged as their ancestor. Lee notes that "Valmiki became the sign of a new regime of recognition" as the government instituted "a government holiday in honor of Valmiki" alongside, "streets and parks were renamed after the *rishi*, and Congress and Harijan Sevak Sangh leaders like Ghanshyamdas Birla began funding Valmiki statues and temples intended for the sanitation labor castes (2021: 12). I will discuss counter-memory and political strategies to appropriate it as noted by scholars in their analysis of UP's politics, especially after 2014 in the next section.

Sabri—or any historical personalities renowned in the folklore of a given region (e.g., BJP also values castes whose historical figures, according to folklore, have fought against Mughal and other Muslim rulers), can be appropriated by political actors/parties. These castes are treated according to the mnemonic hierarchy, given preference in the allocation of positions within the party, installation of statues and celebration of birth anniversary of historical figures. In contrast, caste groups that lack references in any stories, myths, and folklores are considered relatively useful for political purposes. They are treated differently in terms of appropriation strategy. For instance, while a Dom and Mahar may both be Dalit, they belong to different sub-castes with their own historical references. Those sub-castes that align with the political party's narrative are approached favorably by the BJP and other political party for electoral mobilization.

Memory, Caste, and Politics in UP

Those who examine politics in UP for long have adopted the framework of identity politics (Jha 2021; Pai & Kumar 2018; Singh 2022; Tiwari 2014). Post 2014 repeated wins of Hindutva forces and recent developments have been explained as 'neo Hindutva' (Anderson & Longkumer 2018), others have explained it as "the new hegemony" resulting from "conflation between nationalism and Hindutva" (Palshikar 2017). Scholars contend that the mobilization strategy of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) is reshaping the "conventional understandings of Indian politics" and is currently questioning established perceptions of political dynamics (Jha 2021: 19). Furthermore, scholars like Badri Narayan Tiwari, who essentially replicate the established mnemonic hierarchy inherent in the caste system in their work, instead of critically engaging with it have argued that a "phoenix" like "a new RSS…can be seen emerging in the current scenario" (Tiwari 2021). This critique aligns closely with the previously mentioned Foucauldian perspective on social sciences.[10] Overall, the changing contours of UP politics, especially after the 2014 parliamentary elections have been understood as "subalterniz(ation) of the Hindutva agenda" (Pai & Kumar 2018).

Above analyses discussing the hegemony of Hindutva also suggests that the impact of caste on people's voting choices has diminished. These researchers have linked the reduced influence of caste to strategies employed by the RSS and BJP. They argue that the BJP, under its electoral strategy, has utilized ancient myths, memory, and narratives to integrate various sub-castes into its Hindu consolidation project. Consequently, they perceive the weakened influence of caste as a direct result of the strengthening of Hindutva.

In contrast, other scholars have suggested that caste identity remains resilient and crucial in its electoral prominence and essence (Gurjar 2019; Jaffrelot 2019; Singh 2022; Trivedi & Singh 2022). These scholars have also argued that while other factors such as development, governance, and national security may have influenced the outcome of recent elections, caste continues to play a significant role in shaping voting patterns in India. While these scholars acknowledge how various sub-castes have become politically active, majority of them overlook the use of memory and myths for mobilizing caste groups in their analyses. One exception is Shilp Shikha Singh's analyses, as she points out that political parties employ myths, and construct narratives in mobilizing various sub-castes, with BJP not being the sole protagonist in this process. Most importantly, she has noted that the electoral performance of Hindutva forces has developed a kind of 'cognitive blackout' in understanding the "subtle interconnections between the social and the political" in examination of political development in UP recently (Trivedi & Singh 2022).

In the context of the above discussion and within the framework of the current objectives of this article, it can be stated that memory based analysis of UP politics adds to the existing limited understanding of the 'subtle interconnections' and helps in

[10]Tiwari provides a mystical account of RSS which appears not like a physical real world organization but more as an enigma or phoenix, especially when he writes "RSS constantly destroys and renews its image" (2021: 12).

overcoming the 'cognitive blackout' by discussing memory's mobilization based on caste to consolidate votes. In other words, consolidation and mobilization of voters is studied here as an outcome of the process underlying the consolidation of memory. Further, here, I argue that much-hyped consolidation of various castes into the Hindutva fold and explanations of it as the victory of Hindutva is nothing but reproduction of the Hindutva gaze. Overhyped scholarly work that glorifies Hindutva as mentioned before reproduces the dominant social bias and perception of India dominantly being a Hindu society while ignoring the democratic churning taking place at a micro level.[11] Any explanation adopting the macro lens for advancing a macro explanation of politics in UP falls short in taking a note of micro political developments which advance a better understanding of politics. Examining the changes related to politics at the micro level through the lens of memory, an attempt is made to acquire power through memory. In this process, the 'mnemonic battles'[12] manifest on the ground level, ranging from the installation of statues to government enforced changes in the school text books or the struggles depicted through religious and ideological stickers affixed to vehicles, all directly delineates the relationship between memory and politics. In the next section, I will discuss these aspects in detail and explore the context of those dimensions connected to memory, derived from the fieldwork, which will assist in achieving the objectives of this article.[13]

Unequal Mnemonic Structure: Insights from the Field

To understand the counter-memory struggle of Dalits and gather evidence for the same, I conducted unstructured interviews which at best can be categorized as

[11]The bias is implicit, but a significant example would be political anthropologist Badri Narayan Tiwari's recent work. In his recent work focusing on the parliamentary elections of 2014 and 2019, as well as the 2017 UP state assembly election, Badri Narayan Tiwari observes that the BJP is mobilizing Dalit, Tribal, and OBC groups by appropriating, co-opting, and integrating symbols, ideology, and faith associated with non-Hindutva goddesses and historical figures (2021). However, in early 2000s Tiwari wrote extensively based on the fieldwork in UP highlighting Bahujan Samaj Party's (BSP) use of memory for consolidating identity. However, in recent years his focus has shifted to uncritical examination of RSS and BJP's appropriation strategy. For BSP see (Tiwari 2001); For BJP (Tiwari 2009): For RSS: (Tiwari 2021). Similarly, in a different context Uma Chakravarty exposes upper-caste bias in academic views on caste, attributing it to an excessive focus on the Brahmanical perspective from Brahmanical texts. She argues that this overlooks the experiential dimensions of caste-based oppression as presented by Dalit writers. Additionally, she criticizes the dominance of scholars like Dumont and Moffat, who present the caste system as a consensual set of values, neglecting perspectives from scholars like Mencher and Berreman (Chakravarti 2018).

[12]Eviatar Zerubavel introduces the term "mnemonic battles", emphasizing the social dimension of human memory. These battles revolve around collective memory, often involving entire communities and taking place in the public arena through mediums like newspaper editorials and radio talk shows (Zerubavel 1999: 99). (This footnote should be paraphrased.)

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heterophenomenological interviews.[14] The participants belonged to Dalit, OBCs and upper caste groups. Here insights from Dalit participants have been included. Some of the discussants outrightly mentioned their exact caste, while some generally said 'SC community.' Following a heterophenomenological approach, the discussion was open ended while I also shared why I am visiting the park, Ambedkar Memorial Park, Lucknow (the location of these interviews). These interviews took place in two different visits: first, in November 2022 and second in April 2023. A total of 30 participants were randomly interacted with, resulting in discussions lasting from 15 minutes to over 2 hours.

In November 2022, I met a family of four, who were visiting the Ambedkar Memorial Park, Lucknow on a Sunday evening and enquired as to what brings them to the Ambedkar Park. The eldest member—father—of the family who works in the UP secretariat, agreed to respond on terms of anonymity.[15] He told me that "these places and statues remind him and his young children of the great people from their Dalit community who have helped them receive respect and resources." He wanted his children to remember that without the work of these great leaders (whose statues are in the park), their existence would not have been possible in this unequal society. Further, he stated that "anyone in this world will remember those who have helped them in their difficult times, and for Dalits, it was Dr. Ambedkar." In this case, insights from psychologist Frederic Bartlett (1995) can be helpful in explaining how individual memory and collective memory are connected and while remembering individually one also reflects on the caste identity one belongs to.

According to Bartlett, comprehending memory requires acknowledging how "families, classes, and religions, among others, influence individual remembering" (Bartlett 1995: 294–296). The assertion by the participant that in remembering Ambedkar, it is not only the personality that is recollected but the struggles of Dalits and Dr. Ambedkar's role in 'difficult times' and struggles. In this context, while rearticulating Bartlett's claim I argue that memorizing implies reflecting on the past, acknowledging the struggles and challenges faced by the community. The statues in the park for the respondent serve as tangible reminders suggesting that the statues are

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[14]This research is rooted in Edmund Husserl's phenomenological philosophy, serving as its foundational methodology. In its early stages, the study aimed to discuss unconventional approaches in political science, particularly in the examination of mobilization strategies for electoral gains. Drawing a parallel with David Chalmers' exploration of the 'hard problem' and 'easy problems'' of consciousness in his book 'The Conscious Mind' (1996). I applied a similar framework to identity politics. Here, explicit challenges involve voter mobilization and voting patterns, constituting easy problems. In contrast, the hard problems in identity politics encompass nuanced aspects like imagination, judgment, perception, sensory experience, and memory. Within the phenomenological tradition, the interview methodology aligns closely with heterophenomenology, an approach devised by philosopher Daniel Dennett. This method seeks to "access consciousness from the outside," focusing on "the mental life of others as it is publicly expressed or manifested" (Zahavi & Gallagher 2021: 19). For more on debates around heterophenomenology see: Dennett 1982; Dreyfus & Kelly 2007; Zahavi & Gallagher 2020).

[15]The identity of responded is revealed in some cases and anonymized, changed or hidden depending on the consent provided by them during the interviews.

not merely static objects but symbols of inspiration and guidance for himself and his children. At the same time the respondent realizes the privileges and opportunities are a result of the efforts and sacrifices made by these leaders. In essence, the narrative emphasizes the importance of historical awareness and a sense of responsibility embedded in the act of remembering.

In April 2023, during a casual encounter, I met C.V. Singh, in his late 60s from UP's Mahoba district. He recounted his observation on how the RSS is attempting to co-opt legends and icons from the Dalit community. Additionally, he shared his recent experience of visiting Mathura. He noted that there is a recently built Gautam Buddha's premises in Mathura, explaining that in the upcoming times, the presence of Buddha in Mathura will remind people that Buddha and Mahavir were avatars of Hindu gods. Similarly on his awareness of how RSS is making inroads in Dalit settlements, he commented that "yes I am aware of their strategy, however, it is the responsibility of Dalit community to be aware and notice who is placing *Shivling,* statues of Ram and portraits of Durga in their temples and places of worships." Another respondent, I met in November 2022, Abhishek (name changed), a primary school teacher in his mid-40s from the Kori caste in Kanpur district. He shared that previously (before 2019), it was the promise to build a temple and icon and memory-based mobilization did happen but recently (after 2019) it is mostly about free ration. On politics of memory, he complained that "we Dalits do not know about our icons as most of our icons are not part of school and college curriculum." Lastly, he asked me to look into how in the current syllabus the UP government has changed the parent's name of Sant Ravidas to appropriate Ravidas's identity as an upper caste and further stated that "upper caste, ruling elites and their media advertises any event related to their icons and legends whereas the same is not true for icons of our caste."

The insights from the two interviews above underscore a point also highlighted by psychologist James Wertsch, who notes that the mind is "something that 'extends beyond the skin' in at least two senses: it is often socially distributed, and it is connected to the notion of mediation" (Wertsch 1991: 14). While books, statues, and other artifacts influence and mediates the way individuals remember, the above interviews suggest that the mind also reflects on memories that extend beyond an individual's skin. As C.V. Singh observes in the placement of Buddha's statue in Mathura and Abhishek notes in changing the name of Sant Ravidas's parents. Moreover, it can be argued that they are not only recognizing memory's presence beyond the skin but also discerning the political intentions behind appropriation.

One of the respondents, Deepak (name changed), who works as a driver of a goods delivery vehicle in his mid-30s said that he "recently placed a graphic image of Buddha and Ambedkar on the windshield of his vehicle—of the company—to celebrate Buddha and Ambedkar Jayanti. Few days later, he found that somebody had deliberately scratched and removed it from vehicle." Further, he shared that at his current workplace most people belong to Thakur and Brahman caste and, whenever he "wants to say anything about politics and society or about Dalit icons in informal discussion during lunch period he has to hold back his opinion." On asking if he is

aware of icons belonging to Dalit communities, he stated: "I know a lot of them but cannot celebrate or discuss them in my workspace, as my seniors discuss their upper caste hero, I must agree with them. If I discuss about Dalit icons and thinkers, then they (seniors) might not like it and will remove me from the job." In this context, anthropologist Paul Connerton's ideas can help us in explaining the dynamics between memory, authority, caste and power.

Connerton (1989) argued that in everyday functioning of the human body "choreography of authority is expressed" in what he explains as the "mnemonics of the body", wherein memory is ingrained in bodily practices and not in materials such as books, flags, movies etc., (p. 74). In the above situation the fact that one cannot remember the way one wants because of caste hierarchy and conflict inherent in the commemoration of upper caste and Dalit icons, posits that authority and its choreography in formal space is reproduced in remembering as well. In other words, how an individual presents themselves publicly, the use of body language, where they speak and where they remain silent can be examined through—to rephrase Connerton—choreography of caste hierarchy and mnemonics of caste body. Put simply, in the Indian context, choreography of authority and mnemonics of the body in everyday experience are determined by the caste system as evident from Deepak's experience.

Another respondent, Rambabu, in his early 50s claimed that "Dalit people get carried away when RSS and missionaries arrive because their basic needs are still unfulfilled. Wherever there is an organisation promising them money or any other support, people get carried away. Our society has been kept so backward that people turn to opportunity wherever they find it." Most importantly, he commented that "even the OBC community needs to worship their ancestors, as they are carrying the burden of other people's ancestors/icons on their backs." With his assertive approach he counterquestioned me: "Who was Jyotiba Phule?" and he himself answered "He was from Maali caste and an OBC, was he an SC? Who is King Ashoka? Who is Lord Buddha?" and repeatedly suggested that "Dalits are still celebrating their icons and legends in whatever possible ways, but it is the OBCs which have left their icon and are running after upper caste icons." To understand Rambabu's viewpoint in the context of the politics of memory through Foucault, it can be comprehended more effectively. In other contexts, Michel Foucault states "memory is actually a very important factor in struggle, if one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles" (1975: 25–27). An example of this in case of OBCs is evident in Lucia Michelutti's (2008) work which provides a detailed account of the transformation under the process of 'Yadavisation' in Mathura.

Just as Rambabu suggests that the Dalit community is still striving to preserve its memory, the OBC community has, in contrast, lost its memory by getting absorbed into the memories of other communities. One significant reason for this is the RSS-BJP's 'memory schemata' (Erll 2011a) imposed on OBCs since the 1990s, which necessitates a thorough discussion. It is agreed among scholars of memory studies that

most of us rely on certain methods and processes to remember our past experiences. The concept of 'models of remembrance' (Rigney 2005) has been used to describe this process. According to these scholars, the scarcity of memory schemata results in individuals copying and recycling methods of remembering from each other. For further insights on 'scarcity' and 'recycling,' refer to Rigney (2005). Also, it is not that every story, myth and epic are remembered but only those stories which carry the memory, which has the capability to procreate itself are most remembered (Rigney 2008).

In addition, most of the participants during discussions mentioned that they were aware of icons such as Ram, Krishna, Shiva. I encountered a gathering of high school students, predominantly in the 12th grade, and inquired about their experience of attending Ambedkar's birth anniversary in Lucknow. Clad in their school uniforms, each provided distinct responses, ranging from viewing it as a chance to visit Lucknow and witness the capital to gaining insights into legendary figures whose statues grace the park. When queried about whether they observed any disparities in the celebration of icons from upper castes compared to those from their own community, they unanimously concurred. One of them stated that "upper caste Hindutva icons will take our society back in time, whereas icons such as Dr. Ambedkar and others from Dalit's anti-caste movement can fulfil future aspirations and make Indian society progressive." As in this case and mentioned by different respondents, they are aware of the ongoing RSS-BJP's 'memory schemata', therefore, giving all the credit to memory mobilization strategy of political party's equality reflects the failure to recognize the struggle for mnemonic justice. Unacknowledging the spirit of the marginalized community's increasing strive to assert the mnemonic importance—as evident in interviews—to overcome intergroup inequality and attain mnemonic equality is where future research should focus on.

To summarize, the mnemonic lenses, model of remembrance or schemata applied by Dalits are different. Furthermore, the mnemonic transitivity of privileged upper-caste groups—particularly Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya communities—facilitates the broad dissemination of their mnemonic values. This makes it more convenient to mnemonically 'sanitize,' 'decapitate,' or dilute the memory of historically marginalized castes within the caste system. However, what favors Dalits is that the consolidation of memory is more organic and extends 'beyond mind and skin' in everyday lived experience. The longstanding struggle against discriminations enriches the mnemonic traditions of Dalits and makes mnemonic culture of Dalits capable of challenging dominant traditions.

The Politics Underlying Unequal Mnemonic Structure

In political science literature, memory as a tool of political mobilization has been discussed as a process including two steps. As explained by political scientists David Myer Temin and Adam Dahl, "(t)he first step involves acknowledging the existence of past injustices as well as their causal connection to the present. The second step, in turn, involves paying attention to the narrative practices by which past injustices are

given collective meaning" (Temin & Dahl 2017). In the Indian context, of these two steps, the first step is yet to be accomplished as recognition of caste-based atrocities and enduring intergroup inequality among different castes is slowly emerging in public discourse.

To look at the second step, as noted by Temin and Dahl, what is most important for memory politics is the 'mnemonic tradition' in which past injustices are given a collective meaning. In RSS-BJP's memory schemata the marginalized memory has been reimagined; however, the RSS-BJP memory schemata is dominated by an upper-caste worldview which, although it strategically accommodates OBCs and Dalit icons, it fails to overcome intergroup inequality persisting in mnemonic hierarchy among icons and legends of various castes. To elaborate, previously, scholars have also noted how local myths, cultural practices, and stories were appropriated to aggregate a pan-Hindutva identity in north-east of India by RSS-BJP as well (Kanungo 2011). Daniela Berti's research shows how organizations within RSS have "tried to propogate its project on history throughout the national territory by creating 'local units' at province, state, and district level" (2006: 16).[16] On mnemonic traditions of Dalits, scholars have observed how the Dalit mnemonic tradition articulates symbols, myths, epics, and other intangible sources of political mobilization (Jaoul 2006, 2008, 2018; Krishna 2022; A. Lee 2019; Singh 2022; Tiwari 2001, 2004, 2009, 2021). Jaoul's research on the role of statues, events, and method of commemorating Dalit icons since 1990s tells us that the commemoration as an act of remembering is integral to the Dalit movement in UP (2006, 2008, 2018). In her research focused on "Azamgarh, Ballia, Ghazipur, Gorakhpur, and Varanasi districts of eastern Uttar Pradesh," Sangita Krishna asserts that marginalized communities resort to inventing their past as a means to express themselves and establish their presence. This process goes beyond creating a "counter-hegemonic imagination"; it involves negotiating an alternative form of power or authority where the ideals of social justice are transformed into reality (Krishna 2022: 2).

Shilp Shikha Singh in her work notes that "Sangh (RSS) and its affiliates…(are) tweaking the cultural politics of Bahujan mobilization" (2022: 2) In examining the "cultural interventions" by the BJP, Singh suggests that the Sangh and BJP "have effectively manipulated and accommodated even spontaneous cultural changes into their fold" (2022: 3). Consequently, various traditions initiated by individuals or groups without any inherent connection to the BJP, the Sangh, or its affiliates were subsequently utilized by the BJP and its associates to garner support from communities. With this, it would not be incorrect to argue that the existing caste system itself has a mnemonic hierarchy. The caste system possesses its own memory schema, whereby not only memory but also its formation and consolidation are hierarchized according to caste grades. The possibility to remove this hierarchy without dismantling the caste system is bound to reproduce mnemonic inequality. In other words, and to summarize

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[16]Daniela Berti noted that "the absence of any large-scale research programme on the study of regional culture has lent more space to a Hindutva organisation to impose their presence in the intellectual milieu" (Berti 2011: 15).

if the caste system exists, memories are not just about memory of caste but constitute a caste of memory as well.

In other words, the current strategy employed by BJP and RSS to politically engage various caste communities has its own limitation, as once a community reaches a certain stage, it will assert its share and strength. At that point, the existing strategy will reach a saturation point where the community will seek its own political ground and not foster the political growth of BJP and RSS. Despite this, the overarching challenges for Dalits mnemonic tradition will remain because mnemonic battles in India are embedded in caste hierarchy. Before concluding the article, I will highlight the challenges that exist by default due to the fixed hierarchy in the caste system.

The Politics and Promise of Memory

For caste groups positioned lower in the hierarchy of the varna-based caste structure, 'counter-memory' serves as a means of contesting upper-caste hegemony. In contrast, for upper castes, memory functions as a source for reproducing and sustaining privilege. Despite this dynamic, memory is often considered inherent and naturalized, remaining largely unexamined for its political significance. To advance an example of how memory is not apolitical, I will cite an excerpt from a 2021 interview I conducted with a functionary of ABISY[17] (Akhil Bhartiya Itihas Sankalan Yojna), explaining the systematic disadvantages created by the existing caste hierarchy and those wielding power and privilege derived from mnemonic injustice. In the interview, I asked the ABISY functionary if another museum project (in context of a new museum being inaugurated) is a wise decision by the government given the current economic situation in the country after Covid-19. In response, he drew four parallels but unequal lines on a piece of paper. Against the longest one he wrote Congress and against the second longest he wrote BJP and then asked me: "How would you draw a bigger legacy of your regime if there already exist Congress's and others longer legacy (the bigger line)?" to which I said I have no clue and then he answered: "RSS in general and present government in particular want to wipe-out the lines (read legacy) drawn by the past governments and organizations from people's *memory* (emphasis mine), and the only way to do that is to draw RSS-BJP's a bigger line by accommodating everyone in which BJP-RSS are the dominant force. This museum is a part of that bigger line."[18] Therefore, it becomes apparent that the endeavor to draw a longer line will further augment the Hindu ideology that the RSS and affiliated organizations have traditionally espoused as paramount.

As Anastasio et al. (2012) in their book explain 'three in one' model suggested and discussed at the beginning, the memory consolidation process involves a 'buffer,' a 'relater,' and a 'generalizer' located in an entity. If insights of existing and above mentioned works on UP's identity-based mobilization of memory and discussion are

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[17]ABISY is an RSS-affiliated organization with state-wise bodies. The one I interacted with is the Delhi chapter, and the anonymity of identity is maintained based on consent.

[18]This section is a translation of an unstructured interview in Hindi in July 2021 by the author with a functionary of ABISY.

to be fused in the Anastasio et al. model then caste identity is the 'entity' within which buffering of collective memory takes place, whereas the role of 'relaters' is played by political parties and their affiliated organizations in deciding the relationships between buffered memories of various caste groups and stored in the 'generalizer' or simply in the community domain. The functioning of the 'generalizer' mechanism is contingent on the ruling regime. Primarily, it has largely aligned with the framework described by Joel Lee (2021) in his work, which outlines the concept of "Hindu majoritarian inclusion" (p. 79). However, what distinguishes Dalits' memory is that their legends and icons stand strong in their claim of 'counter-memory' against the generalizer project of 'Hindu majoritarian inclusion.'

The significance and influence of icons in the Dalit counter-memory movement is apparent. For instance, present-day Dalits may not have directly witnessed Dr. Ambedkar's struggle against drinking water restrictions in Mahad Chavdar Satyagraha, Maharashtra. However, existing in a different spatial and temporal context, they continue to mobilize the memory of Dr. Ambedkar's struggle, along with that of many anti-caste thinkers, activists, and politicians. This contributes to the consolidation of a 'mnemonic consensus' among Dalits, presenting challenges to the prevailing upper-caste 'generalizer' mechanism aimed at Hindu consolidation. Further, within Dalits, it is also true that sub-castes might have a distinct memory specific to their geographical locations and local dynamics not only in UP but across the country. Yet, it is equally true that there is a broad mnemonic consensus in the anti-caste struggle and its mnemonic politics which consolidates into a distinct collective declarative memory of the Dalits different from the memory of other caste groups in the mnemonics structured of the caste system. Furthermore, based on above-mentioned scholarly works and insights from the field interview, it can be argued that, despite the efforts of various 'relaters' such as the RSS and others to 'co-opt,' 'appropriate,' and 'dilute' the memory of different sub-castes within Dalits for political advantage, the RSS-BJP memory schema lacks a coherent system to fulfil the political and social aspirations of Dalits in an absolute political sense in the long run.

Conclusion

In the generic description of Indian society, the question of memory is about a passive recollection of the past. However, this passive view of memory lacks the capacity to explain injustice, prejudice, and discrimination that memory practices based on the traditional hierarchical caste system reinforce. Like racial discrimination, the caste system too wrongfully discriminates against those considered lower castes by birth and systematically advances privilege for those considered upper caste in the casteist hierarchical system. The underlying caste dynamic in the established collective memory of upper castes is considered as given and naturalized, while treating mnemonic practices of lower castes as abnormal. Because of this unjust hierarchical system, the oppressor community draws from their preserved collective memory, which is dominant, stable, and popular whereas the marginalized groups struggle and

seek to draw from their impoverished but labile collective memory. Therefore, upper-caste memory's material, normative and affective dimension shapes and reinforces the collective memory. Occasional celebrations by organizations upholding upper-caste mnemonic values have tried to honor Dalits and OBC icons by appropriation, however, the pre-existing hierarchy of caste icons and mnemonic traditions still prioritizes those of the upper castes. Recently, in response to the epistemological, material, and underlying normative force of upper-caste mnemonic tradition, lower castes have developed a counter-memory tradition.

Lastly, discussing memory, social justice, and its politics is a challenging task, especially when expressing these ideas in limited words. This research has its shortcomings, and the most crucial one is arriving at a conclusion related to collective memory while considering individual memory. Additionally, the attempt to explore dimensions related to memory through the lens of heterophenomenology is inherently constrained. Despite this, there are contextual questions related to memory that should be addressed in psychology, political science, and other disciplines, ensuring that memory is perceived not as an end but is examined as means too. As I attempt to fill the gap in understanding the systematic bias reproduced within the caste system, more studies are required that can help us to better comprehend caste-related dimensions inherent in the formation of memories to gain a meaningful understanding of the caste system.

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