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(DE)COLONIAL PERSPECTIVES

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Power, Performance, and the Limits of Contemporary Animism as a (De)colonial Perspective for Indian Caste Society

Brahma Prakash[1]

Abstract

"Contemporary animism" or what is often termed as "new animism" has emerged as one of the most powerful perspectives to understand and decolonize the indigenous cultural practices and knowledge systems in recent years. Brahmanical Hinduism (or neo-Brahmanism) is considered as a cultural-religious practice that still carries undercurrents of animism in India.[2] Animist beliefs have remained strongly embedded in Brahminical religious and cultural practices, such as belief in the existence of soul, persona and so on. This article argues that the ethos of neo-Brahmanism is not only antithetical to the perspectivism of contemporary animism, it rather offers a model that can be termed as 'inverted animism' or the cultural practices that tend to colonize the radical potentials of animism. Such Hinduism as hegemonic cultural practices disrobe the environment from its personhood, even fetishizes the person, and turns them into objects. It is an 'animism' that goes against its own spirit by colonizing the personality of the object, materials and other entities.

Keywords

New animism, decolonization, Brahminism, caste society, perspectivism and Adivasis

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[2] The debates around what is Hinduism, Brahmanism and Buddhism are far more complex. Scholars like Lal Mani Joshi see current Hinduism as an offshoot of Brahmanism. In his view, the elements of Shramanic culture and Buddhism were assimilated by the Brahmanical culture and resulted in what we now term as Hinduism (See Joshi, 1970:77). Joshi terms the current cultural-religious practices as neo-Brahmanism or Hinduism. I am formulating my reading in the light of Joshi's formulation of the Hinduism that incorporated the elements of Buddhism, Jainism, Tantricism, animism, and various other strands but on its own principles and conditions.

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The Spirit Bound

Despite having a great admiration for much contemporary scholarship on animism (Bird-David, 1999; Graham, 2005, 2014; Descola, 1996; de Castro, 2015), one needs to be cautious about its potential use for decolonization in the Indian socio-cultural context. My concern has to do with the animated world of Brahmanical Hinduism, which, on the one hand, offers fascinating modes of interaction between humans, and nonhuman worlds but, at the same time, colonizes this interaction to produce hierarchies based on the caste system—a contradiction that turns the emancipatory potentials of new animism upside down. While non-human beings such as birds and animals find their personality in the animated world of Hinduism, they acquire their caste-based dispositions in this constitution.[3] For instance, where the bird *haliasatur Indus* is considered as part of the Brahmin caste with the name brahminy kite, the *Milvus migrans* or pariah kite is thought of as untouchable in many parts of south India (Pariah or Paraiyar being the untouchable caste in Tamil Nadu).[4] Likewise, one finds names of snakes, birds and trees named in line with caste distinctions. Wendy Doniger has shown how dogs have been viewed as Dalits in Indian literatures (2014, pp. 488–500). Not only humans but the non-humans' world is also judged based on the division of purity and impurity following the caste ideology. Like humans, non-humans are similarly placed in the hierarchies. In other words, the caste-based values of Hinduism become the main criteria to judge them and situate them in their respective orders and associations. The article problematizes the way Hinduism uses animism to reinforce caste hierarchy and to present aspects of 'animism' as a tool and conception to do this.

For scholars working at the intersection of anthropology and philosophy, the new (approach to) animism marks an ontological turn in the field of humanities and social sciences. It destabilizes fundamental assumptions of the field such as what it might mean to be human, a person or to be in a relation. The approach positioned itself in the indigenous worldviews which can be located in the light of the larger discourse of the decolonization and human-beyond human discourse of the ecological concerns. The set of relationships with the new approach can be termed as radical animism. However, this idealistic approach of new animism needs to be properly contextualized in its specific socio-cultural contexts. My main concern is the relationship between animism as it discussed by many scholars as an emancipatory perspective and the

[3] In the absence of any specified texts on religious beliefs and practices, it becomes difficult to pin down the principles of the religion on which the criticisms can be posited. With varying cultural practices and contradictory belief systems, it is always complex to synthesize its ideology, structure and core arguments. Mainstream Hinduism has already consolidated and legitimizes specific sets of beliefs and practices that can be considered as point of reference in this work. It can be also argued that while Hinduism is a complex world of beliefs and has many forms across different regions in India, it shares a number of common features concerning the fundamental perspectives on life, death and living beings. Hindus, for instance still worship their ancestors, natures and animals in various forms.

[4] Pariah has become a denigrated synonym for the outcaste in several Indian languages. The term is used like 'nigger' in racial society, a term to use ethnic social group. Pariah caste has traditionally been associated with drumming and menial jobs.

animist structure that exists in the Hindu caste society. Drawing from the critical readings proposed by Graham (2005), Descola (2013) and de Castro (2015), the article problematizes animism as a possible decolonizing perspective in a caste-based society. It shows the power and limits of animism as a decolonizing perspective in India, unless there is an attempt to reclaim the radical animism from the indigenous discourse, as it is taking place in the case of many indigenous movements in India (such as in the demand of Sarana religion in Jharkhand).

The article points to the relational approach of Hinduism (informed by strong currents of Brahmanism) based on hierarchies and argues on the (im)possibility of new animism to make a critical turn in the postcolonial context without fundamentally acknowledging the cultural context of animism—is Ontology just another name for culture? What is at stake here is not the decolonization of Brahmanism as a culture of animated belief, but the decolonization of the colonized world of animism itself. Identifying this problem is vital for two important reasons in the contemporary indigeneity politics in India. First, India has a significant number of indigenous populations, often referred as Adivasis (aboriginal people or original habitants) who largely follow animism. At the outset of escalating neo-liberal and neo-conservative polices of the Indian state in which Adivasis have to be "sacrificed" for the progress and development of the nation, Adivasi communities are facing the direct brunt of the state on various issues including those of displacement, citizenship, customary laws and on the issues of cultural appropriations by resurgent Hinduism—where the aim is to reinforce Brahmanical ideology. Such Hindu religious groups have been actively trying to appropriate indigenous beliefs by reinterpreting Adivasi myths and texts to serve its own end. It can be argued that decolonization for the indigenous communities in India have to fulfill both the aims, i.e., decolonization from the colonial legacies as well as decolonization from the hierarchical Brahmanical beliefs.

Second, the animism of indigenous people is more in the vicinity of the decolonial perspective proposed by contemporary animist scholars than the elements infused in Brahmanical encoded Hindu cultural practices that has gone through an "ontological change" by positing hierarchies at the centre. Can we say that the radically posited animism of non-Brahmanical traditions went through an ontological turn in caste-based Hinduism? In a different context, Aparecida Vilaca (2015) asks, 'Do animists become naturalists when converting to Christianity'? He considers an ontological turn in the light of the ontological change that happens in the shifts of socio-cosmological views, as happened in the case of modernity. Elaborating on the Amazonian tribe Wari, he argues that in the conversion to Christianity, a complex and a non-linear transition between the two ontologies seem to have happened. What do such similar transformations suggest in relation to the practices of animism in the Hindu world?

However, the animist beliefs of Brahmanism cannot be merely viewed as an appropriation of indigenous knowledge forms; it can be rather considered as a parallel to new animism. It is rightly so because the Brahmanical inscribed culture and the Indigenous societies both practice some deep tenets of animism; however, their perspectives of animism remain different. Marine Carrin (2018) has pointed out a

similar connection in the context of "Hinduisation" of indigenous belief systems in the tribal region of Jharkhand in India. She argues how the same cult object may have a different meaning for the indigenous Santhals and for the Hindus who believed in the caste system (2018, p. 119). The problem becomes acute when we discuss how Hinduism and tribal societies interface in Indian society and the (re)shaping of animism in the new sites of cultural appropriations. It can be argued that Brahmanism might have promoted an animated world of beliefs in its residual practices but in its very principle, it goes against the principles of radical animism by resisting the transformative potential of the latter. My concern here is not to analyze how these transformations or appropriations might have taken place in Hinduism. It can be largely seen through a socio-political change in the society overall which led to the shift in ontological entity. This includes the historical changes and the formation of class and caste-based societies and development of agriculture and industry and different hierarchies that Brahmanism tends to perpetuate. The colonialism has also played a vital role in the shift of ontology while subsuming various aspects of animism of those societies.

Povinelli (2016) has examined how the state and neo-liberal forces have appropriated vitalist, and animist practices of indigenous communities in Australia, and how vitalism is the last vestige of the late neoliberal society. We can problematise this animated relationship by analyzing how capitalist ideology has influenced the animist world through the fetishization of objects, and, in a related sense, by exploring how animation helps to uphold and transmit capitalist and corporate ideology. We can take examples of the corporate animation industry in which capitalist entertainment corporations have exploited what is essentially an animistic logic (Forgacs, 1992, p. 363). Disney preys on and appropriates animism in order to cater childhood into global circulation as a commodity. In doing so, it creates what Forgacs terms 'a utopian realization of a world of complete freedom' (1992, p. 363). A similar case can be observed in the case of mainstream Hinduism where the animist logic is used to domesticate and exploit other human and non-human personalities. By positing animist world of Hinduism, the article shows how animism works merely as a tool to justify its relational world.

Despite some radical changes in the world of beliefs, Hinduism still believes in worshipping nature, animals and ancestors unlike the clear separation of human and animals that largely happened in the case of Christianity as part of European modernity (Vilaca, 2015). Nevertheless, Hinduism appears to subvert the fundamental relational logic of radical animism that has been taken for granted in contemporary scholarships. In a radical change, it brings hierarchies into a relational perspective: that is, the obvious hierarchy that can be seen in human and animal relationships and between human and human relationships. They could be only seen and accepted as subservient in the relational terms. Scholars have rightly pointed out how 'the separation between humans and animals is associated with the constitution of a given natural universe' (Vilaca, 2015, p. 6). In this subordination and domestication of animals, Descola sees this shift from an animist ontology to an analogical ontology (2013, p. 388).

Hinduism de-subjectivises animals and gives them secondary status. While animals still maintain an autonomous subjectivity in the indigenous beliefs, they are largely domesticated in Hinduism. For instance, a lion becomes a mount for the powerful Hindu deity Durga, an owl for Hindu goddess Lakshmi and similarly other deities can be seen riding other birds and animals. Arguably, the independent existence of non-human beings ceases to exist. In this regard, the works of animist KajArhem and Sprenger (2015) offers a specific framework to understand this complexity in the Asian context. Most importantly, how the very domestication of animals in an agrarian society promotes domestication of animal relationships and symbolism, and therefore the animist practices. He underlines a distinction between the animist principles of Castro, Kohn and others who work on animist practices of the tribal communities of the Amazonia, and mainland South East Asian animisms which are emerging from hierarchical agricultural societies. The Amazonian communities see animals (usually often in the relation of game/prey) as another that has to be imagined, captured, sought into a relation, therefore expanding their cosmologies into non-human actants. KajArhem, then uses the many examples of South East Asian Mainland animisms (many of which are Hindu in origin, or from the Theravada Buddhist practices), where he argues that because animals are now domesticated, they now incur a relationship of ownership with the human. He states that in agricultural societies, animism prevails but it is turned into one of sacrifice (the animal is the homo sacer), and therefore, they become part of one of hierarchies, property and ownership. The relationship to the other which marks Amerindian knowledge, what I have termed as radical animism, is thus turned into a relationship of the self in this case. It is one of intimately knowing the animal (hence animist), but also converting it into one of value—socio, economic and moral. It can be argued that it is a world where anthropomorphism slides into anthropocentricism (and anthropocentric practices like the caste system are reflected in animist knowledge). Though his work does not speak of Hinduism proper, one can see a fundamental resonance between Arhem's work, and animisms of agricultural societies, of which the Hindu caste society is an example. Arhem's work is also interesting in the sense that his works lies in the interstices of global south/ east cultures without being necessarily decolonial in perspective. It rather recognizes the violence and hierarchies of these practices. Moreover, his readings complicate the inherent decolonial claims of the animist world.

The other relevant transformations can be observed in the changing worldview of the so-called low-caste Hindus. The animist beliefs among the low castes maintain more regional and ecological currents and remain relatively more dynamic than the animated worldview of the upper caste because of their socio-cultural contexts and beliefs in the spirit world (Prakash, 2019). It can be argued that interactions and relations are already performed in the entrenched world of upper caste Hindu ideology. When it comes to the relationship between the upper caste worldviews and the low caste worldview, it is the hegemonic worldview of the upper caste that plays a more crucial role and subverts the dynamic relational mode prevalent among the animist views of the low castes. In the background of the emerging debates of new animism,

it becomes pertinent that we underline this shift in the context of local socio-cultural hegemonies.

The shift in approaches on animism from a derogatory to critical term requires that we clarify what this move consists of in terms of thinking about an animist worldview. As discussed by several scholars (de Castro, 2014; Bird-David, 1999), this is a shift from animism as part of anthropological construction to animism as part of the vital strategy of decolonization. The shift has changed the terms of seeing, mode of interactions and ways of engaging with the human-non-human world. It happened in two major ways: while the earlier anthropologists viewed animist societies with a great suspicion, the new anthropologists view it as an emancipatory paradigm at the outset of colonization and widespread ecological concerns. For example, de Castro gives his anthropological work with the Tupis an epistemic charge—that he levitates what is merely ethnographic fieldwork into conceptual claims about ontology and species relations. The new animism has reversed the nature and culture poles seeing nature as particular and culture as universal. In this case, multinaturalism replaces the notion of multiculturalism.[5] The new approach claims to reposit indigenous knowledge from various positions; however, in the lack of criticisms of the internal colonization, it appears to be another ethnocentricism.

The existing problem has also to do with the existing approaches in the new animism which has been narrowly focused on a settler colonial framework.[6]There is no discussion on the experiences of the peasant community or for that internal colonization that could be part of an indigenous worldview itself. In this construction, the native becomes the absolute other to the European settler. It can be argued that the narrow historiographic framework of Castro and many other animists do not capture the complexities of Asian animism. Any decolonial perspective cannot undermine the hierarchies within because often this hierarchy creates alliances with the external forces. In this regard, Kenyan writer, Wa Thiong'o suggested moving the center in two senses, in the postcolonial contexts 'between nations and within nations' (1993). His site of criticism is parallel both to the external colonization as well as internal colonization. It can be observed that the shift in the discourse of animism has not paid enough attention to issues of the internal colonization in parallel to offering a critique of colonialism and capitalist exploitation. Otherwise, there is an inherent danger that the emancipatory project of animism will subsumed to another sort of ethnocentrism in the contemporary discourses. It is true that contemporary animism has emerged as one of the most powerful perspectives in the decolonial discourses. It has challenged conventional scholarship and radically influenced the various ways indigenous knowledge and worldviews were perceived. Even though the new animism

[5]In de Castro's view, multinaturalism could be understood as the opposite of the multiculturalism. It designates a unity of mind and diversity of bodies. In multinatural perspective, culture is viewed as the form of the universal and nature as the particular (2014: 56).

[6]The problem has its root in the history of the colonial encounter with the indigenous people. Since the first knowledge of Amerindia came to Europe through Columbus and other European settlers, scholarship also tends to focus on this divide between the European settler and the indigenous forest dwelling native.

perspective has not yet significantly influenced postcolonial scholarships in India, one needs to be cautious of uncritically using the perspective in Indian and South Asian contexts.

New Animism as a Decolonizing Perspective

Animists see the presence of a lifeforce in humans and as well as in nonhuman beings, including what we normally perceive as things—tree, stone, river, mountain and soil. Things are supposed to possess life principles or life force, what is commonly termed as jeeva or jeevi in many Indian languages. Santhal indigenous communities of India believe that 'he who has jeeviis able to move.' They believe that they have jeevi inside their bodies. They all have agency and potency to transform themselves. One who believes in the animist world also sees the existence of soul and spirit in language and "abstract" words. Thus, we can say that in such situation the word also acquires animating presence besides being performative. The affect and meaning of word not necessarily appears in its performative dimension but also in its lively animated being. For example, the word is called shabd-jeeva (word life) and any violence on it is considered equally serious as physical and psychological violence.

Animism was earlier viewed and interpreted through the colonial lens in which animists were viewed as low creatures or backward people who were unable to understand the difference between nature and culture: between persons and things, life, death and metaphors, symbols and the living words. Animism was fundamentally seen as an epistemological error in those approaches. For several anthropologists and scholars, animism was based on an erroneous, unscientific observation about the nature of reality (Graham, 2005). However, animism has acquired a new force in the contemporary animism. The new animism has not only decentred the colonialist approach, it has also decentred the narrow humancentric approach that assumes colonization of non-human beings as the central prerogative in order to become human. The actions of non-humans are also considered "intentional, planned and purposive." Like humans, non-humans also participate in everyday exchanges of relationships. They participate in kinship systems and ceremonies with human, as well as maintain their own kinship systems and ceremonies (Harvey, 2005, p. 102). Things do not remain as things to be acted upon but equally act and participate in the works and ceremonies. This approach has not only changed the human and object relationship, it has also challenged how persons are to be treated beyond the confined boundary of identity and subjectivity. What Davi Kopenawa said about white people: 'white people do not think very far ahead. They are always too preoccupied with the things of the moment' (2013, p. 12).

I would like to mark three underlying radical principles of new animism which are opposed to the so-called animated world of Hinduism informed by Brahmanism. In the first case, new animism challenges the limited view of the human-centric world. Second, it has challenged the division between nature and culture, in fact, the idea of nature becomes cultural. And in the third case, the relationship between 'object'

and 'identities' is enacted through personification and not through objectification as it happens in capitalism. Apart from these shifts in fundamental principles, we can also discuss how new animism has placed ontology rather than anthropology (the sociology of knowledge) and epistemology in the centre. The strategic location changes the relationship between nature and culture and established nature as particular and cultural as a universal category. And beyond nature and culture division, nature is viewed as what Descola would term 'the society of nature'.

In Cannibal Metaphysics, de Castro (2014) argues for the Tupian mode of thinking (based on the worldview of the Tupinamba tribe who inhabited the Brazilian coast in the seventeenth century) which offers a new kind of Ontological Prior-Thinking from the others' positions. Descola has suggested that the human tries to understand the human-non-human relationship through four modes of identification based on interiority and physicality. Interiority stands for self-reflexive inwardness and physicality stands for the dispositions enabling a physical action. The aspects of interiority and physicality offer us an interesting way of understanding this relationship. So, while in the case of totemism, the object possesses elements of physicality and interiority analogous to a human being, in animism, the object has a similar interiority but a different physicality. It is believed that humans and all the kinds of non-humans with which humans interact have different physicality. In naturalism, the object is devoid of interiority but possesses a similar kind of physicality. In animism, human interiority is lodged in different kinds of bodies or they simply wear different kinds of skins. This background is important as it helps us in examining the Hindu world of animated beliefs and their potentials for decolonization.

The Animated World of Hinduism

Animist belief is strongly embedded in Hindu religious and cultural life, such as in the belief in the existence of the soul (even after death) and even in the worship of tree and stone and so on. However, I argue that Hinduism is antithetical to the ideology and the perspectivism of radical animism or what has been postulated as new animism. The dominant Hinduism, the point of reference here disrobes the nature from its personhood. It tends to fetishize the personhood of the non-humans which ultimately becomes an expression of a soul without spirit. In other words, the soul has to be purified from the infliction of the spirits. Spirits rather get imprisoned and lose their fluid energy and vitality that marks their movements and relations in the new animism. This does not mean that animism in Hinduism is immobile and is signified as static. What changes is basically what relation different bodies may imbue with it. This does not mean that the relationship to objects is always changing. This change has to do with the historical process of colonization in which meaning making shifts and every process or shift is seen as having a new ontology, instead of multiple relationalities. Thus, it can be argued that while Hindu cosmologies and Amerindian/new animist thought start off from a similar point, Hinduism makes a regressive turn with a moral-political enshrined in caste society. This is an animism that goes against its own spirit

by colonizing the personhood of the object, materials and other non-personal beings. The hierarchical ideology is so deeply embedded in Hinduism that any manifestation of animated being carries the graded distribution of the sensible. For all these reasons, much of the participatory world of animism becomes a terrifying world of hierarchy. In a paradox, a religion that is based on animism sees spirits and animism with contempt. While it justifies colonized aspects of animism, it sees archetypal animism as a threat.

The sense of being immersed in a sentient world is part of some of the major cultural practices of the adivasi and low caste communities. Without any discrimination, they will sing the praise of both human and non-human personhoods. They worship river, boat, plant, animal, fire, sky and the six directions supposed to be possessed by the spirits. All these objects were supposed to have their specific traits (personality). The communities treat these objects as spirits and deities of that particular non-human entity. They believed that like humans, non-humans also interact and express their emotion and feelings. A basket will talk to a broom and the broom can talk to a 'real' human being. In the new development, adivasi communities are moving out of the worldview of the animated world of beliefs to the image worship form of institutionalized Hinduism which tends to fix the traits and limits the relational approaches. For example, the sun was supposed to be an active force in agricultural society. From day to night and from one season to other, the sun will acquire different traits, but in the image worship of Hinduism, the sun as an active force gets diluted and gets uniformity and retains only specific representations. The same applies to the river deity, Ganga who is worshipped both in iconic and non-iconic forms.

It can be argued that the animated beliefs of Hinduism have radically changed the relational approaches of animism. In the animist understanding, a stone was imbued with spirits, but in the new worship, a stone has to be consecrated to become a sacred object. A stone has become an idol and represents human personhood rather than non-human personhood. So, an idol can be anthromorphic as well as symbolic but it is jeeva which transforms the stone into a stone god. This creates another problematic of the mode of relation in Hinduism. In this constitution, Hinduism subsumed some stones as inanimate. It has created some as ceremonial objects and emptied their personhood—other than human persons. The stone that has imbued values now acquires the value in ritual exchange; the exchange value becomes the basis of new personhood.

E.B. Tylor in his book, *Primitive Culture* (1871) observed stone worship in Tamil Nadu in which community members place five stones in a field. They daub them with red colour which can be viewed as erstwhile practices of animist beliefs. Tylor (1871) observed that these stones were then named after the five Pandavas of the Mahabharata epic. But what is entailed of turning the five stones into five Pandavas? Do they acquire a certain amount of uniformity contradicting their own dynamic nature of perspectivism? Let us consider an ideal situation of stone personality in animism. The stone will have a relational approach; its position will change in a given situation. In one situation it may participate in kinship and ceremonial events, in another situation it may have a dialogue with a tree and a hunter. In another famous story of the Ramayana, Ahalya, who was the wife of a much older sage Gautama

was seduced by Indra and reciprocated with desire. For this act of infidelity, she was cursed by Gautama to turn into stone, to be later purified by Rama. Her turning into a stone indicates her loss of agency and personality. While Hinduism still maintains the possibility of personality interactions, it appears that it also takes out the personality imbued in stone. Levi-Bruhl used the word 'participation' to characterize the animistic logic in which 'inanimate objects' like stones and mountains are often thought to be alive.

Inverted Animism of Hinduism

Animist beliefs within Hinduism are not just an appropriation of indigenous knowledge forms. Indeed, some aspects of Hinduism remain animistic in nature. While animism clearly refers to the beliefs about spirits, we also need to understand what that belief and spirit might mean in a specific context. How does the activity called 'believing' manifest itself in a cultural context? How is it done and how is it recognized by observers? (Graham, 2005, p. 4). One of the main emphases of new animism is that life is lived in relation with others. Descola sees this ontological change when a kind of minority relation becomes hegemonic. This can be understood as a triumph of Brahmanism in Indian society. He argues,

> Certain ways of treating 'others' that are present in a minor form in one mode of identification sometimes come to play a more predominant role that soon renders them incompatible with the ontological regime in which they have developed; and this makes it necessary to alter that ontological regime or transfer to another mode of identification that is better suited to a different way of treating. (Descola, 2013, p. 366).

Descola considers the possibility of more than one ontology co-exisiting within the same community, organized in a hierarchical relation. There can be a dominant ideology but it does not completely erase the residual presence of the other ontologies. Anima (breath, life, spirit) can be translated as atman or jeeva in many Indian languages. I am not using atman as it brings contradictory interpretations. Jeeva could be used as possible working translation for the soul and spirit in Hinduism. Jeeva or jeevi is also a widely accepted term beyond caste, communities and regions in India. In some Indian languages (e.g. Hindi), animism has been translated as *Jeevavad*. The translation of spirit as jeeva still makes a vital connection in this context. Jeeva is life, the vital force in the human and non–human world that marks it as the centre of animism.

The *Kathopanishad* tells a story of a bird with one belly and two mouths, one representing atma and the other jeeva. Jeeva is considered as the unit of existence conscious of its physical being. It is bound by good or bad actions which gives its place in the hierarchy. But what is the basis of good and bad actions? It is the imitation of the model of Brahman that characterizes action as good and bad. Jeeva enjoys the physical and gross things, as it has a body that feels appetite. Because of the physical

body and its appetites, jeeva experiences hunger, thirst, sleep, anger and all such states. The physical body which jeeva possesses is the fleshy covering, which it casts off at its death. But other than the physical body, the jeeva has what is called a subtle-body. While the physical body dies, the subtle body survives death and accompanies the individual jeeva beyond death. Prana (refers to energy, life or breath) is considered as the most powerful individual vivifying principle in jeeva which permeates both animate and inanimate objects. In phenomenal experience of the animated beliefs, one is caught up with jeeva experience. One of the core formations of Hinduism has been to move away from the phenomenal body to noumenal body. In the formation of its hegemonic ideology, Hinduism emphasizes that the pure consciousness in jeeva is purity of atman (soul) and the ultimate reality is Brahman.

Hinduism in its institutionalized thinking deploys some important key terms to define itself. It believes that karma (action) has to follow dharma (duty) to achieve the highest realm of Brahman. Thus, it can be argued that Brahman is the model that defines the relations and actions. They are already performed in the light of Brahman. In Vedic thought, Brahman is the impersonal or non-personal generative principle which underlies all forms of manifestations. Such Hinduism creates uniformity and limits the possibility of unfolding relations. On the other side, Brahman is unchangeable quality unlike prakriti (nature), which is changeable. So while the animism of Hinduism believes in the idea of changing nature and in the universal self they are not relational in this sense and thus appear to lose its possible perspectivism. In this mode of relation, the ultimate causal level of 'person' is not attached to the transient. The ultimate goal of the atman (self) is to merge into the Brahman (the Self) and the finality of this destination therefore brings closure to the spaces and dialogues. The model in a way resists the transformative potential of the self and nature. It is often argued that with good karma, there is a possibility that a low caste personality can acquire the personality of the upper caste and it is possible that because of bad karma, Brahmins may turn into untouchables in the next life. However, the real essence of karma is to follow one's ascribed caste duty to achieve the highest status of being in the graded pyramid. The point has been well argued by Vijay Mishra,

> The brahminical orthodoxy who were traditional arbiters on questions of knowledge put a mechanism in place which stipulated that the self came into being already karmically formed (an earlier life experienced the present human condition) and self-representation or self-definition could not be removed from both an earlier life-experience and future life stages. (1998, p. 21).

Since Hinduism also believes in the afterlife determined by the Supreme Being, it marks another closure to the possibility of being and becoming. One of the core principles of Hinduism advocates getting rid of the birth-death cycle. To get moksha (salvation), one needs to transcend this bondage that could be only possible by merging with the Brahman. The nature of the transmigration of a soul into a reincarnated self as another caste human or non-human is controlled by hierarchization of Karma and how

it is contradictory with the unchangeable nature of the soul. Unlike the personality of the new animism, Hinduism believes in selfhood which is largely confined to the self goal. It believes that the soul will bear time and again unless moksha is not achieved. In this case not everyone is capable of achieving personhood and moksha. One can compare it to the Santhals world of beliefs in which everyone who dies is capable of becoming bonga and becoming the centre of relations. The goal of moksha (liberation) in Hinduism is to be set free from the cycle of action, reaction, and interaction. Mishra rightly underlines that 'there is then, a prior system that acts as a template, as a sanctioned pattern' (1998, p. 21). The arguments clearly exemplify that Hinduism is not interested in the mode of interactions based on perspectivism and participation facilitated in the animism. What we see is the "animist" world of Hinduism which is self-colonizing in nature and resists the emancipatory potential of the [new] animism. This also shows that animism needs to be placed in a cultural context before it can be claimed as 'decolonial' perspective. In the case of Hinduism, animism as a strategy of interaction goes against the very tenets of animism and merely works as tools of colonizing in a caste-based society which believes in purity and impurity and in the assumption of the supremacy of knowledge.

The dominant form of Hinduism believes in moving from *aparaavidhyaa* (lower form of knowledge) to *paraavidhyaa* (highest form of knowledge). The aim of the highest form of knowledge is *Brahmaajijinaasa*. Hinduism believes that *aparaavidhyaa* is a lower form of knowledge carried out through the senses. The *aparaavidhyaa* comprises all empirical and objective knowledge. The *aparaa* form of knowledge in Hinduism is considered to be limited to the finite world. Against this lower form of knowledge, such Hinduism wants to posit the knowledge of Brahman as the highest form of knowledge which cannot have relational position. It is rather an absolute form of knowledge. The division of knowledge becomes the foundation of knowledge practices in India so much so that *aparaavidhyaa* is dismissed as knowledge.

One of the powerful manifestations of beliefs in Hinduism is engendered through *daan* (ritual gift) culture. Marcel Mauss (1990) has argued that gift objects themselves are 'in some degree souls and gift exchangers operate as 'things' in these interactions'. Drawing on the works of Mauss, Graham argues that gift exchanges are integral to relational definitions of personhood and central to debates about ontology (2005, p. 12). As we know, Hinduism maintains an elaborate system of *daan-punya* (earning blessing through gift exchange) culture. But the facet of Hinduism that has not been discussed yet is the foundation of relations through gifts. Hindus worship different objects and deities to achieve wealth and blessing. Most Hindu rituals are centred on the gift-exchange ceremony, from *gau-daan* (cow as gift) to *kanyadaan* (daughter as gift). The question that can be posed here is what is happening in this gift-exchange culture that exchanges the souls but without the spirits that imbues life energy. Let us take an example of Maoris who as per the animist beliefs will return birds that are caught back to the forest considering that it was an immoral and antisocial act. However, in the case of Hinduism, it would be highly impossible because the dominant social has taken over the participatory mode. Here again Arhem becomes important because

he explicitly traces a relation between the domestication of animals which produces different gift/ownership relations than predatory forest- based animist practices do.

What Hinduism did to Animism

This thought can be examined in various relations and objects of Hinduism. One of the kernels of Hinduism is the belief in *panchamahabhutas* (five cosmic principles) made of five *bhutas* (spirits). It is believed that the body is made of these five spirits—earth, water, fire, air and *akasha* (space). Often, these five spirits have been also translated as the five principles. In this relation, Gopal Guru argues that,

> The structural device [of Hinduism, inserted] involves the conversion of the ecological (five principles) into the sociological (hierarchical). In sociological reading Panchamabhute acquire different and perhaps negative meanings through deploying the ideology of purity-pollution, which is so central to the former. The conversion is sustained by the asymmetries of power that robs the panchamahabhute of their positive meaning. People do not follow the moral basis of the metaphysics of panchamabhute when they act. (2012, pp. 206–207).

The argument by Guru shows how ecological principles have been transformed into sociological principles by reinstating the human at the centre of the subjectivities. It also suggests how *panchamabhutas* are reduced to the principles by eliminating their spirits. The ecological has merely become an entity to support the social formation. The ideology of purity-principles has not been derived from animism but from Brahmanical ideology that postulates the absolute validity of this division. Guru rightly points out that 'how their material interest and the cultural need to draw relative superiority over others seriously undermine the validity of metaphysics as the universal framework that provides moral orientation to social interaction among people' (2012, p. 207). Purity and pollution become the essence of the personhood as in the case of Brahmany Kite and Pariah kite in Tamil Nadu and *dhobiyachirayin* (washerman bird) in north India.[7]

The need to remain socially superior has led the upper caste to convert the ecological into the sociological and the natural into the cultural category. Let me explain this in terms of the politics of converting the *panchamabhute* (five life elements) into instruments that are deployed to reduce some section of society to 'walking carrion', a degraded entity filled with a deep sense of repulsion. This transmutation, which is produced by the politics of the preservation of the hierarchically superior self, has serious implication for these five principles. They stand discredited; they are robbed of their vital meanings.

[7]*Shilpashastras*are replete with caste ascription to non-human objects. *Vishnudharmottara Purana* divides stones into varna categories such as Brahma as *shuklavarnashila* (*satvika*), Kshatriya as *raktavarnashila* (*rajasi*), Vaisha as *pitavarnashila* (*rajasi*) and Shudra as *krishnavarnashila* (*tamasi*) along with different types of stone black, smith, chunar sandstone and others. Similarly, *Brhatsamhita* teaches and classifies woods into different categories.

Each of these five elements—the spirits of life has been colonized in the hierarchical thinking of Hinduism. Earth, which was considered the maternal force in many animist societies, is considered ritually polluting in the Hindu world of animated beliefs. In fact in the Tantric sect of Hinduism ritually polluting earth becomes the site of worship. Using ritual pollution to assign a negative quality to earth goes completely against the vital force that earth was supposed to inhabit. We can observe a similar pattern with other principles, so for example, water is used to create what Guru says 'a perennial division', thus rendering some bodies ritually pure and others as eternally impure not only marks the caste division among humans but also among the non-human world.

Fire is another example of the animated belief which is considered very powerful. In Hinduism fire has become another source of this purity and impurity division. If earth is intrinsically impure, fire is intrinsically pure. Fire acts as the purification agent in Hinduism. In the sati-system of Hinduism, widowed (it represents the state of impurity) and immoral women were not only burnt to death because she has violated the feudal moral order but they were also put into the fire to be purified. By going through the fire-trial, the women were supposed to purify their souls. Guru (2012) gives several such examples where fire is used as purifying element, it cleanses the spirit. Similarly, Guru (2012) asks but in what condition does air become an impure substance. He argues that 'it can be objectionable [because it is impure] only if is converted from its being natural and hence as a pure substance into a source of a contamination' (p. 209). It can be argued that Hinduism has converted animism into a morphology in which the archetype of animism gets castified. While the principle elements acquires the quality of purity and impurity, caste moves from being a matter of sociology to one of eschatology and cosmology. What Guru (2012) explains about the *panchmahabhutas* (five powerful spirits) describes the larger phenomenon of what might have happened with the spirits and animated beliefs of animism with radical potential.

It can be argued that caste society uses the logic of animism to displace the spirit and personhood of the human as well as nonhuman subjects. It tries to enslave these agencies by bringing them under the materiality of caste. This could be an effect that some objects and animals become pure and others become impure. In result, it is not only human society which has a caste-like structure but objects and animals also obtain the similar personhood (selfhood) in the larger structures of feeling. The shift from archetypal animism to Hinduism also shows the shift from perspectivism to absolutism. In the animist belief, humans and non-humans could have changed their appearance at will, so that real identity becomes difficult to ascertain. The caste world of Hinduism resists the permeable boundaries and creative power of animism and merely reduces it to serve its own aim.

Tupi or Not Tupi is the Question

This article analyzes the ontological changes brought out by Hinduism in the archetypal animism. It shows how animism is accommodated in the Brahmanical ideology of Hinduism. The point is not to root for any authentic animism but to show the changing

socio-cultural contexts in which animism is placed, within capitalism or religious contexts. Animism co-exists with various cultural practices and belief systems at the present; it cannot be seen as cut off from those practices and influences. Dominant Hinduism has produced a peculiar relationship with animism in India that appears to go against the very tenets of animism. It has also to do with the ontological changes brought out by Hinduism in the model of animism. Though I am not specifying the reasons of this development, however this development cautions us to critically analyze animism before taking it as a new approach of decolonization. Placing animal and human relationship, Danny Naveh and Nurit Bird-David (2014) have argued how the movement of animals and plants no longer carry their personality. What I have termed as the inverted animism of Hinduism is increasingly becoming the basis of ritual and festival of the dominant Hinduised society in India. It looks as if Hinduism has been successful in objectifying relations and therefore the mode of relations and being in the world. On the one hand, it has tried to produce the separation by constantly working to purify relations. And on the other, it has produced the separated world by constantly demeaning others. It is not only animals that loose the agency but by marking a whole low caste community at the pedestal of animal, Hinduism tries to de-subjectify the community from their agency and potency.

Hinduism offers an elaborate system of defining human and non-human relationships. But the animated worldview of Hinduism creates a complexity not only for the communities who follow it but also for scholars working towards the decolonization of approaches and methodologies in the field of culture. The complexity can be read in the light of the problem that de Castro (2014) asked in *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Using Shakespeare's famous question, he insists that 'It is not "to be or not to be" that is the question', it is 'Tupi or Not Tupi that is the question'. How should one reconcile with the animist world of Hinduism which at a time offers us a perspective that resists the colonial mode of thinking but at the same time colonizes the world internally. The point is not to decolonize Hinduism but to show how mainstream Hinduism in India has created a system of colonization that employs tools of animism to colonize the spirits and societies of radical animism. The question also needs to be posited that can we consider the radicalism of animism in relation to other religions, culture and society beyond the locations of indigenous communities?

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Article

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The Jigsaw of Dis-coloration: Anti-Caste Poetics and *The Absent Color*[1]

Dickens Leonard[1]

Abstract

The article is a critical review essay that contextualises, discusses, and theorises anti-caste poetics in the context of discussions on Dalit aesthetics and experience vis à vis postcolonialism and subaltern studies, foregrounding an English poetry collection by a/nil, aka, Anilkumar Payyappilly Vijayan titled *The Absent Color* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2023). I propose that a/nil's poetry, in comparison to discussions on world literatures, demands a specific labor in reading; his writing produces an annihilation of a given sensibility in reading poetry. I suggest that his poetry works like an inverse jigsaw puzzle, offering an anti-caste critique of a *varna*-centered world which is in place. *The Absent Color*, I argue, un-colors this world of deceptions, using discoloration (like annihilation) as a conceptual framework, to critique the world colored by caste.

Keywords

Poetics, Critique, Caste, Dalit, Subaltern, Theory and Experience

> The message, just like the poem, was addressed to no one in particular. And yet both have addresses: the message is addressed to the person who happened across the bottle in the sand; the poem is addressed 'to the reader in posterity,' to me if I find it and, in finding it, become the poem's 'destiny.'
>
> —Mandelstam

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[1]This article is dedicated to the memory of Namdeo Dhasal (1949-2014); on his 75th birth anniversary and his 10th death anniversary year in 2024; and for his singular contribution to the emergence of the Dalit Panthers and the plural reception of his literary thought across the world.

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I'd given my poetry notebook
Long ago to Kabir as a keepsake.
But there's no Kabir in this bazaar.
The one who stands here accosting passers-by is me.

–Dhasal

I still write poetry
And nothing happens…

–a/nil

Talking of a poem reaching its destiny, i.e., to the unaddressed reader, Paul Celan—a Jewish poet writing in German—had described it as "a letter thrown to sea;" whereas Osip Mandelstam—a Jewish poet writing in Russian—likened the poet to "the shipwrecked sailor who throws a sealed bottle into the sea," and the poems are messages to be picked by their "secret addressee" ("Message in a bottle," 2004). And Namdeo Dhasal, the iconic Marathi-Dalit poet, remembers of his poems as a poetry-notebook left with Kabir—the fourteenth century poet—as a keepsake; and Kabir himself is now absent. Dhasal, thus, had to accost the passers-by in the bazaar in the absence of Kabir, likening himself to the fourteenth century poet. a/nil, aka Anilkumar Payyappily Vijayan, relating with these masters of verse in different languages from a different time and space, writes in *The Absent Color* (2023), that he still writes, and nothing happens. Absence and nothingness fill their poetic world; and for a/nil's poems, the reader—just like Celan's, Mandelstam's and Dhasal's—is not readymade, dispelling all arguments about the reader as an active agent of the author. A Dalit writer, often, is in search of an unborn reader but a writerly Dalit—a Barthesian figure—is always in search of a reading that is often absent (Barthes, 1973, p. 2); for it would be a reading against the scripting of caste.

Dalit Aesthetics and *The Absent Color*

The Absent Color, a recent publication of Navayana celebrating its twentieth year as a foremost Ambedkarite publishing house, is a collection of poems written in English that it gifted itself and the world. a/nil's verses now share space along with a few names in Navayana's published shelf: of Dhasal, Rajkumar, and Kandasamy's poetry in English (also as translation). This book, the publisher believes, would challenge "our ideas of …what makes great poetry, and what is expected of so-called 'Dalit poetry'" (Singh, 2023). In a sense, *The Absent Color* critically departs from recurrent themes of "suffering," "rejection and revolt," "narrations of experience;" and significantly, the promise of "consciousness and commitment," which Limbale, the literary critic, had enshrined as "an aesthetic of Dalit literature" (2004, pp. 30–33). Yet a/nil, although sharing these concerns that were raised by Dalit literary critics in the past, moves away from them as well, thus signifying a creative arrival; critically departing from definitive destinations.

In a similar vein, cautioning us of presumptive analysis, Henry Louis Gates Jr., the renowned literary critic and African American scholar, writing on "the race for writing on race," had suggested that:

> We must, I believe, analyze the ways in which writing relates to race, how attitudes toward racial differences generate and structure literary texts by us and about us. We must determine how critical methods can effectively disclose the traces of ethnic differences in literature. But we must also understand how certain forms of difference and the languages we employ to define those supposed differences *not only reinforce each other but tend to create and maintain each other*. Similarly, and as importantly, we must analyze the language of contemporary criticism itself, recognizing especially that hermeneutic systems are not universal, color-blind, apolitical, or neutral (1985, p. 15; italics mine).

Warning about the force of writing against fundamental signs of domination, i.e., the commodity of writing itself; the text operating as the technology of reason, Gates had argued against the immersive use of language to define supposed differences, which not only reinforce but also in vain create and maintain otherness. Raj Kumar, on the other hand, writing on Dalit literature and criticism, describes them as "creative expressions of a people who were *silent* for a long time" but who invariably inaugurate "new aesthetic values" (2019, p. vii; italics mine). Dalit is a "speaking subject" in the context of Dalit movements across the country. Dalit has the proclivity to do menial and manual work *silently* as seem fit within the caste system. When she becomes the writerly subject, who demands a reading, she becomes a force, more than a voice, against "fundamental signs of domination." These two theoretical concerns and tensions, in a way, germinate a/nil's poetry.

Carrying that rooted vein forward from Gates to Raj Kumar, I propose that, to engage with a/nil, one needs to purge his poems of readymade contexts, whether they are implicitly historical or explicitly political. Abounded by allusions that are impersonal, hermeneutic, and often esoteric, each of his poems may create its own context; and a context within which other poems and references could be read. Sharmistha Mohanty, writing on the cover, terms it as "a voice which has read everyone but imitates no one;" whereas Akhil Katyal describes his language as "wildly allusive, demanding and whimsical;" and for M.T. Ansari the lines are "unexpected…unruly and even uneven yet affecting all things around" (1). Albeit, a primary question may beg the readers: what can one write about a color that is *absent*; of that which is not *pre-sent*? How does one respond to a verse on it? And what if one is brought into a "mysterious" situation in which it is not easy to understand all the causes of what one reads? Poetry may become an enigma of a kind, one of a kind, and very unkind in such a situation; especially when the poem's destiny is playfully absent, negating, and nullifying everything around. Anti-caste poetics may then demand a specific labor to undo the trivialities that are made out of the context of caste.

Purging Trivialities against a Poetic Context

> If the *triviality* is over, can I move on to the question?
>
> –Kumar to Spivak

It is, perhaps, instructive to reflect on a recent diatribe between Prof. Gayathri C Spivak, the literary scholar, and Anshul Kumar, a student, at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, to understand the enigmatic labor behind reading *The Absent Color*. Ostensibly, the fracas was over Kumar's "incorrect" pronunciation of the name "WEB DuBois"—the twentieth century radical African American intellectual—which Spivak repeatedly corrected (Lakshman, 2024). Nevertheless, the event became an intervening discussion on "Can the Subaltern Speak?"—the cult text written by the famed scholar in the late 1980s (Kumar, 2024). The student identifying himself as a Dalit later engaged in a verbal harangue against Spivak on social media, in which he used several invectives. The exchange initiated a debate in scholarly circles too, raising questions about demonstrative creativity and performative propriety on the one hand, while underscoring the experiences of humiliation and the violence of imposed speechlessness on the other. In one of the engaging discussions on the issue, poet a/nil as Anilkumar P V, prosaically comments thus:

> When correct pronunciation is dictated by the Savarna, it serves as an entry token to the citadels of knowledge for people like Dalits, who inhabit the outermost ambit of the Savarna universe. The Savarnas not only close the door but also strip Dalits of their right to freely navigate a language that is unique in its spelling and pronunciation, a language notable for its fluidity. This fluidity allows for the *formation of new identities*, distinct from the languages and spaces in India that are overdetermined by casteist and feudal practices and phrases (2024; italics mine).

Paradoxically, Spivak interpreted the "speechlessness" of the subaltern only as an abject of the West, earlier, in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), thereby recusing any local dominance on navigation. In comparison, however, Gramsci had defined the subaltern as those "social groups" that are economically exploited and socio-culturally dominated. But in an unapologetic deployment of Foucault, Deleuze, and a reclamation of Derrida's theoretical premises in probing Indian women narratives as subaltern history, Spivak had given examples of Hindu law in Sanskrit—the locally dominant, caste-centered, yet self-privileging world view that castigates women and out-castes, relegating them to the outermost ambit—as the native culture of the subaltern in colonial India. This was singularly pitched against the colonizing west that is foreign, rather than that which is also within. This is, perhaps, a misdeed.

For instance, in a daring accusation Spivak had begun "Can the Subaltern Speak?" thus:

> Some of the most radical criticism coming out of the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject. The theory of pluralized 'subject-effects' gives an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing a cover for this subject of knowledge. Although the history of Europe as Subject is narrativised by the law, political economy, and ideology of the West, this concealed Subject pretends it has 'no geo-political determinations.' The much-publicized critique of the sovereign subject thus actually inaugurates a Subject. . . ("Can the Subaltern Speak?)

If one just rephrases "the west" and the "history of Europe," quoted in the paragraph, and reads it against the grain, while critically evaluating the writer's power to pronounce, translate, and speak for a speechless abject in the practice and proposition of subaltern history and post colonialism, one could understand that the writer's subjectivity to partially represent the east and the colonized is also, at once, an invested desire to conserve one's privileged subjecthood. It illusively undermines others by providing a cover to themselves, all the while indeterminately concealing and pretending to be a critique in public. This unjust concealment not only inaugurates but also continues to impose criminal subjection that ejects every other becoming, in a nutshell.

Colonial Heritage and Caste of the Subaltern

As recuperation, however, Spivak intrigues us further with the question of "heritage," more than three decades later, inviting us to rethink postcolonialism *personally*. Suavely titled "How the heritage of Postcolonial Studies Thinks Colonialism Today" (2021), she autobiographically remembers a Miss Charubala Dass—the principal of a school where she studied as a kid—whom Spivak fears that "*we* caste-Hindus treated… (her) direct ancestors…like animals" (22). This is presented as a personal story of her-self, as recuperation and reflection, being a part of the collective "we"—as "caste-Hindus;" however this is a misnomer. Perhaps, one may ask whether caste-Hindu, the Spivakian subaltern, is simply an alibi for a collective enclosure in Brahmin-hood, where a Miss Dass can never be a part of? It troubles because it embarks on a recuperative guise, in the name of a speculative recovery of subjecthood for the Brahmin, but at once, halting at an unreachable destiny for many like Miss Dass as heritage.

In this nostalgic endeavor to recover heritage, it is indeed Miss Dass's personhood and history that goes for a miss; her subjectivity is evacuated and is made absent in the sojourn of the Spivakian subaltern as a concept. It is merely re-presented as that innocent, if not ignorant, native-subject, who is animistic and dehumanized, by the

Hindu law through its "sruti (the heard), smiriti (the remembered), sastra (learned from another), and vyavahare (the performed-in-exchange)" (1988). Thereby, it dismisses Miss Dass as a person, albeit, as the animalistic other of a sanskritized culture that is in turn subalternized by colonialism.

In this twisted long-drawn reading, "sitting on the heritage of postcolonialism," the ancestry of the animal-like social groups—that Miss Dass's people belong to—has to also make way for the inauguration of a new subaltern, Spivak seems to conclude. They should be the "illegal immigrant" now, an islander amongst city's dwellers, without any heritage, who must seek to build bridges only as "social groups in the margins of history" (Gramsci quoted in Spivak, 23). Such demands are not only ignorant of caste as collective subjection, but they are also pretentious of its capability for violation. These proposals conceal the subjectivity of the casteist's imagination of the world as an island, in isolation and at a distance. Doesn't this thought disguise the Spivakian subaltern because it criminally subjugates and ejects every other becoming?

The diatribe that reminded Spivak of these gestural nuances as epistemic violence, albeit calling them out as "trivialities" that a language like English can bring to customary caste-power in academia, or in Spivak's case, the power that English brings in the formation of *new identities* that can at once subjugate and eject, thereby, objectifying any subaltern—as marginal—to an enclosure. These formations illusively undermine the other yet provision a cover to oneself by coloring the world outside. This palette of colors (*varna*) has to be cut-sharp, laid-open, and display the innards of its pretentions, and nullified to witness the truth as bare existence through the work of language. A/nil in *The Absent Color* uses English poetry, thus, purging the excessive, illusive formation and inauguration of the casteist guise/gaze as the public critique.

Discoloration as Critique

In the repository we read countless names
Unknown to our childish knowledge.
The photograph was not there,
Nor the piercing cries.

Either faces and no face
Or faces without names.

("The Absent Color," 69)

To read such a verse on an absent photograph amidst faceless faces without names: would one—the reader—be asked to comparatively read, identifying analogies, to get it and make sense? Would there be a demand to this reading for which one must be prepared? Especially, when people allude, speak in parables, use different tongues, employ minimal words and frugal sentences, or just be economical. Do they demand attention to something else? What is this puzzling and riddling all about? These questions would plague any reader who enters into the world of a/nil. An inquisitive

clamor is heard as verse. Rightly so, Saitya Brata Das calls a/nil as "the poet of questions…whose songs are essentially cries—that cry out in the wilderness, in the desert of time, so that even inanimate objects start lamenting at once" (2023).

> I cry like my earth, the rain of my mother.
> Darkling hopes, everywhere, fists in chains.
> And my violence and my apologies.
>
> ("Pre Face," 12)

a/nil's poems read like a maze of puzzles; for instance, of "Euclidean flat/ Uncorrupted by Mafias" and of "Now neatly Riemannian/Curved, explorable manifolds" to speak of "*No Clear Demarcation*" (13) as a response to an antisemite Ezra Pound. He sings of the "Icarians flight" and of "More's Utopia;" of a "Jew-hater" and "Metamorphosis;" and of "the Buddha and his Dhamma and Ambedkar" in "Kekule's dream" all in a single poem as a "*Rebus"* (16)—which is a riddle, or a puzzle made up of symbols. One is then asked of a labor and a commitment to crack them to see it through. Then one may ask in retort borne by his name a/nil: how do puzzles or riddles do the act of "annihilation" in language? Would it be by riddling the reader to pose a limit to language and experience? Perhaps, *The Absent Color* enunciates such an invocation. May be, it is a poetry of discoloration against colorful difference. It is called "undo" colors--the process of negating the essence of every color. Or, probably, it is poetry about absence, of inevitability, of nothing-ness. Arresting mindless reflections that make a color what it is, by stopping, absolving, and turning it all inside, evacuating all the colors within. His poems seem to *un-color* all essential colorations. Discoloration, I propose, becomes the *in-sight* of a nil.

> The spectres of bloodshed lurk in every turn of the tongue
> Not pointing to things out there but in our field of vision…
>
> … Peeled-off, poetry bleeds.
>
> ("Of Poets and Rapists," 22)

Indeed, a/nil states in his pre-face that he is partially insighted. Being partially blind from childhood and myopic to the colored world make his world uncolored. It is filled with "inverted memories," which is an active inversion of sight, forgetting all memory of colors even as it un-colors all sight. It un-colors what is left "un-imagined" and "un-manageable" (11); or, in his words, it "un-dreams" in "*Mneumosyne*" (98). So many "uns" pre-fix to un-fix poetry for a/nil. His poems side-step and step-aside the conditions of poetic nostalgia for rhyme, rhythm, and romance as they become an inflected out-cry: "…unfolding and… polishing … to have clarity…" ("*Unplannable Supplement,"* 56). They are an *unning* which "repeats the unrepeatable" as "*The Journey of the Rejected"* (62), and as a poetry of annihilation. They undo words that lessen the world of its colors, bit-by-bit, step-by-step!

An/nihilation and Writing

I am not a poet like me
Nothing is complete for now
Even now is in the middle
Like a Bible without punctuation

("I Can Only Give You This Refrain," 34)

So, one wonders, who is this "An-nihil-er"—the poet who is not like oneself—who does this discoloration? Born in Kerala and having travelled to the North-East (Tripura in particular) as a young teacher, poetry happened to him at this dislocation, he says. All he had was a desktop with a word processor, and the CD-Rom of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ("The nothing that comes of nothing," 2023). He returned to work in colleges across Kerala later in the 2000s and was very much alive to the post-1990s world of dis-cord and inter-net in India. Exposed to the violent complexities of the modular disengagement of caste in the southern-most tip of the sub-continent in Kerala, Anil's "lived experiences" inherit a discolored, untouched world. Vijayakumar reviewing a/nil writes that, "those who have read Ezra Pound, Paul Celan, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, and Slavoj Zizek, and who have also journeyed through the pains and sufferings of Dalit life in Kerala may find Anil's (a/nil's) poems easily accessible" (2023). But that is not enough. Biography alone limits and never allows one to move on, a little closer to a/nil.

Having read Anil's unpublished thesis titled *The Untouchability of the Unconscious* (2012)—a dabble with a two, too many "uns" there already—I can vouch that it is a tour-de-force of prosaic elegance. It read and evaluated the presence of "excessive absence," of that which is "unseen and untouched" in cinema. Through a Lacanian engagement, it demonstrated how Dalit identity is contained and disfigured in Malayalam cinema. In the last chapter, writing on the figuration of *Ponthan Mada*, a 1994-cult film, and foregrounding the eponymous Dalit character played by Mammootty, the national award-winning actor, Anil interestingly reads the portrait of an affective relationship between an untouchable servant and *Sheema Thampuran*, the colonial landlord (played by Nasiruddin Shah), in British India. He offered a hitherto unheard or unseen comparison, of a cinematic depiction that is in conversation with Marx, Lacan, Heidegger, Zizek, Ambedkar, and the Buddha at the end. Anil "saw" something else, and "read" everything else as "nothing." He had prepared himself as a readerly writer, a decade ago, in his own way, for this eventual encounter. These poems, however, out-run the age of his thesis; and some by more than a decade. They express and represent a distinct work of thought and experience.

As Dhasal writes of his own poems: "For what makes one speak or write is the themes that create an excruciating turmoil inside you, heighten your sensitivity, and leave you tenderly troubled. This is the sort of inner disturbance from which my poems

come" (2013, p. 112), a/nil's too create such a writerly space. While Dhasal's poem "*For Vincent van Gogh*" (2013: 78) had pinpointed a missing color of the sun, earlier:

> Sunflowers truly are
> The self-expression of your
> Experience.
> But, brother,
> You've forgotten to paint
> One of the colours of the sun!

Whereas a/nil paints "*The Dance of Darkness*" (2023: 40) in every flower as a smile to the sun:

> Every flower
> As the Japanese have correctly surmised
> Is the dance of darkness
> A smile to the sun
> Rooted firmly in the earth
> That's how the dancer becomes …

Influenced by major European poets and thinkers, and the Dalit intellectual writings that made one aware and awake, like Dhasal before him, a/nil's words are exposed to the world of continental thought, world literature, discussions on art and science, which constantly weighed against a discolored existence. His poems at once verify the world of quantum physics on the one hand and versify on an unforgiving Levinas (*"Entre Nous,"* 48) on the other. Sometimes, all of them in just 4-lines on a page. They indiscriminately read yet discretely interpret to taste and judge better, and ultimately "see" through. One gets a feeling that he looks and converses to an "inside," all laid bare, to see otherwise. Writing, or say a reading, born of this labor also demands such a labor. Thus, it educates, excites, and leaves one in a world of allusions, of pain and loss, of collusion and confusion arranged with precision and playfulness; and they "retreat into self annihilation beyond verse" ("*The Unnameable,"* 26).

The Inversive Jigsaw

> In search of a dialogue
> I talked to you over and over
> In desperation, in delirious fever
> You gave me no answers
> A shadow outside language
> Homeless within language, nothing.
>
> ("Deep Past," 31)

Allusion is a technique of inspired labor and a/nil uses it as an instrument of thought. It works as an economical means towards a calling, unto a shared world

of reading. It anchors an experience that is shared in the act of reading a colorful world. Colors must be slashed across and nulled so that a shared world of words can coappear to mark their presence with each other. This is a sharing, where Celan (en) counters Heidegger, whereas Euclides and Reimann, Pound and Kafka, Eisenstein and Tarkovsky, Oedipus and Habakkuk, Beckett and Joyce, Hegel, Marx, and Lacan, along with a host of rejected woman characters of the Judaic-centered Old Testament, exchange a word with a touching Ambedkar in conversation with the Buddha.

In bringing together this multi-figured encounter, a/nil counters the presence of any incisive "figural" excess. Neither any red that reddens every other; nor a black that blackens, or a white that whitens, any other. But Blue–*Neel(am)*–as rain drops trickle down "on mountain-top" (*"Nostalgia for the Void,"* 79); they wash it all away, *nils* everything as nothing, as "a shadow of an inverted rain" (*"The Night and Blindness of 98,"* 73) becoming a commune of discoloration. Like the blues, it is a collusion of odd singular notes. A coming together of a "singular-plural," an idea proposed by Jean Luc-Nancy, the French philosopher, to argue that being is always "being with," and existence is essentially co-existence. Not as a comfortable enclosure in a pre-existing bond, but as a mutual "abandonment and exposure" to each other (2000, pp. 1–100).

It is like a dissonant musical note arranged towards an indefinite void that is heard by another ear. This is the puzzle that a/nil poses…to another ear and eye. Not any puzzle but something akin to the opposite of a jigsaw puzzle through a technique of allusion in poetic thought. A jigsaw, as we all know, is a picture of playful arrangement, a puzzle on cardboard or wood. Cut up into a lot of smaller pieces of different shapes, one is invited to fit it altogether to get the whole picture. Each part in its place makes it wholistic. However, a/nil denies this party to be a part of parts in a bondage of pre-existence.

a/nil's "insighted blindness" (11) to *varna*—color—incites a nihilation against an ordered placement of colors. They are fixations, for him, that interlock and mosaic each other as assemblage, placing the untouched and the uncolored all pieced together into a façade of a union, all reddened, black-mailed, white-washed, and saffronised. It looks as if the dis-play is all over, and completely fixed. But when one dis-colors everything, washed away in blues, a reversive play is on as "*The Exchange Sacrifice*" (2023, p. 94):

> … like the vanishing mediator
> Slipped into the event horizon
> Disappeared just like that
> Knew this before…
>
> …Oh, they smelled of blue deep
> Mother warned: they go back, always
> And they did, like always…

This inverse jigsaw, a jigsaw in verse, is a cutting out by discoloration—an *un-coloring* of that which is excessively interlocked and mosaiced. It had to be unlocked

and undone, negating and annihilating every color that stands as a piece in order, for a place in *sanatan*, unshakable for eternity by itself. a/nil would part apart with a riddle just like Babasaheb, his predecessor—as the vanishing mediator.

Un-Coloring as Anti-Caste Poetics

In the end, a/nil as Anil declares the "with-outness" of others that rustle down a "nothingness" in flux, which cannot just "be" by itself, even as a book of poems parting apart (*"Without You,"* 101). So, he asks us to work along. In that, this collection—a jigsaw of discoloration—demands a distinct effort, a labor of love. It is unique as an experiment in the context of "coming out" narrations of lived experience of all kinds in English. Gopal Guru in an incisive piece that inaugurated a critical discussion on experience, thought, and the question of caste in Social Sciences, had argued for the moral conditions of reflective thought and a Dalit-need for theory as a social necessity. Vulnerable to the attraction of temporal power that does not flow from "theoretical practice" but from "more glamorous and easy spheres of mobility," doing theory, alternatively, is "a social necessity" for Dalits, Guru underlined, which demands "enduring moral stamina for resisting the temptation for temporal gains" as well as attractions that can "de-motivate a person from pursuing the spiritual" (2002, p. 5006).

In a stance similar to Plato the Greek philosopher, Guru foregrounded that poetry cannot be a substitute for theory as many Dalits try to "compensate for theoretical deficiency by doing brilliant poetry" (2002, p. 5007). He evaluated, albeit unkindly yet judiciously, that "most poetry, including Dalit poetry, is based on aesthetics and metaphors…but it belongs to the particular though it is based on rich experience." He suggested that, "it generates inwardness and keeps some things hidden from the public imagination," and concluded that "poetry has no conceptual capacity to universalize the particular and particularize the universal. It does not have that dialectical power" (*ibid*).

Guru's trial on the Dalit-settlement for experience, empiricism, and elegies seem to be answered by a/nil through a revelatory *rejection*, which is indeed a poetic "rejection of rejection" (2011). Unworking a theory of poetics, by not merely versifying theory, a/nil's poems move from the immediate to the abstract and, unlike any other, restore a radical *subjection*. Slavoj Zizek, the philosopher who validated a/nil in the cover page, remarks that "it is not versified philosophy but a true *thinking* in the form of poems…Like a sharp razor, it cuts deep into your skin" (2023: 1). As a/nil pre-faces poetically, "The other gives you tongues where the body loses the skin" (2023, p. 11), but concludes philosophically that "without you…there would have been *nothing* here for us" (2023, p. 101). Everything *is* with you here, for us.

Guru and Sarukkai, thus, in their latest work, formulate *maitri* as a new configuration of ethical relations between different socials which "has to be both universalizable and realizable", and cannot just be "an absolute platonic ideal". It "has to be experienced in the everyday form of human experience," they conclude (2019, p. 194). a/nil's

poems have labored and demand such a labor towards a new configuration. Unlike a written word that arrests the voice behind, separating and nulling all sounds, making all thought a soundless sight that is only visible, *The Absent Color* instead invites us to reverse jig both theory and poetry, the particular and the universal, the reject and the subject by sawing everything you see in excess as nothing but nulled in *blues*. Neither merely compensating nor definitively Platonic, but like the indefinite article "a" in a/nil, like a blue drop, drop by drop, it is profoundly unspecific and indeterminate. It is truly a *nil* that *uncolors*; and it is an act of love as well as thought that *moves*; travelling across in search of the "secret addressee" so as to discolor the world of pretensions. In the end, like the "*Habiru*" (2023: 7)—the rejected other of history—a/nil would thus riddle against all subjections and casteist trivialities:

> Rainwards
> Glides the smooth flow of the balloon of desires
> Sliced from prehistory
> Barred with words…
> …We move
> Like habiru
> Or do we?

***

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Populism, Anti-populism and Minorities: Governmental Discourses and Policies on the Romani People in Greece

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Abstract

The early 21st century has witnessed a significant rise in extreme nationalism, racism, and xenophobia, deeply affecting the rights of minorities such as the Roma, who have historically faced systemic discrimination and racism. Given that many political leaders who downplay minority rights often engage in populist discourse, a debate has emerged about the relationship between populism and minority rights. While many scholars argue that populism inherently undermines liberal principles like the protection of minorities, the question remains whether populism is necessarily anti-pluralist and anti-minority. What about the case of left-wing populism? Furthermore, why is the relationship between anti-populism and minorities often overlooked? In this article, we examine the relationship between populism, anti-populism, and minorities through the case of two different governmental discourses in crisis-ridden Greece. Specifically, we focus on the governmental political discourse and policies of the populist SYRIZA (2015-2019) and the anti-populist ND (2019-2023) on Roma, with the aim of showing that populism is not necessarily anti-pluralist, while anti-populism is not always pluralist, as both phenomena can follow inclusionary or exclusionary logics.

Keywords

Populism, anti-populism, minorities, Roma, SYRIZA, ND

Introduction

We live in a time that is characterized by the explosive rise of extremism, nationalism, racism, and xenophobia. This is reflected in the escalation of racist discourse and the high numbers of racist violence targeting various social groups, including Jews,

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Roma, migrants, and Muslims (Nwabuzo, 2019, pp. 12-13),[1] as well as in the election outcomes, with radical and extreme right-wing parties espousing nationalist and xenophobic ideas gaining substantial support (Wang, 2021).[2] In several cases, these parties present an exclusionary populist cloak, opposing the domestic and foreign political and economic establishment, as well as migrants, refugees, and minorities in general, putting their rights and status in danger. In addition, anti-minority logic is not limited to rhetoric but often manifests in state laws. There are governments in Europe and beyond that pursue anti-immigration and anti-minority paths (Fernandez, 2019; Baer, 2021).

One of Europe's largest ethnic minority/groups that face diachronically blatant discrimination and racism that keeps it in poverty are the Romani people (Renzi, 2010, p. 40). McGarry (2017, p. 1) notes that Roma "is one of the most marginalized groups in Europe". The economic and the pandemic crisis seems to have caused them even greater problems, leading to larger anti-Romani discrimination (Frazer & Marlier, 2011, p. 6; Matache & Bhabha, 2020). For example, in Italy, according to scholars, the (exclusionary) populist Matteo Salvini of Lega (Cervi, 2020), has expressed a Romaphobic discourse, framing Roma as a threat to cultural values (Cervi & Tejedor, 2020), while in Hungary, as Baer underlines, Orban has instrumentalized Muslim refugees and the Romani community for political purposes, capitalizing on popular xenophobia and racism (Baer, 2021).

More than a few political leaders who underestimate the rights of minorities often express a mixture of nationalist and populist discourse and performance. Their discourse is usually based on nationalism, as *the nation* functions as a central signifier, however, in many cases, it is accompanied by populist elements.[3] For that reason a debate has opened up about the relationship between populism and minorities. For a section of scholars, the connection between populism and anti-minority logic is not surprising, as populism tends to undermine liberal features like minority protections, mainly because it seeks to promote and protect the rights and interests of the majority (Mudde, 2013, pp. 3-4; Weyland & Madrid, 2019, p. 16). Is populism necessarily an anti-pluralist and anti-minority phenomenon? What about the case of left-wing populism? What if anti-minority discourse is connected to nationalism and xenophobia and not populism? Furthermore, why do we avoid examining the relationship between anti-populism and minorities?

In this article, we focus on the relationship between populism, anti-populism, and minorities through the case of two different governmental discourses in crisis-ridden Greece. In that period, populism and anti-populism emerged as a crucial ideological cleavage in the Greek public sphere (Stavrakakis, 2014, p. 509), directly affecting

[1] Between 2014 and 2018, racially motivated crimes have been increased in many EU Member States (Nwabuzo, 2019, pp. 12-13).

[2] In Greece, even a Neo-Nazi organization entered into the parliament (Yilmaz, 2014, p. 218) and remained there for some years. Moreover, in the election of 2023, three far-right parties managed to enter to the parliament (Fallon, 2023).

[3] For a discursive theoretical perspective on populism and nationalism, see: De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017.

discursive and performative repertoires. The Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) launched a fierce populist attack against the establishment mainly for their austerity policies, finally managing to rise to power in 2015, while New Democracy (ND) accused the radical left of expressing dangerous populism that threatened democracy, managing to return to power in 2019. The multiple crises, austerity policies, political discourses, and governmental policies have directly affected minorities and vulnerable social groups who were in dire economic and social circumstances. Was populism a factor that negatively affected their status, or not?

After analyzing the main characteristics of the notions of the minority, the phenomena of populism and anti-populism, as well as the theoretical discussion on their relationship, we examine the governmental political discourse and policies of the populist SYRIZA (2015-2019) and anti-populist ND (2019-2023) on Roma. In Greece, there are thousands of Romani people who live in difficult conditions and have been clearly affected by the economic and pandemic crisis and governmental policies. How did the two recent governments approach the issues of the Roma community? Can we confirm the argument that populism undermines the rights of minorities, or not? What about anti-populism? We analyze populism and anti-populism as discourses through the methodological tools of the Essex School of Discourse Analysis. Our aim is to demonstrate through the Greek case study that populism is not inherently anti-minority or anti-pluralist, just as anti-populism is not invariably pluralist. Both phenomena can embody either inclusionary or exclusionary logics.

The Notion of Minority and the Romani People

Over the years, various definitions of the concept of "minority" have emerged, with numerous references to minorities and their rights found in international organizations, constitutions, political manifestos, newspapers, and academic literature. However, it seems that there is not a widely accepted definition in the international community, despite the efforts of the UN. Furthermore, modern documents and treaties on minorities lack a definitive definition of the concept (Valentine, 2004, p. 445), likely due to the complexity of the phenomenon.

The first attempt to define 'minority' occurred in 1930 under the League of Nations, when the Permanent Court of International Justice (PCIJ) defined the concept of "community" (namely minority) in the context of the mutual voluntary exchange of the Greek-Bulgarian communities as outlined in the Neuilly Convention of 27 November 1919:

> "the "community" is a group of persons living in a given country or locality, having a race, religion, language and traditions of their own and united by this identity of race, religion, language and traditions in a sentiment of solidarity, with a view to preserving their traditions, maintaining their form of worship, ensuring the instruction and upbringing of their children in accordance with the spirit and traditions of their race and rendering mutual assistance to each other" (PCIJ, 1930, p. 21).

Many scholars of International Law adopt the interpretative approach proposed by UN Rapporteur Francesco Capotorti, who identified several specific characteristics of a minority. These include its relatively smaller numerical size compared to the rest of the population, its non-dominant position within society, distinct cultural, traditional, religious, or linguistic features, and a sense of solidarity aimed at preserving its collective identity. (Capotorti, 1977)

Some years later, the next UN Rapporteur, Jules Deschênes, offered a definition of "minority" that closely aligned with Capotorti's earlier definition (Deschênes, 1985, p. 31). Today, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a minority as:

> "an ethnic, religious and linguistic group, fewer in number than the rest of the population, whose members share a common identity. Members of minorities commonly share ethnic, religious, linguistic, and/or cultural characteristics that differentiate them from the majority, and generally seek to maintain these distinguishing identities. At the same time, the characteristics that define minorities vary widely from one context to another" (UNHCR a).

Building on these definitions, it is evident that minorities can be categorized into various types, including ethnic,[4] religious, linguistic, and others. In addition, some researchers identify additional dimensions within the concept of minority, referring to "minorities within", like "women, children, gay men and lesbians,[5] religious dissenters and linguistic minorities within minorities" (Eisenberg & Spinner-Halev, 2005, p. 5).

Minorities are not always officially recognized by states (Morel, 2006, p. 125) and as a result do not fully enjoy their rights. However, as Morel (2006, p. 125) argues, they can be recognized "through direct constitutional recognition of groups, or through indirect policies or programs such as identification in census data". The problem is that the non-recognition of their minority status (and the reference to them as a vulnerable or marginalized community) would deny them the extensive body of law on minority rights (Morel, 2006, p. 128). Since their rights as a minority are not fully recognized, it is easier to deal with discrimination. Minorities and indigenous peoples are often marginalized socially, economically, politically, and culturally in many societies, thus encountering obstacles to manifesting their identity (UNHCR b). Even though minorities have specific rights under the international human rights framework and laws (UN Human Rights Office), they can still be victims of serious human rights violations, conflicts, and persecution. In this article, we focus on the case of the Romani people, who are considered by most of the literature an ethnic

[4]"An ethnic group generally shares a common sense of identity and common characteristics such as language, religion, tribe, nationality, race or a combination thereof" (UN, 2018, p. 91).

[5]Sexual minorities include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals, whom their rights are often being violated (Math & Seshadri, 2013).

minority or an ethnic group (Von dem Knesebeck, 2011, p. 1; Ahmed, 2011, p. 174). The European Commission supports that:

> "The Roma are Europe's largest ethnic minority. Out of an estimated 10 to 12 million Roma living in Europe, approximately 6 million are citizens or residents of the EU. Many EU Roma are still victims of prejudice and social exclusion, despite the discrimination ban across EU Member States. The umbrella-term 'Roma' encompasses diverse groups, including Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as Traveller populations (gens du voyage, Gypsies, Camminanti, etc.)." (European Commission)

Nevertheless, according to Horvai (2012, p. 112), the categorization of the Romani people as an ethnic minority "oversimplifies complex issues related to self-definition and the social construction of the identity". McGarry (2010, p. 2) argues that "Roma are unlike other ethnic minority groups as they are a transnational minority without a kin state. Additionally, they are not united along linguistic, religious, familial, occupational and class lines and they are not territorially concentrated." However, Horvai (2012, p. 113) notes that the definition of transnational minority "raises questions related to citizenship and the protection of legal rights in the national context." Regardless of their status, there are specific legal frameworks that protect the Romani people (Horvai, 2012, p. 113).

In conclusion, in many countries the representation of the Romani people in decision-making structures is negligible and their size is often underestimated because they are undocumented, which limits their access to public services (Abdikeeva & MRG partners, 2005, p. 1). Even in countries where conditions are relatively better for them, they still face numerous challenges. Diachronically, Romani people deal with blatant discrimination and racism, keeping them in poverty (Renzi, 2010, p. 40). The economic crisis has put them in an even worse position. Cienski and Escritt (2019) stated that the economic slump hit Europe's Roma particularly hard, as they have been facing obstacles in finding a job in the formal economy, while they have been among the first to lose their jobs during the crisis. In addition, anti-Roma racism has increased during the pandemic crisis. As Matache and Bhabha argue, "from Slovakia to Romania and Bulgaria, states have enacted disproportionate or militarized measures targeting Romani neighborhoods or towns. Some of these measures are driven by a racist narrative that casts Roma as a collective health and safety threat" (Matache & Bhabha, 2020). Racist discourse and behavior against the Roma has been explained through some terms like "anti-gypsyism" (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2018), "Romaphobia" (McGarry, 2017) and "anti-Roma racism" (Matache & Bhabha, 2020). According to McGarry (2017: p. 1), "Romaphobia is the hatred or fear of those individuals perceived as being Roma, Gypsy or Traveller; it involves the negative ascription of group

identity and can result in marginalization, persecution and violence".[6] Regardless of the definition one chooses, the reality remains the same: Romani people continue to suffer from discrimination and racism.

Populism, Anti-populism, and Minorities

In much of the literature, populism is associated with an anti-minority logic, undermining minority rights and denying the liberal principles intended to protect them. Many populism scholars support the idea that populism calls upon a homogeneous people with one single general will against the establishment/the elite, characteristics that do not allow for the representation of the interests of the minority. For instance, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, p. 81) argue that "populism holds that nothing should constrain 'he will of the (pure) people' and fundamentally rejects the notions of pluralism and, therefore, minority rights as well as the 'institutional guarantees' that should protect them." Moreover, Kaltwasser considers that populism can use the notion and praxis of majority rule to circumvent minority rights, negatively affecting liberal democracy (Kaltwasser, 2012). For Müller (2014, p. 487), "while populism does not oppose the principles of representation and the practices of election, it necessarily has to deny any kind of pluralism or social division: in the populist imagination there is only the people on the one hand and, on the other hand, the illegitimate intruders into our politics, from both above and from below, so to speak." Weyland and Madrid (2019, p. 16) note that, "populism rests on majoritarian notions of politics that diverge from the fundamental goal of liberalism to protect minorities against the potential abuse of power." However, not all approaches to populism adhere to this logic.

There are indeed populist and nationalist examples around the world with anti-minority governmental discourse and/or policies. Baer notes that Orban in Hungary has instrumentalized for political purposes Muslim refugees and the Romani community, while having also targeted the LGBTQ minority (Baer, 2021). Moreover, a project in the Columbia Human Rights Law Review notes that the Trump Administration in the US had undermined human rights, paving the way for expanded immigration detention and deportation, ordering the construction of a border wall, suspending refugee admissions to the United States for a period of 120 days, separating over 2000 children from their parents at the border, etc. (The Trump Administration Human Rights Tracker). Is populism inherently anti-minority, and does it systematically infringe upon the rights of vulnerable social groups?

In this article, we distance ourselves from the aforementioned approaches. Following the Essex School of Discourse Analysis, we consider populism as a discourse (with both linguistic and non-linguistic elements)[7] that separates society into two opposing camps, the "people" and the "elites/establishment". According

[6] McGarry (2017, p. 5) writes: "I use 'Romaphobia' in preference to other similar terms such as anti-Tsiganism or anti-Gypsyism partly because 'Gypsy' and 'Tsigan' are considered offensive and many prefer the endonym 'Roma'."

[7] For Laclau and Mouffe, discourse is a network of meaning that articulates both linguistic and non-linguistic elements (Laclau & Mouffe, [1985] 2001, pp. 107-108).

to Ernesto Laclau, populism is "the dichotomic construction of the social around an internal frontier" and "the discursive construction of an enemy" (Laclau, 2005, pp. 38-39). Populism calls upon the popular subject against the political and economic establishment that promotes its own interests against the interests of "the many", forming a chain of equivalence and providing specific meaning to the new discursive construction. Hence, in populism we have two important features, "people-centrism" and "anti-elitism" (Stavrakakis, 2019, p. 94).

In contrast to approaches that perceive populism as an anti-pluralist phenomenon with homogeneity within its people, discourse analysis does not necessarily recognize a homogeneous popular subject. Thus, the people can be constructed through the combination of heterogeneous demands (Katsambekis, 2020). According to Mouffe, "as a collective will created through a chain of equivalence, the people is not a homogeneous subject in which all the differences are somehow reduced to unity" (Mouffe, 2018, p. 62). After all, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), who follow the ideational approach, have referred to inclusionary populist cases that include different social groups (demands) within its people.[8]

Furthermore, discourse analysis does not recognize predetermined characteristics within populist discourse, while it analyses populism through the relationship between key signifiers (nodal points) and the other signifiers. There are no specific pathological elements of moralization within populism, while they can be found in a plethora of discourses (Stavrakakis & Jäger, 2018, p. 560). In short, populism does not contain predefined elements at its core, taking different forms depending on the signifiers that surround it. Thus, while many approaches that characterize populism as a moralistic or pathological phenomenon recognize an exclusive link between populism and anti-minority discourse, our theoretical and methodological framework does not. Besides, conceptualizing populism as inherently anti-minority leads to the equation of different types of populism, leaving out of analysis a plethora of populist examples with distinct features. How can one exclude inclusionary populist parties that often promote and protect the rights of minorities?

The central elements of a discourse surrounding the nodal point of "the people" can provide us with crucial information about whether it seeks the inclusion of the popular classes into the popular subject (inclusionary populism), or whether it excludes them due to racist/xenophobic reasons (exclusionary populism). Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), who focus on different cases of populist parties and leaders in Europe and Latin America, underlined the fact that, in recent years European populism has been presented predominantly as exclusive (see radical right parties). While Latin American populism is presented mainly as inclusive (see left-wing populism). According to Stavrakakis, "in inclusionary populism "the people" operates as a fluid "empty signifier" without a fixed signified, while in exclusionary populism it usually refers back to a fantasmatic transcendental signified (the nation, race, etc.)." Furthermore, according to him, "in inclusionary populism the dichotomisation

[8] Katsambekis identifies this paradox of the approach of Mudde and Kaltwasser (Katsambekis, 2020, p. 64).

of the political space is arranged in a mostly vertical manner (up/down, high/low), while exclusionary populism involves a horizontal (inside/outside) dichotomic arrangement" (Stavrakakis, 2018). Filc notes that inclusive populism allows for the political integration of marginalized and excluded sections of the society, expanding the boundaries of democracy, while exclusive populism perceives the people as an ethnically or culturally homogeneous unit and excludes people or social groups on the grounds of racist or nativist reasons (Filc, 2015).

Similarly, anti-populism can manifest in both inclusive and exclusive forms. What is anti-populism? Anti-populist discourse is a strong criticism against the rise of populist parties through a fierce attack on populism and sometimes on the popular classes (Markou, 2021, p. 203), which together with populism have formed an antagonistic landscape that organizes the political meaning of the new environment (Stavrakakis, 2014). Anti-populism, of course, even if it includes liberal elements, is not always inclusive. For example, in Argentina, Macri's anti-populist and neoliberal administration created significant challenges for vulnerable social groups and minorities. Macrism identified poor migrants as the primary perpetrators of crime through its immigration legislation (Basok, 2019). Additionally, "Indigenous peoples continued to be criminalized and discriminated against", while "migrants' rights suffered significant setbacks" (Amnesty International, 2018, p. 76). Notwithstanding, anti-populist discourse is not necessarily anti-popular as some anti-populist parties and leaders adopt inclusive perspectives within their agendas. For instance, the Communist Party of Greece has repeatedly denounced populism, advocating a democratic and inclusionary society.[9] Hence, it is not useful to predetermine populist and anti-populist discourses, as they can take different forms. After all, "both (pro) populist and anti-populist discourses can acquire 'progressive' or 'reactionary', democratic or anti-democratic forms" (Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 3).[10]

Populism, Anti-populism and the Roma in Greece (2015-2023)

In Greece, many people are ethnically, culturally, or religiously different from the national majority. According to Triandafyllidou and Kokkali (2010), there are "co-ethnics", such as ethnic Greek Albanians, there are "native minorities", such as Muslims and Roma, as well as "migrant populations" like Albanians, Georgians, and Ukrainians. However, Miltos Pavlou (2007, p. 2) underlines that the Greek state acknowledges the existence of only one minority, the Muslim of the Western Thrace, which is recognized through international treaties of the early twentieth century. It is true that Romani are not recognized as an official minority[11] [(except from Muslim Roma) (Triandafyllidou & Kokkali, 2010)], but they are legally and institutionally

[9] For example, KKE demands substantial and personalized support and integration measures for refugees (Rizospastis, 2020).

[10] More for anti-populism find here: Markou, 2021.

[11] There are Greek political parties (and their MPs) that have referred in their discourse to the Roma as a minority, like SYRIZA, MeRA25 (SYRIZA, 2020; MeRA25, 2019).

identified as Greek citizens[12] (Reach, 2021, p. 11), as they were granted citizenship in the 1970s (Abdikeeva and MRG partners, 2005, p. 6). Moreover, the Greek Roma[13] are recognized as a "vulnerable social group" by the Greek state (Triantafyllidou & Kokkali, 2010).

Despite Romani people possessing characteristics that typically classify them as a minority—such as being fewer in number than the general population in a country and sharing a common identity—it is noteworthy that some Roma reject the characterization of their community as an ethnic minority (Abdikeeva & MRG partners, 2005, p. 6). Maria Tsampazi, SYRIZA's MEP candidate in the 2019 European elections and member of the Panhellenic Confederation of the Greek Roma (ELLAN-PASSE), stated (Avgi, 2021) that the Greek Romani people do not belong to an ethnic minority, observing that the racist treatment towards the "tsigans" is a phenomenon of the last thirty years:

> "Greek tsigans have brazenly stated since 1971 at the World Roma Congress in London that since they have never been persecuted in Greece and since there was no racist treatment of them by the Greeks, they do not want to be described as an ethnic minority in their country" (Avgi, 2021).

In Greece, vulnerable social groups and minorities, including the Roma, were significantly affected by the economic crisis, austerity measures, and the recent pandemic. Romani representatives have repeatedly highlighted that their problems have worsened with the onset of these major crises (Antonopoulos, 2021). Nevertheless, Greek Roma have long been facing social exclusion and discrimination, including the lack of adequate and permanent housing, poor health, low employment rates, unequal wages, illiteracy, and the stereotypical perceptions of a significant part of Greek society (Atsikpasi et. al, 2016, p. 398). Greek governments periodically plan specific policies that attempt to promote their social inclusion through strategies on education, employment, healthcare, and housing,[14] but they do not appear to have fully achieved their goal to this day. Additionally, the recent rise of the conflict between populist and anti-populist parties—each advocating either inclusionary or exclusionary logic—may have also impacted their lives. Did populist and anti-populist leaders and governments play a role in the deterioration of the position of the Greek Roma, or not? How did the SYRIZA-led and ND governments in Greece approach the Romani people? Does the evidence support the view of an "anti-minority populism"?

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[12]More for the Greek legislation for the Roma in Greece here: (Social Inclusion of the Roma, 2018).

[13]In 2018, the Special General Secretariat for the Social Inclusion of Roma recorded Roma in Greece, numbering them around 110000 (Avgi Newsroom, 2018).

[14]In Greece, the first attempt to construct a coherent framework of political support for the social integration of the Roma was in the mid-1990s. More on Greek legislation and initiatives for Roma integration here: (Social Inclusion of the Roma, 2018).

SYRIZA-led Government (2015-2019): An Inclusionary Populist Case?

SYRIZA is a left-wing party which, both in the opposition and during a period of its rule, expressed a strong populist discourse that called upon "the people" to oppose the domestic and foreign political and economic establishment, the traditional parties, corruption, austerity policies and neoliberalism (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014; Markou, 2017). Specifically, after its rise to power in 2015, the left-wing party maintained its populist discursive and performative elements but not so much its radicalism, continuing to place "the people" in a central position and against the establishment. Nonetheless, it gradually reduced the intensity of its populist discourse, while its political decisions drove it away from part of the people (Markou, 2021, June 14).

At a time when many researchers analyzed the supposedly anti-pluralist character of populist parties, thus often equating left-wing and right-wing forces, there were scholars (Markou, 2017; Font et. al, 2021; Katsambekis, 2019), who focused on a type of populism with inclusionary/pluralistic elements. SYRIZA in power pursued a humanitarian agenda intending to support vulnerable social groups and minorities. After all, its political discourse constructed an inclusive popular subject ("the people" functioned as a nodal point) which among heterogeneous identities demands, included immigrants, the LGBTQ community, Romani people, Muslims, and vulnerable social groups in general. Moreover, despite the fact that SYRIZA formed a coalition government with a radical right party (on the basis of a "popular front" against austerity policies), it maintained its inclusive agenda, promoting and voting policies in favor of minority groups. For example, the government of Alexis Tsipras recognized many of the rights of the LGBTQ community, such as the civil partnership agreements between same-sex couples, the recognition of gender identity and the legislation that allows same-sex couples to foster children (Katsambekis, 2019, p. 38). In addition, the SYRIZA-led government implemented inclusive policies for immigrants, such as the law that grants Greek citizenship to second-generation migrants (Kotronakis, 2015). However, although SYRIZA, while in opposition, frequently criticized governmental policies on immigration and refugees, it did not achieve significant progress on these issues after coming to power. Although it demonstrated a willingness to address the issue from a new perspective—for example, by establishing a Ministry of Immigration Policy—it continued to face significant challenges in practice. To exemplify, their living conditions in "Reception and Identification Centers" were dire. It is characteristic that the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) of Council of Europe underlined in a report the unfavorable conditions that existed in reception centers in Greece (CPT, 2017).

Let's examine how SYRIZA approached the Roma. During his governmental rule, Tsipras developed a special relationship with the Romani people, having meetings with representatives and members of the Roma community, referring to the discrimination they suffered and supporting their rights. Tsipras' political performance frequently

featured images highlighting his warm relationship with the Roma, including hugs, warm greetings, and celebrations. The leader of SYRIZA tried, as part of his populist discourse and performance, to show his undivided support for the Roma. For example, when he visited a settlement in northern Greece where Roma live and people with different religious beliefs coexist, he stated: "Regardless of the God we believe in and the color our skin is, we are human beings, we are citizens of this country and we must have equal opportunities and equal rights" (CNN Newsroom, 2019). In 2019, the president of SYRIZA welcomed, as the prime minister, representatives and members of the Roma community in Maximos (Maximou) Mansion on the occasion of World Roma Day and said:

> "Today is a special day. It is a day dedicated to the Roma. But I would say that it must be a day to remind all of us that there are no second-class citizens. Unfortunately, this is not, especially in our time, something that is self-evident. This discrimination based on gender, racial origin must stop. And this is a battle that cannot be won overnight. It is a battle against prejudice, it is a battle against stereotypes" (Tsipras speech, 2019).

Furthermore, a member of the Panhellenic Confederation of the Greek Roma (ELLAN-PASSE) participated in SYRIZA's European ballot in 2019, forming together with the other candidacies a mosaic of identities, cultures, and ideas. In the election campaign for the 2019 European elections, a large part of the Roma community participated in SYRIZA events, a fact that was negatively characterized by a part of the media and conservative citizens. The president of SYRIZA reacted against racist views, saying: "We welcome them, there are no second-class citizens in Greece" (protothema.gr, 2019).

At the level of policies, the SYRIZA-led government tried to tackle the extreme poverty and social exclusion of the Roma through some crucial interventions. In 2016, it established a Special General Secretariat for the Social Inclusion of Roma with Law 4430/2016 (article 42) with the aim of implementing interventions in the education, employment, health care, and housing of the Roma, monitoring and evaluating policies related to them and conducting research on their living conditions, etc. (Lawspot.gr, 2016). The Special General Secretariat recorded Romani people for the first time in Greece, numbering them around 110,000, while mapping the 370 Roma settlements/camps to improve living conditions of the people (Avgi.gr, 2018). Moreover, special importance was given to strengthening the education of the Roma. For example, the Solidarity Social Income was granted to Roma on the condition that their children go to school (Government, 2017). In addition, the SYRIZA-led government promoted interventions related to housing support and the improvement of the living conditions of the Roma (Law 4483/2017) through the transitional relocation of Roma who live in makeshift or irregular accommodations to appropriately organized housing complexes with social support services (Government, 2018; Ziomas et. al, 2019, p. 13). Finally, in 2019 the government planned to strengthen Roma entrepreneurship within the

Operational Program "Competitiveness-Entrepreneurship-Innovation" of the NSRF 2013-2020 (taxheaven.gr, 2019).

Overall, the SYRIZA-led government seems to have moved more in an inclusive direction in its discourse and policies, but without bringing the desired results on immigrant and refugee issues. As an inclusionary populist party that constructed a heterogeneous popular subject, it put special emphasis on improving the lives of Romani people through a few policies and interventions, without, of course, providing solutions to all their problems. The truth is that Roma continued after the end of its rule to live marginalized and in poor living conditions. Nevertheless, SYRIZA's efforts for Roma inclusion were appreciated by a large part of the Romani people. After all, the party received thousands of votes from them in the 2019 national elections. For example, in the Dendropotamos region in Thessaloniki, where many Romani people live, SYRIZA got 63.5 per cent of the votes, while on the contrary, New Democracy got only 15.8 per cent (Tovima.gr, 2019, July 10). Evidence suggests that the SYRIZA-led government demonstrated a notably greater emphasis on the inclusion of the Roma compared to many previous administrations.

New Democracy Back in Power (2019-2023): A Paradoxical Example?

ND returned to power in 2019 after four and a half years of SYRIZA rule with a one-party government, securing 158 of the 300-seat parliament (Tidey, 2019). ND is a right-wing party that combines liberal and conservative characteristics with a pro-EU stance. Specifically, it exhibits a paradoxical character, characterized by a contradictory blend of rhetoric and ideas, oscillating between liberalism and nativism, with conservatism prevailing. Its rhetoric does not always go hand in hand with its political action and vice versa. In recent years, especially after the electoral rise of SYRIZA in crisis-ridden Greece, ND has expressed a strong anti-populist discourse that considers populism one of the greatest dangers to (liberal) democracy (Markou, 2021). Its anti-populism stems mainly from the discourse of its leadership, while at the same time, there is a part of the party that flirts intensely with populism. Nonetheless, its anti-populism is central to its political performance, directly affecting its relationship with vulnerable social groups. At the same time, ND embraces a nationalist logic on various issues, while its leadership discourse relies largely on the concept of security (safety), underlying the need to protect "our neighborhoods" and "our borders" (ND, 2019a). Its rise to power came with the promise:

> "to lead Greece out of the "stagnation" of the Syriza years, deal with the refugee crisis, assert Greece's position on the international stage, and introduce technocratic governance following five years of "populist mismanagement" (Tsimitakis & Panayiotakis, 2021).

The leader of ND, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, presents himself as a liberal politician who respects social diversity and believes in democracy based on the will of the many and

the protection of the few, underlying the importance of providing equal opportunities to everyone (Toumasis, 2020). Mitsotakis declares from time to time some statements against social discrimination (e.g. in the case of LGBTQ people), highlighting the need to eliminate it (Protagon Team, 2022). However, these progressive statements do not present the whole picture of his party's political discourse and performance. First, the president of ND refers to minority issues and rights only occasionally, primarily in the context of specific events or international days (e.g. International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia). Second, his references to vulnerable social groups and minorities in his public (pre-election) speeches are few and far between. For example, in his keynote speech in Athens before the 2019 elections, the president refers to all Greek citizens, including employees, farmers, professionals, retired, civil servants, unemployed, young mothers, and university students, but without focusing on minorities and vulnerable social groups, such as Muslims, LGBTQ community, migrants, etc. (ND, 2019, July 4). Third, the Mitsotakis' administration implemented policies that weakened the position of vulnerable social groups in the country, including the (temporary) cancellation of issuing the social security number (AMKA) to "migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, unaccompanied refugee children and non-EU nationals" (Pannia, 2021, p. 57).

What about the Romani? Both in opposition and in power, the leader of ND does not appear to seek a close relationship with the Roma or include them in his political agenda, and his references to them are infrequent. However, he presents himself as a politician with social sensitivities and an advocate for the social inclusion of the Roma. Specifically, ND president carries out some minimal actions to emphasize the importance of "equal opportunities for everyone", such as his participation (whilst in opposition) in a football match against the Greek Roma team, with the aim of "breaking down prejudices and stereotypes" (News247, 2018) and his statement that all children should have equal opportunities, referring to Roma families (Tovima.gr, 2019, April 8). Furthermore, in 2023 Mitsotakis met Roma families in Katerini, where he promised the removal of social exclusions, as well as the inclusion and the assurance of equal access of the Roma to public education and job opportunities (In. gr, 2023, June 10). Nonetheless, a part of the party has expressed racist and provocative comments about the Roma at different times, such as in the case of an MP of ND (former Deputy Minister of National Defense), who expressed racist opinions about Romani people, asking from them not to vote for him in the elections (Ertnews.gr, 2018, March 3). The problem is that the party did not take decisive action against this kind of racist comment.

At the policy level, ND promoted numerous initiatives for the social integration of the Roma, such as inclusive educational programs. Moreover, it planned to implement (after some years in the country's governance), within the framework of the National Strategy for the Social Inclusion of the Roma (2021-2030), a strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion of the Roma, strengthen their equal access to basic services and goods, prevent and combat stereotypes and discrimination against them and promote

their active participation in social, economic and political life (Social Inclusion of the Roma, 2022, March 9). In the context of this strategy, the program "Social Integration and Empowerment of the Roma" was presented in June 2022, with the aim of solving serious problems of the Roma (Social Inclusion of the Roma, 2022, June 6).

However, the initiatives and strategies for the inclusion of the Roma present many problems and seem to be going at a slow pace. According to the president of ELLAN-PASSE and its legal advisor, once again a national plan for the Roma is being drawn up without asking the opinion of the Romani people. These actions concern mainly the Roma in a state of extreme poverty (which means that not everyone is included), while the role of their higher-level body (ELLAN-PASSE) is not institutionally guaranteed anywhere (Konstantopoulos, 2022). It is interesting that representatives of the Roma community refer to the lack of communication between ND and the Roma community, as the right-wing party does not often come into direct contact with them.

Additionally, during ND's tenure, a number of initiatives and decisions undermined and violated the rights and interests of the Roma. First, the "Special Secretariat for Social Inclusion of Roma", which institutionally recognized the social integration of the Roma as a distinct public policy, was abolished by presidential decree [84/2019, Article 7 (5)], while its services came under the new "General Secretary for Social Solidarity and Fight Against Poverty" (e-nomothesia.gr). Second, according to the president of ELLAN-PASSE, thousands of Roma children were excluded from distance education during the pandemic, because several camps lacked basic necessities such as electricity and running water (Konstantopoulos, 2020). Third, the state implemented no protective measures during the pandemic for the Roma, who live under inadequate living conditions (Andrianopoulos, 2021). Fourth, there were many complaints of police violence against the Roma.[15] Not without reason. For example, in October 2021, an unarmed young Roma, who had stolen a car with two other persons, was killed by police fire after a police chase (Varvantakis, 2021). In that case, the Minister of Development and Investment and one of the two vice presidents of ND, Adonis Georgiadis, congratulated the police who had shot at the Roma, because according to him they "did their job well and protected both their lives and society by defending themselves"[16] [17] (Varvantakis, 2021).[18] ELLAN-PASSE characterized it as a "murder of a 18-years old Roma", arguing that: "…the crime was committed by official state bodies with the seven police officers who fired 38 bullets against three unarmed young Roma" (ELLAN-PASSE 2021, October 24). In 2022, a 16-year-old Roma was killed

[15]ELLAN-PASSE has published statements on police violence against the Roma (see: ELLAN-PASSE, 2022).

[16]See: (Georgiadis, A. 2021).

[17]Some days later, Adonis Georgiadis said: "The state must help them to find a job and be included in the society. But they must also understand that what they are doing confirms the stereotypes" (Press Project, 2021).

[18]Varvantakis (2021), argues on this issue: "Observers may wonder what exactly was heroic about a frenzied shooting of three unarmed young people, which led to the killing of one of them. The answer may lie in the identities of those who were shot at and their status in Greek society."

by the police during a pursuit because he did not pay 20 euros for gasoline at a gas station (tvxs.gr, 2022, December 22), while in 2023, a 17-year-old Roma was killed by police gunfire following another pursuit (Efsyn.gr, 2023, November 13). Hence, despite the purported declarations and plans for the social inclusion of the Roma, the approach taken by the right-wing government appears to result in their stigmatization and further marginalization.

In summary, ND presents a paradoxical image overall, as it integrates both inclusive and exclusive elements in its discourse and policies on minorities. However, regarding the Roma minority, despite Mitsotakis's declarations and some policy initiatives, his government has not done much to help them in practice. On the contrary, there have been instances where the Roma have been marginalized and have experienced social discrimination. The government appears to lack an understanding of the problems faced by the Roma community, as it does not engage in regular dialogue with them. Consequently, Romani people are often excluded from Greek society—a concern that has been repeatedly highlighted by community representatives.

Conclusion

Through this analysis, we aimed to contribute to the academic discourse on the relationship between populism, anti-populism, and minorities by offering an alternative perspective on the issue and criticizing theories that posit a predetermined anti-pluralist element within populism. Moreover, we examined how the Romani minority was approached by both a populist and an anti-populist government in Greece, aiming to highlight the inclusive and/or exclusive characteristics of their respective discourses and policies.

As we have seen, on the one hand, SYRIZA and Alexis Tsipras (2015-2019) expressed—more or less—an inclusionary populist discourse that embraced Romani rights, promoting their social inclusion. Despite that SYRIZA failed to fully satisfy popular demands on the economic level due to Memorandum policies (Markou, 2017), the party made significant strides in advancing minority rights, although it did not resolve all the issues affecting these social groups. One of the most significant issues was its inability to find a solution to the immigrant and refugee crisis, as well as to improve the living conditions of these people in the country. On the other hand, the anti-populist Kyriakos Mitsotakis and his party demonstrated a paradoxical performance, characterized by some inclusionary and numerous exclusionary elements in their discourse and policies on minorities. Regarding the Roma minority, the ND government appears to have promoted their marginalization rather than their social inclusion.

The example of SYRIZA fully confirms our argument that populist discourse can construct a heterogeneous and democratic popular subject, without being necessarily anti-minority, while the case of ND proves that anti-populist parties may advocate for the inclusion of marginalized groups, however, their discourse and policies are not

always fully inclusive in practice. The Greek case shows that the anti-minority logic does not necessarily go hand in hand with populism, while underlining the importance of studying the anti-populist discourse and its effects on specific vulnerable social groups.

Finally, it is important to highlight two key issues raised by this article. First, the paradoxical stance of ND towards minorities prompts us to reconsider the efficacy of the "inclusionary" and "exclusionary" approach. While ND occasionally flirts with right-wing radicalism and incorporates many exclusive elements in its discourse and policies, it is not certain that it can be characterized as a (fully) exclusionary party, particularly given that its leader frequently advocates for the inclusion of some minorities. Second, the fact that SYRIZA, despite largely expressing an inclusionary populism, failed to address the issues faced by immigrants and refugees in Greece raises questions about the extent to which a political party can fully implement its inclusionary policies or ideas within the existing post-democratic and neoliberal capitalist context. It is true that even when a party comes to power with an inclusionary agenda and good intentions toward minorities and vulnerable people, it may struggle to effect substantial change if it does not confront the prevailing political and economic framework. Thus, even when inclusionary parties are in power, not all minorities necessarily experience an improvement in their living conditions. This implies that a government seeking to present itself as progressive should not merely address the immediate problems faced by minorities, but should also strive to fundamentally reassess these issues and advocate for structural and radical political changes.

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From Panthers to Political Dalits: Revisiting the Legacy of Dalit Panthers in India

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Abstract

The Panthers had created a rupture from the earlier pattern that Ambedkar has strategized to integrate the Dalits as one of the important political subjects of the modern nation state. The Panthers deviated and invested in two radical ideological traits; the Civil Right Movement in the US (including the Black Panthers' Party) and radical Marxism (Indian Naxalite movement) to transform Ambedkar's social theory into an aggressive brand of transformative politics. The Panthers showed open discomfort with the given liberal model of democratic politics and attempted to shift the traditional Dalit political ideology into a revolutionary force. Though the Panthers' innovations have impressed the urban Dalit youths and intelligentsia, it failed miserably in forming a concrete political alternative at the regional or the national level. I have concluded that, with the rise of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the Dalits were introduced to an improvised liberal political agenda, different from the earlier variants of Ambedkar's participatory politics and the Panthers' militant rhetoric. It shows that the Dalits are more convinced and engaged with the liberal-democratic model and consciously refute the militant and radical methods for political actions.

Keywords

Ambedkar, Dalit literature, BSP, radicalism, naxalism, Maharashtra, pragmatism

> "We will build the organization of workers, Dalits, landless, poor peasants through all city factories, in all villages. We will hit back against all injustice perpetrated on Dalits. We will well and truly destroy the caste and varna system that thrives on the people's misery, which exploits the people, and liberate the Dalits. The present legal system and state have turned all our dreams to dust. To

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> eradicate all the injustice against Dalit, they must themselves become rulers. This is the people's democracy. Sympathizers and members of Dalit Panthers, be ready for the final struggle of the Dalits." (*Dalit Panthers Manifesto,* 1973)

Since the beginning of the 1970s, the nation had started witnessing a widespread disillusionment among the marginalized sections against the political rhetoric of development and social justice, offered by the ruling elites. Various fragments of society (women, peasants, students, *adivasis* (tribes), etc.) whom earlier had posed their faith in the progressive developmental agenda of the state had started their independent movements to articulate an organic opposition towards achieving a substantive form of social democracy and economic justice (Sangvai, 2007, p. 111). The Dalit Panthers (DP) emerged in such widespread turmoil of the new people's movements in the 1970s. From its notable emergence in the poor urban alleys of Mumbai till its downfall in the late 1980s, in a very short period of time, it has achieved a cult status with a remarkable impact in restructuring the conscience of the subaltern communities, especially of the urban Dalit youths. It has articulated one of the most daring and militant political ideologies for the socially marginalized groups that disturbed the political establishment with its revolutionary zeal and alternative language of resistance. However, within a decade, such an impressive force is relegated to the margins with only some memorials available in the literary-folk traditions in Maharashtra. In the contemporary Dalit discourses, there are only a handful of cultural activists that may claim to have carried the radical legacy of the Panthers.

This article investigates two questions. First, it examines the rupture that the Panthers had created in the earlier strategies and political program that Ambedkar had initiated to integrate the Dalits[1] as the important political subjects of the new nation state. The Panthers combined two radical ideological traits; the Civil Right Movement in the US, including the Black Panthers and the radical Marxism (Indian Naxalite movement) to transform Ambedkar's social theory into an aggressive brand of transformative-revolutionary politics. The Panthers showed open discomfort towards the liberal democratic politics and judged it as a system that serves the interest of the social elites. Therefore, the Panthers opined that a complete uprooting of the 'bourgeois-Brahmanical' institutions is a must to insure justice against the social maladies and economic injustices. Though the Panthers overtly legitimized the idea of romantic militancy as an appropriate form for the emancipatory struggle, it failed to engage the Dalits into its revolutionary program or even in building a popular mass mobilization of the downtrodden people. Within a decade of Panthers' arrival, its radical euphoria collapsed and the organization became defunct.

[1]Dalit is a political term, mainly used as a synonym to represent the Scheduled Castes (regarded as 'Untouchables' in the traditional Brahmanic Hindu social order). Jyotiba Phule used this Marathi word to name the most marginalized social groups and it was later adopted by Ambedkar to represent the same in his journalistic writing *Paddalit* (crushed under feet), *Dalitoudhdhar* (Dalit emancipation) etc. Literally it means crushed, broken or oppressed. Dalit Panthers provided it a positive and dignified meaning by placing it against the given political identities like Gandhi's *Harijan* (God's people) and other socially degraded low caste identities.

Second, I have argued that Panthers' sudden decline showcases that the Dalit masses were ill prepared for such an aggressive brand of political activism. Instead, the liberal-democratic format for political participation remained the preferred choice of the Dalit masses. Especially in the case of Uttar Pradesh, it is visible that distinct from the Panthers' appeal, the Dalit politics under the leadership of Kanshi Ram reinvents the relevance of democratic politics by adopting improvised social strategies and would soon emerge as an influential mass movement. I have concluded here that with the rise of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the Dalits were introduced to a new language of political presence, different from the Panthers' variant. After witnessing the shortcomings of classical Ambedkarite politics and the utopia of Panthers' militant rhetoric, the BSP initiated new strategies for political mobilization, introducing the Dalits as new leaders in democratic battles. The party was successful in creating a new 'political Dalit' that is more convinced and comfortable with the idea of achieving political power through a greater politicization of the social identities, rather than the aggressive and separatist methods presented by the Panthers.

From Passive Liberals to Lumpen Proletarians: The Origin of the Dalit Panthers

The Context

Ambedkar introduced the Dalits as compulsory participants in the new democratic institutions. It was a revolutionary turn as the modern constitutional legality promoted the ex-Untouchables as significant participants in state power and provided opportunities for their economic mobility. In the first two decades of the new republic, the Dalits showed their uncritical allegiance to the political system with a poised hope in the national project of political and economic development. The Congress party utilized the Dalit constituency as its natural ally in winning the elections over the heightened agenda of social justice but hardly awarded the Dalits influential positions in political and state institutions. The new realm only produced a handful of self-engrossed Dalit middle class individuals with a declined sense of self-respect and lack of political ambitions. On the other hand, the vast Dalit majority remained excluded from the benefits of political developments and capitalist growth and suffered under precarious social and class conditions.

The post-Ambedkar Dalit leadership also remained passive as its party, the Republican Party of India (RPI) had limited organizational strength and lacked innovative strategies to build impressive political mobilization.[2] Very soon factionalism popped up within the party on flimsy issues, allowing the Congress party to appropriate the disgruntled Dalit leaders. An influential RPI faction formed electoral-alliance with the Congress party and its leadership turned into a 'client' to the dictates of the 'patron'

[2]In the late 1960s, the Republican Party of India (RPI) under Dadasaheb Gaikwad did mobilize peasants and Dalits on crucial issues of land rights but soon failed to remain united as the sole political heir of the Ambedkarite legacy.

leadership (Jogdand, 1998, p. 1072). Importantly, the socio-economic context remained almost unchanged for the majority of the Dalits as the rigid upper caste hegemony continued as a regular norm. Dalits face visible discrimination and atrocities and were condemned to survive under poverty and ghettoized locations. The Panthers emerged as a reaction to the growing atrocities (Teltumbde, 2020). Though the Dalit political class raised these issues, it lacked the commitment, honesty and courage that could have led the masses towards a better social and political arrangement.

The Panthers emerged as an attack over the widespread pessimism attached to the Dalit identity in the post-Ambedkar period. It evolved in the early 1970s, at a juncture when the independent political capacities of the Dalits (under RPI) had little impact and it mostly operated as a submissive force under the dictates of the Congress party. In the absence of a vibrant political alternative and ideological merit, DP was welcomed as the true harbinger of the conscious Dalit subjectivity.

The Panthers was sporadically established in Mumbai in 1972 by a bunch of newly educated Dalits, young artists, poets, unemployed youths and social activists mainly to articulate a critical militant Dalit response without fear and compromise.[3] It was poised to build an ideological response against the social elite hegemony, insensitive and corrupt political and bureaucratic order and also against the opportunist, stooge-like behavior of the Dalit leadership (Murugkar, 1991). It evoked a new language of protest based in the rooted experiential episteme of the social wretchedness and class exploitation, arguing that the question of poverty was misplaced in the contemporary Dalit movement (Omvedt, 2011, p. 77). It stood distinctively from the mainstream Dalit political movement and its ideological goals as it wanted to place the Dalits at the centerstage of political deliberations by bringing the issues of rape, violence and atrocities in the mainstream discourse.

The DP movement was one of the most imaginative exercises within the Dalit discourse. It promoted a radical Dalit agency to draw a political roadmap different from the conventional liberal model of democratic politics adopted by the post-Ambedkar Dalit leadership. It proposed a militant rejection to the integrationist ideals of nationalism, secularism and constitutional justice to promote a romantic vision for the future, imagining the downtrodden mass as the ruling class. The Panthers gave an élan that only after the complete overthrow of the caste system, alongside a call for the reforms in modern institutions (as it protects the interests of the social elites), would real justice to the poor and the Dalits will be achieved.

The Activism of the Wounded Souls

The first few years of the DP activism were marked by sudden mobilization of youths over the growing incidents of caste atrocities, rapes of Dalit women and social violence/boycott of the caste Hindus against the poor Dalits.[4] The incident that

[3]Raja Dhale, J.V. Pawar, Namdev Dhasal, Avinash Mahatekar, Latif Khatik, Baburao Bagul and Bhai Sangare are recognized as the leading collective behind the forming of the Dalit Panthers on 9 July 1972 in Siddharth Nagar, Mumbai.

[4]The incidents of Dalit women being paraded naked by the dominant caste Hindus of the village have hovered over Dalit consciousness. The case of Dalit boycott in Bawda and sexual assault

brought the Panthers into the limelight of Maharashtra's politics was the anti-Dalit Worli riots of 1974. The Panthers had decided to boycott the *Bombay Central (North) Parliamentary bye-election* to protest the growing cases of caste atrocities (Jogdand, 1991, p. 82). The DP's Public meeting at Ambedkar Maidan, Worli on January 5, 1974 was disturbed by anti-social elements from the nearby upper caste localities. The miscreants started hurling 'stones and soda bottles' from the neighboring buildings causing injuries to the people and created a situation of riot and conflict. The police reached there immediately only to protect the interests of the dominant castes. The police mercilessly lathi-charged the gathered people (including women and children), fired teargas bullets and also arrested numerous Dalits, while taking 'virtually no action against the perpetrators of violence' (Mody, 1974, p. 44). DP leaders Raja Dhale and Latif Khatik were arrested along with 19 DP activists.

The situation of riot continued in the following days as the police assisted the rioters in unleashing a long violence in the predominantly Dalit residential location of BDD chawl (colony).[5] On 10 January when the DP organized a peace procession at Parel, demanding inquiry over the biased role of the police and immediate release of the DP leaders, it was further attacked by Shiv Sena activists, resulting in clashes in which a DP activist, Bhagwati Ramji Jadhav, was killed on the spot.[6]

A year before the Worli riot, the Panther as an organization came into news over a fiery article in a Marathi magazine *Sadhana* by Raja Dhale. It denounced Independence Day (15 August) as "Black Independence Day" (Kala Swatantray Divas) and made strong comments against the national flag questioning the legitimacy of independence over the pretext of growing atrocities against Dalit women (Dangle, 1992, p. 253). The Shiv Sena and Jan Sangh (party which was a precursor to the current Bhartiya Janata Party) demonstrated at the *Sadhana* office demanding Dhale's apology (Rao, 2009, p. 189). Members of the Panthers' overwhelmingly endorse Dhale's line and observed that year's Independence Day as the Black Day. Further, DP leader Namdeo Dhasal was also arrested for making inflammatory remarks on the same issue. The radical and aggressive tone of the article was debated heavily amongst the Dalits, along with the concerns over the arrests and atrocities against the Dalit activists. This event and later the Worli riots brought the Panthers in the mainstream political discourse of

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on two Dalit women in Brahmangoan (both in 1972) was discussed significantly within the Panther's circle. The inability of the political class that represents Dalits (mostly RPI) to deliver justice to the victims has further motivated the Panthers to think about direct mass actions.

[5]The Maharashtra Government set up a judicial enquiry committee over the Worli-Naigaon Riots, headed by the then Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court, S.B. Bhasme. He submitted his detailed report in 1976, mentioning the close connection between the police, the upper caste lumpen gangs and the Shiv Sena activists in instigating and prolonging the violence and atrocities against the neo-Buddhist Dalit community.

[6]*Economic and Political Weekly* (*EPW*) published a news report of the same incident. It gives a detailed account of atrocities committed by the upper castes under the patronage of Shiv Sena and the police personnel. It is also mentioned how the growing might of the Panthers were seen as a threat to the political establishment. (See "Attack on Dalit Panthers" *EPW*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Jan. 19, 1974)

Mumbai.[7] The Dalit residential colonies of the city (Dadar, Parel, Worli, Naigaon, Taddev, Bhiwandi) became central locations for demonstrative actions. It created several situations of conflict, especially against the assertions of the Shiv Sena which was equally struggling to establish its political base in the same region (Rao, 2009, p. 189). The DP also measured itself as a compatible and capable force that could challenge the Sena's lumpen chauvinism through counter violence.

In both cases, the involvement of the Shiv Sena as an arch rival to the Dalit cause made the conditions violent and conflicting. The DP leadership showed its readiness to counter such attacks and converted the political battle into a street fight between two caste gangs. It presented the Panthers as fearless and aggressive law-breakers, resembling the heroic persona of 'angry young man', different from their corrupt and passive political counterparts. Though their political acts and actions are not admired by the general masses, including the Dalits, the Panthers were able to promote themselves as a serious and committed group for a greater moral cause. Very soon, the Panthers became a state-wide phenomenon with a loose but widespread network of *chhavnis* (branches), influx of new members, indulging in a series of socio-political acts, organizing processions and public meetings to highlight the precarious conditions of the Dalits.[8]

Compared to the Sena, the Panthers hardly achieved any significant form of organizational structure and mostly remained mobile and active whenever cases against Dalit atrocities appeared in the newspapers. The DP activists would visit the site of the atrocity and try to mobilize people for demonstrative action. The speeches would be infused with rhetoric of violent revenge, social tension and coercive pressure tactics.[9] Such acts, for the first time introduced the Dalits as capable beings who wanted to end caste oppression without direct support from state institutions.

Literature as Everyday Life

No! No! No!

A Triple rejection,

To your economic, social, political, mental, religious, moral and cultural pollution

You ever-living, ever luminous sun!

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[7]Excerpts taken from Raja Dhale's interview, telecasted on a Marathi News Channel (*Jai Maharashtra*) on the 40th anniversary of the Dalit Panthers.

[8]In 1974, it is estimated that there were 25,000 DP members, mostly the neo-Buddhist Mahars (Deliege, 1999, p. 170).

[9]Namdeo Dhasal narrated one such incident to a Marathi news channel. In Bhugaon, a Dalit pregnant woman was raped by the upper caste landlord's son. She committed suicide the next day. Dhasal immediately mobilized close to 2000 people in Pune with petty arsenal (hockey sticks, latthis and swords) and barged into the village to give justice to the victim, against the failure of the police and politicians. The Panthers encircled the house of the culprit and decided to give the final judgment over the rape case by burning the whole house. However, they were stopped by the local MLA, and with the promise of immediate relief and fair judgment the Panthers withdrew their violent protest.

Your every touch brings a contagious disease.

But I am a new sun

Independent, self-illuminating,

Possessed of new spirit

I reject your culture.

I reject your Parmeshwar (The almighty) centered tradition.

I reject your religion-based literature.

…

I have taken into account the unceasing battles.

I may bend but I won't break.

The DP movement influenced the Dalit writings and added a radical and militant fervor to its language. The above-mentioned poem by V.L. Kalekar, a Dalit poet, depicts the conscious contempt against the Hindu caste order and the readiness to counter it. It reflects the confidence and courage of the Dalits as the vanguard of socio-political change. The Dalit literature groomed new idioms and expressions against the standard, morally loaded aesthetics and sophistication represented in mainstream Marathi literature. It created a realistic imagery about the unheard and unseeable Dalit lives in the rural and urban ghettos and introduced readers to the hidden filth and degraded living conditions, like that of Mumbai slums, prostitutes and the excluded Dalit *bastis*.

The autobiographies, stories and poems revolve around the theme of extreme caste atrocities, cruelties, humiliated personalities, powerlessness, forced prostitution and perpetual despair in Dalit's everyday world (Zelliot, 1978, pp. 84–86). In the plays of *Dalit Rangbhoomi* (DP's theatre group), the artists would consciously enact the brutal rape incidents or the scenes of lynching/murder of the Dalits, not to sensationalize the issue but to depict the everyday inhumanity that rules the Dalit living spaces. The classical expediency of socialist-liberal analogy appeared too sophisticated and alien to address the precarious and degraded living conditions of the Dalits and therefore writers and poets (like Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar and Baburao Bagul), Intellectuals (Raja Dhale and Arun Kamble) and public speakers (Bhai Sangare) utilized harsh and even patriarchal/filthy tones available in the daily colloquial vocabulary, to voice frank and fearless opinions.

Panthers' major influence in the social discourse is to present the Dalit as an aggressive social identity that is ready to confront adversaries with violent means. The new 'Dalit-self' rejected the passive, downtrodden, unintelligent identity to cherish a new modern consciousness as a robust free being. The Panthers' literature envisaged an enlightened community that treats each individual with dignity and provides them equal access to the entitlements of a modern society. It was a resurgence of a sovereign 'Self', liberated and motivated for complete social transformation. For example, Dhasal's 'Dalit Panthers' Manifesto' that outlined the organization's ideological goals,

refused the material doles that the benevolent liberal state offered to the Dalits, as it made them submissive to the authority of the social elites. Instead, the Panthers were poised to claim the whole system:

> We will not be satisfied easily now. We do not want a little place in the Brahmin alley…We want the rule of the whole land. We are not looking at persons but at a system. Change of heart, liberal education, etc., will not end our state of exploitation. When we gather a revolutionary mass, rouse the people, out of the struggle of this giant mass will come the tidal wave of revolution. (See Joshi, 1986, p. 146)

The literature provided them an accessible platform to express their sentiments and vision without fear and prejudice. The Dalit writings became a tool to conceptualize and imagine the socio-political sphere different from the given order. The poetry, prose, essays and the biographies centered over the Dalit wretched life is not only pessimistic and dark narrations of their sufferings but simultaneously it projects a visionary human agency of Dalit consciousness, eager to revolutionize the crippled, violent world into a liberated space for human equality and peaceful co-existence (Shaikh, 2021, p. 15).

The Radical Political Ideology

Panthers improvised the Dalit identity as a poised collective adjective. They tried to reach out to a larger section of struggling people, offering them an 'hermeneutic ability' to recover the historic meaning of the past (Guru, 2001, p. 98). The Panthers provided modern and materialistic significance to Dalit identity and crafted a 'proud' Dalit-self, ready to engage in the democratic deliberation as a free person. Such aspiration rejected the bracketed and humiliating denominator like the Hindu *asprushya* or Gandhi's *Harijan* (Zelliot, 2001, p. 130) and invited the ex-Untouchables to view themselves as torchbearers of a revolutionary movement. Panthers redefined the political ideology for Dalit emancipation by evoking Ambedkar not as a mere parliamentary social democrat but as a crusader for a complete revolutionary praxis.

DP was inspired by the ongoing civil rights movement by African Americans in the US. However, the Panthers were more inclined towards its radical version. For example, the aggressive Black Panthers movement during its radical phase, showed its antagonism against the passive non-violent, assimilationist model proposed by Martin Luther King Jr. and other white reformist leaders. The Dalit Panthers drew inspiration from the early works of Black Panthers leaders and cultivated its image as a radical revolutionary and in their performative texts showed readiness to even adopt violent means for self-defense. During a crucial phase of the radical Black Panthers movement, certain leaders questioned the possibility of an alliance with the White radicals and liberals (Middlebrooke, 2019) and criticized the assimilationist affirmative action policies (Meister, 2017, p. 21), the DP also advocated critical distrust

towards the democratic politics in India and called for its complete transformation. They suggested a rediscovery of the independent cultural and religious merit rooted in the newly gained Ambedkarite consciousness (Shaikh, 2021, p. 19).

The Marxist socio-political movement further influenced the DP. The rise of the socialist countries under the leadership of Communist Russia was also imagined within the Dalit discourse as the inevitability of Marxist doctrine towards achieving a complete proletariat international revolution by the working classes. In India, because of their most disadvantaged position, the Dalits can relate directly to the proletariat imagination (especially in the Naxalbari movement) with an organic capacity to wage revolutionary struggle. However, within the Dalit discourse, Marxism is interpreted not only as a class-specific political theory but also as a tool to understand how the ruling social elites have re-structured the caste system and retained their dominant control over major institutions of power.

Influenced by Militant 'Black Power' ideology and Radical Marxism, the Panthers bonded Ambedkarite principles to develop a new indigenous language of revolution, emancipation and justice in India. Powered with a new language of social revolution, they fearlessly reprimanded the polity for protecting the class-caste interests of the social elites and even called the Independence of the nation a farce against the downtrodden masses. It looked at the political power with Rosa Luxemburg's sense of 'internal colonialism' and termed the Brahmanical elites as the new brown masters of the black Dalits and Adivasis slaves.

The Panthers adopted a militant language of resistance and opposition against the inclusivist rhetoric of the passive civil rights movements, political democracy and constitutional justice (Slate, 2012, p. 130). The DP followed this political line and improvised the language of social protest, using violent contempt against the feudal-Brahmanical order. The Panthers had an overt suspicion towards the integrationist social justice model and on occasion argued to launch a revolutionary struggle to establish a socialist order.

On its normative aim, the Panthers claimed that all the oppressed groups who suffered religious and economic exigencies must be unified as 'Dalits' and thus offered a new indigenous nomenclature for the proletariat masses in India.[10] It was a grand imagination of creating a collective notion for the oppressed groups with a radical adherence to political ideologies that promised revolutionary transformative objectives. The Panthers created a complex mosaic of varied revolutionary ideas mainly to carve a distinct space in the bourgeois democratic milieu. In this respect it departed from the socialist-liberal elegance that Ambedkar had adopted to characterize the Dalit politics.

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[10]The Dalit Panther's Manifesto published in 1973 is an important document that shows the ideological imagination that the intellectuals have offered. It defines Dalit as "A member of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhist, the working-people, the land-less and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically, and in the name of religion." (See Joshi, 1986, p. 145)

The Panthers departure towards the Left and Marxist praxis soon became the reason for ideological conflicts as sections amongst the Panthers (led by Raja Dhale) decided to stick to the canonical features of the Ambedkarite movement (peaceful struggles, Buddhism and demands for constitutional rights) and regarded the Dhasal faction as a sporadic 'infantile disorder'. Navayana Buddhism was pitched as a competent theological model against the rigid Brahminic society and looked upon the wider anti-caste movements to generate organic ideological resources. The debate produced a rich anthology over caste-class relationship and hoped to see a promising convergence of Marx and Ambedkar to evolve a revolutionary political ideology.

The Churning and the Decline

The Slippages and Factionalism

DP was a poorly conceived organization with no financial resources, social capital or political support. Soon the Panthers witnessed factionalism over ideological issues between Dhasal and Dhale (Marxist versus Buddhist) and the growing criticism from the RPI leadership. Also, the leaders and the activists were often booked and harassed by the police, which began to affect the activists. As there were no resources to contest the police cases in the court, the fear and threat of police action often demoralized the activists from taking part in the protest demonstrations.

After Indira Gandhi's sudden declaration of Emergency (1975-77), one Panthers' faction collided with the socialist movement (influenced by JP Narayan) and opposed the imposition (Dighe, 2013), whereas the Left leaning DP leader, especially Namdeo Dhasal supported Indira Gandhi's authoritarian regime (Rao, 2009, p. 350). There was widespread disturbance and indiscipline within the DP (like the hostile accusations between Dhasal and Dhale), and only at certain local levels, the Panther showcased their organizing capacities through militant protests and mobilizations, especially to organize protests against the cases of caste atrocities. For example, in 1977, a handful of DP activists demanding special safeguards to the Neo-Buddhists had courageously disturbed a huge political rally of the then Home Minister Charan Singh at Shivaji Park in Bombay. However, on most occasions it remained a defunct political force and only sporadically showed its presence.

In late 1978, a major faction amongst the Panthers under the leadership of Gangadhar Gadhe joined the greater Dalit struggle for the renaming of the Marathwada University after Ambedkar, popularly known as Namantar Andolan (Movement for Renaming). The DP aggressively campaigned for the cause and faced heavy police repression. This movement received unprecedented media coverage and activists felt the need to build a national Dalit organization. In March 1979, the Bhartiya Dalit Panthers (BDP) was formed in New Delhi, aiming to launch new branches in the northern state of India, Uttar Pradesh (UP).[11]

[11]The first president of BDP, Bapurao Pakkhidey wished to attach the DP activism with the political front of RPI in UP, however because of internal differences and petty politics, the

The Panthers emerged again into political news in 1987 with the publication of Ambedkar's writings *The Riddles of Rama and Krishna*. The Shiv Sena reacted heavily against the text as it contains critical remarks against the Vedas and depicts Hindu deities with objectionable narratives. The Sena called for its ban, mobilized the dominant castes and decided to publicly burn the volume (Joshi, 1992, p. 50). It was countered by Panther activists, resulting in large incidents of street fighting on streets of Bombay. Like earlier, the Panthers mode of protest during this event too was instant and aggressive. Especially in Mumbai, the remnants of Panthers tried to build their presence against the growing fear and threats of the Shiv Sena, however nothing much was achieved and it soon collapsed. Founding leaders of the Panthers (like Dhasal and Dhale) adopted various political options, contested elections or worked in the literary field.

The Reasons for the Collapse

This unique exposition of radical alternative was short lived and at the beginning of the 1990s it completely collapsed. The activism of the Panthers was not a planned strategic exposition towards achieving petty bourgeois political objectives but in contrast it was reactionary, disturbing, sudden and sometimes even violent acts of resistance. It operated with a deepening urge to break away from the conservative social bondages, economic exploitation and absence of the Dalits in dominant political locations. However, there was no match between their utopian ideological goals and the practical circumstances in which the Panthers were operative. Hence, the Panthers tried to achieve a grand task without preparing its own ground for such a huge battle and thus periodically declined as a movement. Anand Patwardhan's mega documentary 'Jai Bhim Comrade' depicts the decline of the robust Dalit political consciousness, its loose camaraderie with the Left ideology and the uneven, unethical nature of the Dalit political class in providing leadership to the real cause. He comprehensively showed the actual pathological condition of the Dalit movement today and succinctly criticizes it for remaining distanced from the radical tone of Ambedkarite-Left alliance only to play a second fiddle to the feudal-bourgeois political outfits.

In general, assessment for the downfall is seen in the incapacities of the young leadership to mediate between the ideological planks under which the movement must operate. The infamous 'Dhasal-Dhale clash' eventually converted into personal accusations that resulted in the faction in the Panther movement (Omvedt, 2001, p. 153). Both groups contested the primacy of ideological orientation that should dictate the political and emancipatory strategies of the movement. Dhasal indicated his open allegiance with the Communist Party of India (CPI) and insisted on collective struggle against class and caste exploitation. On the contrary, Dhale opted for the Buddhist conversion movement as an exclusive Ambedkarite strategy that has the capacity to dethrone the Brahminical hegemony to carve a new religious and cultural identity of

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BDP was officially dissolved in 1990s, allowing its members to take their political calls independently. (See Jaoul, 2007, p. 191)

the Dalits. Dhale eventually expelled Dhasal from the Panthers in October 1974 (Rao, 2009, p. 192).[12] Further, the attempts to forge an 'Ambedkar-Phule-Marx' alliance by political outfits like Sharad Patil's Satyashodhak Communist Party and Bharat Patankar's Shramik Mukti Dal introduced new players in the caste-class debates in Maharashtra. It tilted the balance of political debate more towards class perspective, making the Buddhist agency a mere social phenomenon.

The second response about the decline claims that the leadership, intellectuals and the audience for the DP's activism remained restricted within the Mahar and the neo-Buddhist communities. The Panthers presented an abstract unity of all the Dalit castes including the Adivasis, however the other sub-castes within the Dalits (Matang, Mang, Chamar and Mehtar) in Maharashtra have shown little interest in joining the Panthers. At their respective local activism, the residents (including Muslims) regarded the Panthers as passionate and righteous campaigners for justice,[13] however it has not transformed the stereotype that DP has remained an exclusive Mahar movement.

The third critical assessment argues that the leaders of the DP opted for more liberal alternatives and accepted the dictums of political democracy. The leading activists and leaders opened their independent political shops only to bargain for petty profits from the big political master of the Congress party (Wankhede, 2005). Further, the breakup of RPI in multiple factions divided the activists of the Panthers. Its linkage with the factions of RPI and failure to provide political alternatives during elections delegitimized their character as the real voice of the poor Dalits. Further, the DP also failed in forming political or social alliances with other struggling groups (rural Dalits, Adivasis, working classes, Naxal movement and Muslims) and hardly developed a comprehensive synthesis on the 'class-caste' ideological debate (Guru & Chakravarthy, 2005, pp. 146–47). The popular agitation built against caste atrocities, for students' fellowships, reservations and employment soon dried up in the absence of a competent mobilizer, the needed resources and organizational strength.

Finally, it is observed that Mumbai, one of the most important locations of Panthers activities, came under the direct threat and control of the regional parochial political party, the Shiv Sena. Mumbai politics was dominated by the communal-parochial leadership, which clamped down heavily against Dalit activism and on many occasions restored police brutalities including killing innocent Dalits in police firings. The fragmented DP is restricted to operate only in the Dalit ghettos under the fear of retaliation and police atrocities. It remained vibrant at the literary front with its philosophical content, but its radical posturing as street fighters died down suddenly after the 1990s. Further, those who remained committed to the revolutionary political

[12]Interestingly, Namdeo Dhasal joined the Shiv Sena and became an early proponent of the 'Shiv Shakti-Bhim Shakti' political alliance. The other leader, Raja Dhale had earlier collided with one faction of Prakash Ambedkar's RPI (Bahujan Bharip Mahasangh) but later launched his own organization, Phule-Ambedkar Vichardhara. It showed that those ideological debates were not the central issues by which the DP started vanishing from the public sphere.

[13]Contursi A. Janet has conducted comprehensive fieldwork on the Panthers' movement in Maharashtra between 1985-86 and has mentioned this aspect about the activists, especially in the Bhimnagar slum of Pimpri-Chinchwad district. (See Contursi, 1986)

culture of the movement have been haunted and harassed by false police cases and tagging them as Naxalites as indicated in recent incidents.[14]

The above-mentioned reasons have qualified merits to understand the decline of the DP movement in Maharashtra. However, it is still unconvincing to accept the fact that at today's juncture there is almost no one in Maharashtra to claim the heroic imagination that the Panthers envisaged as a revolutionary strategy for social emancipation. I would argue that though Panthers created a successful rumble in the socio-political atmosphere, it was never seen as a serious challenge to the political establishment. The romantic and utopian radicalism of the Panthers was short lived mainly because of the impractical assessment of concrete political conditions based on certain canonical principles. The adventurist Class-Caste international alliance for complete revolution or the fanatical over-assessment of imagining India as 'Prabuddha Bharat', both undermine the other democratic credentials in which society operates. The Panthers created a greater valorization for a casteless-classless society emphasizing heavily on the idea of caste antagonism. Such extreme criticality towards the usage of caste identity in the political field further arrested their capacity to think in a more imaginative way about how to indulge other social identities in the struggle. Here, with the emergence of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) under the leadership of Kanshi Ram, produced a new dynamic alternative that challenged the utopian considerations of the Panthers with a more rational and practical political arithmetic.

The Post-Panthers' Dalit Politics: The arrival of BSP's Political Pragmatism

Distinct from Panthers' zealous and radical approach towards democratic politics, Kanshi Ram adopted a liberal standpoint to build the Dalit movement. This model emerged as a subtle critic of the Panthers' program and ideas, evoking innovative strategies to build a new innings of Dalit politics.

To find a viable political alternative, Kanshi Ram initially experimented by building a trade union style organization, identical to the non-political assertion of the DPs, called the Backward and Minorities Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF) in Pune in 1973. Simultaneously, he also formed a 'quasi-political party' called Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangram Samiti (DS4: Committee to fight for the community of exploited and oppressed) in 1982 in Maharashtra mainly for agitational politics and to spread political awareness among the Dalits (Sudha Pai, 2002, p. 109). DS4 was motivated to spread awareness about Ambedkar's political ideology, especially in areas where people are 'ignorant about the life and mission of Ambedkar' (Kanshi Ram, 1982, p. 125). Both socio-political experiments by Kanshi Ram were intrinsically built on the model earlier championed by the Panthers in Maharashtra,

[14]The prosecution of cultural activists (Sheetal Sathe and Sachin Mali) of Kabir Kala Manch under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act is one such incident. The state has branded them as absconding Naxalites. Anand Patwardhan's documentary 'Jai Bhim Comrade' has considerably highlighted the plight of these activists.

to assert an aggressive communitarian identity of the Dalits, initiating campaigns, mobilization and agitations to engage the socially deprived masses.[15] However, Kanshi Ram also learned that such 'agitational' politics was not yielding good dividends in the electoral democracy and therefore changing the nature of political activities became imperative.[16] BSP is the result of such deliberation.

With the rise of BSP in 1984, the celebrated political term 'Dalit' now has to contend with a new popular collective term called the '*Bahujan*' (literally the "majority mass"). It connotes a discursive front of socially marginalized communities and religious minorities that purports to 'challenge the majoritarian claims of an aggressive Hindu nationalism' (Ganguly, 2002, p. 332). In the post-Ambedkar period, this imaginative new political slogan emerged as a comprehensive tool to organize the socially marginalized groups as a new democratic force against the other nationalist formations. Kanshi Ram presented this vision by giving a practical road map of social revolution based on the idea of social engineering. The idea of *Bahujan* was one of the most imaginative political categories, which he coined to overturn the dominant generalisation that sees the Dalits as the submissive participant (through reservations) or aggressive claimants (pressure tactics through the agency of agitation, like the Panthers). *Bahujan* identity is crafted as a democratic political alliance between the politically deprived caste groups under the leadership of the Dalits. It elevates the Dalits as a master category in the formation of *Bahujan,* leading the coalition of all the deprived social communities to challenge the conventional ruling elites. This alternative based on a majority-minority dichotomy (*Bahujan* versus the social elites) though mimics the classical Marxist category, improvises it with Gramscian cultural attire, making it suitable to the Indian context.

BSP enthralls the Dalits as the leading agents of democratic change and builds dynamic aspirations for political power within them. Panthers, on the other hand, has this hypothesis that political power will be inaccessible to the Dalits (due to the demographic limitations and incapacity in resource mobilizations) and only by forcing the establishment with radical overtones, can the Dalits improve their conditions. BSP's sharp electoral ascendency in Uttar Pradesh proved that the Panther's hypothesis is untenable as it established the Dalits as a significant force in mainstream politics. Thus, the BSP departed from the canonical objectives of the DP and provided new ideological goals, a powerful organizational capacity and robust aspirations to challenge the ruling establishment.

[15]In 1983, DS4 organized a 'unique' '100 days Social Action Campaign' in which hundreds of cyclists under the leadership of Kanshi Ram traveled all over India (thirty-five districts/ seven states/3000 km.) campaigning against caste atrocities and mainly to promote Dalits as a new independent political force of national stature. A cycle is utilized as the new weapon of the poor to organize democratically in public places. (See Joshi, 1986, pp. 109–117)

[16]BAMSEF was strategically created by Kanshi Ram to build a financial resource and ideologically oriented cadres with the support of strong middle class government employees. With it, he launched DS4 mostly to mobilize the Dalit sections. His first attempt to contest the Assembly Elections (1982) in Haryana on 46 seats had minimal success.

BSP undermined all the three canonical values that the Panthers stood for during the days of activism and drifted comprehensively from social questions towards a political agenda. First, the BSP valued and granted political space to the caste identity rather than building a hypothetical 'enlightened' community through Buddhist conversion. Buddhism appeared as a blockage in creating a social platform of the *Bahujan* that represents various aspirations (social, economic and political) of the marginalized groups, whereas Buddhism suggests an exclusive new social identity, traditionally related to the Mahar caste.[17] Second, the BSP stood away from the 'Leftist' model of aggressive politics of agitation, political vendetta through street violence and symbolic protests for gaining immediate socio-cultural benefits from the state. The party also showed restraint in politicizing the cases of Dalit atrocities, caste discrimination and non-fulfillment of reservation quotas in government jobs. It hardly presented any flashy charter of economic demands or even argued that distribution of land will resolve the issues of poverty and marginalization. The BSP had no affiliated mass organizations based on professional/communal or caste affiliations and even distanced itself from the functioning of the BAMCEF.

Finally, the BSP further showed political aversion to the intelligentsia and the middle-class values of political correctness. It remained distanced from the populism created by the media, academic disciplines and also from building a superior ideological merit in the battle of political ideas. Instead, it invested in building a quasi-secretive strategic plan for mobilizing the Dalit masses by utilizing an indirect mode of communication specifically related to the given caste/community.[18] Dalits were framed as new political masters who can manipulate, converse and pragmatically use the democratic subjects for political gains without any recourse to ethical judgment. The BSP advanced the 'political Dalit' as a matured agent, different from the Panthers' modes that emphasized on the emotive caste exclusivity and militant resistance.

Conclusion: Examining the Appropriate Revolutionary Model

The Panthers produced new revolutionary ideals different from the liberal-bourgeois passivity offered by Dalit politics and the accommodative nationalist rhetoric of the social elites. It imagined a militant political alternative against the hegemonic appropriation of social and political assets by the upper caste elites and its lackeys. The unemployed urban youth became the new aggressive voice of the movement that employed street protests, mass agitations and emotive speeches to produce a militant socio-political consciousness amongst the Dalits. The language that the Panthers had introduced was inspirational and radical but was also stuffed with rhetoric of religious proximity (Buddhism) and anti-constitutional violent jargons (Radical Marxism). Such complex duality with unclear political guidelines failed to capture the Dalits'

[17]Kanshi Ram established 'Buddhist Research Center' exclusively for religious activities and to keep the political sphere secular by not mixing in religious activities (See Kanshi Ram, 1982).

[18]Badri Narayan in his extensive study of oral history, folklore, myths and local traditions demonstrated that the BSP has developed an indigenous model of mobilization by creating and politicizing local caste heroes. (See Narayan, 2006)

political imagination and distanced them from Panther's revolutionary endeavor. The Dalit masses instead, trusted the liberal-constitutional framework and showed more inclinations towards the political parties that raise their concerns in the field of electoral democracy.

Though the Dalit Panthers movement appears as an unsustainable revolution, it emerged as a political catalyst that announced the arrival of the Dalits as a dynamic political force. Kanshi Ram, by establishing the BSP, groomed the Panthers' idea with liberal values and inspired the Dalits to play a central role in power politics. The BSP borrowed the political ethics and social consciousness from the DP but instead of giving it more radical revolutionary attire, it adopted a prolonged strategy of democratic participation and political mobilization. Kanshi Ram's reformed socio-political alternatives suited the Dalits' political claims and allowed them to escape the Panthers' radical rhetoric. The BSP appeared as the competent political party of the Dalits, with an Ambedkarite vision and concrete political objectives. It soon sidelined Panthers' rhetorical and romantic claims to convert the Dalit masses as radical revolutionaries of the Marxist-Maoist brand. Instead, with the BSP's pragmatic and politically correct ways, the Dalits returned to the Ambedkarite canons, following the liberal progressive path against the Panthers' call.

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Feminist Pedagogy and Peer Relations in Women's Studies Classrooms: Reflections on Caste Inequalities in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

This article attempts to explore the nature of peer relations across caste locations in higher education in the Indian context and the possibilities of pedagogical intervention in caste inequalities in the classroom. Much of the discussion around caste in Indian higher education has been limited to questions of access of marginalised caste groups alone, without taking account of the terms of this "inclusion" and the conditions of survival in higher education. With the shifts in the caste composition of students in recent decades, some reflections on the struggles of marginalised students have come forth, highlighting the extent to which the higher education system is ill-equipped to deal with a diverse student body. Based on a qualitative study of five degree programmes in women's studies, the article discusses peer relations in the context of efforts of women's studies teachers to intervene in the dynamics among students given the varying degrees of diversity in the classroom. Highlighting bitter divisions as well as attempts at solidarity among students across caste locations, it argues that addressing peer inequalities in the classroom must be part of feminist pedagogical work. Furthermore, these strategies must go beyond "enabling" marginalised students and equally directed towards questioning the privilege of dominant students, otherwise the classroom will not be enabling for the best of marginalised students.

Keywords

Caste discrimination, higher education, feminist pedagogy, women's studies, peer relations

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Introduction

Questions of caste within higher education in recent decades have usually found space through discussions around reservations in admission—the debates around the Mandal Commission's recommendations for reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBC) in employment and education, when these were implemented in public sector employment in the 1990s; and then in 2006, when the OBC reservations were sought to be implemented in higher education (also popularly known as Mandal II). Inevitably, these battles also (re-)generate questions about the need for reservations at all, including the already existing reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). The opposition to reservations in higher education—often from "eminent" scholars[1]—has meant that debates have been persistently focused on whether or not reservations are required and if so, what the best modes of implementation might be. As a consequence, much of the scholarship on the subject has been limited to questions of access of students from marginalised caste groups. There has not been a commensurate reflection on the conditions of survival and experiences of marginalised students once they are enrolled in higher education.

The structural deficits that students face once they have entered higher education are largely neglected (Xaxa, 2002; Deshpande, 2016). It is student suicides that bring attention to caste discrimination but not much is known about the institutional cultures of higher education institutions that lead into such extreme consequences. Some critical insights into these institutional cultures with respect to caste have much to say about the conditions of survival in higher education—discrimination and resistance to discrimination both emerge in these accounts (Sukumar, 2013, 2022; Singh, 2013; Kumar, 2016). Yet it is clear that the systemic bias against the marginalised is significant, and resistance itself can prove detrimental to the interests of these students. Reservations thus are merely the beginning of story of inclusion and democratisation.

Through his experience of teaching political science at the University of Delhi, N. Sukumar (2023) has drawn attention to the resistance of academic institutions to teaching Dalit Bahujan thought, and the deep resonance such courses have for students

[1]Two of the most well-known scholars to protest against Mandal II were Pratap Bhanu Mehta and Andre Beteille, who resigned from the National Knowledge Commission to mark their disagreement (Also see Mehta, 2006). However, these positions should be seen within the larger discourse of merit and quality in higher education debates. The higher education system in India has been described as facing a crisis by many scholars and commentators over the past two decades, but there is no agreement as to what the nature of this "crisis" is. Oddly, one framing of the "crisis" is about the "quality" of students. The issue of the "quality" of students, more often than not, is tied to the social composition of students, where quality of school education is spoken of with respect to students who enter higher education through reservations. This is part of a larger narrative where decline in the quality of higher education is posited against inclusion (Beteille, 2008) in arguing that the expansion due to "political pressures of inclusion" has meant compromising on academic standards. The framing of the "crisis" of higher education as one of "quality" has been questioned by Satish Deshpande (2016) as emerging from the fact that elite institutions are not equipped to deal with the kinds of students inhabiting them with greater diversity in student composition.

from marginalised social locations - precisely because these critical perspectives are completely absent in the rest of their curriculum. Thus, even as the social composition of students is increasingly shifting, the curriculum and the classroom continue to be alienating for students from marginalised caste and gender locations. In the American context, Victoria Reyes (2022) has brought out that despite the shifts in social composition of universities and the proliferation of studies of identity and marginalisation, the lived experience of scholars from marginalised social locations reflects how they continue to be "academic outsiders" through various subtle and unsaid exclusions. Such deeply ingrained, often subtle, forms of discrimination and exclusion in the context of caste inequalities in Indian higher education have been critically analysed by N. Sukumar in his incisive book *Caste Discrimination and Exclusion in Indian Universities: A Critical Reflection* (2022). Focusing on one aspect of how caste is experienced in the classroom, this article attempts to understand how peer relations evolve in increasingly caste-diverse classrooms of Indian higher education, and what role critical feminist pedagogical approaches can have to deal with inequalities among students.

The article has been drawn from my doctoral research that set out to study women's studies degrees programmes but I found that these programmes were considerably shaped by issues emerging from the shifting student composition in the post-Mandal II context. My fieldwork data sheds considerable light on this aspect, as students from marginalised castes spoke at length about their struggles to survive in a system which appears to be designed to push them out. My doctoral research studied MA and research degrees in women's studies at five universities across two regions—a state university (University A), a centrally-funded deemed university (University B), a non-metropolitan central university (University C), a metropolitan central university (University D) and a state university dedicated to the social sciences (University E). I conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with 163 students and 54 teachers at these universities over two years, 2016 and 2017. Broadly, the classrooms under study were of two kinds—either composed of women of various caste-class backgrounds; or composed of women from various backgrounds and men from marginalised caste backgrounds.

In the midst of my field work, the current funding crisis of women's studies was just beginning to emerge. The model of Five Year Planning was discontinued in 2017 under the present right-wing government; and since Women's Studies Centres are governed directly by the University Grants Commission their funding was tied to these Plans. Since then the status of women's studies has been precarious with some Centres being closed, and persistent uncertainty about the extension of funding to the existing ones. As Mary E. John (2023a) has noted of the National Education Policy 2020, despite the repeated emphasis on multidisciplinarity, women's/gender studies is not even mentioned in the document. In a recent volume on women's studies in India, Panchali Ray and Shadab Bano discuss with reference to the present government:

> [T]hough the UGC has extended support to the WSCs, it emphasises workshops, training, and gender sensitisation programmes at the cost of teaching and research. The trends in the development agenda set by transnational think-tanks (World Bank, United Nations and the International Monetary Fund) have seen a shift, with gender-mainstreaming as a core component in their various policies. However the focus is not to question patriarchy, but to use a language of empowerment that reflects the country's aspirations to be an equal participant in the global order with developed nations. Nowhere has the appropriation of women's studies to suit the ends of the hegemonic social order been more apparent than the attempt at renaming 'women's studies' to 'women and family studies' in 2005. (Ray & Bano, 2024, pp. 4–5)

Thus it is important to bear in mind that the marginality that women's studies as a field faces in Indian higher education conditions the possibilities of enabling feminist pedagogies, when it is constantly in danger itself.

With the implementation of the Mandal II (OBC) reservations since 2008, classroom composition in all five of my field sites has come to display growing social diversity as the enrolment in reserved seats has picked up some pace in the past decade. Thus as questions of location have become sharper across universities because all classrooms are increasingly required to respond to the changing composition of students, for women's studies this effectively means that the classroom is critiqued much more, particularly from an anti-caste perspective. It is also significant to note that the fieldwork for my doctoral research, beginning in January 2016, happened to coincide with Rohith Vemula's death and thus this immediate context meant that the visibility and articulation of caste issues within higher education was much more across the duration of fieldwork than it had been previously been.[2] This also meant that students across caste backgrounds were more willing to speak to me about these issues than would have otherwise been the case, given my dominant caste location.[3]

Effectively then questions of caste within women's studies classrooms have emerged in much sharper ways since 2016, even though women's studies as a field has been focused on inequalities in higher education throughout, and often degree programmes attempt to align pedagogical strategies to feminist principles. The academic commitment to critical thinking in feminist classrooms appears to produce expectations of critical education, centred on ideas of feminist pedagogy. Thus the ideas discussed in this article can be significant for other fields/disciplines that aim to teach critical thinking, particularly its relation to the social composition of the student body in higher education at present.

[2]In some of my field sites, questions of caste already had a significant presence in the university on account of regional and institutional histories but this was not true for the rest. In these remaining sites, it was after January 2016 that the caste question was acknowledged more visibly, though it had been raised in these campuses for many years prior to this. I found caste to be the central axis of discussions even in classrooms where the student composition was largely upper caste.

[3]I am a middle class cis-woman born into an upper-caste group of the Sikh community.

In the classrooms under study, pedagogical issues were much emphasised by respondents and within that, peer relations and the "failure" of feminist pedagogy to address classroom inequalities. Centring the experience of students emerges as a fundamental aspect of many writings on critical and feminist pedagogy, yet direct intervention in peer relations does not find much focus. Further, much of the reflection on feminist pedagogy has come from teachers of feminist/women's studies courses and programmes. This article seeks to understand the feminist pedagogical expectations emerging from students regarding pedagogical intervention in peer relations on account of inequalities of social location, focused on caste in this case. I rely primarily on the voices of students, but within the context of the pedagogical practices and expectations of teachers that, directly or indirectly, endeavour to initiate students into thinking about their social locations, privilege and marginalisation and what these mean for their classroom relations with their peers. Even when absent as an active pedagogical intervention, in most classrooms peer relations did emerge as a prominent concern. Some teachers also articulated an expectation that classroom teaching will impact how students from different locations engage with each other. Thus the article attempts to understand these expectations and question whether and how these can be addressed within the space of a degree programme.

The first section attempts to situate the question of intervention in peer relations within the existing scholarship on feminist pedagogy. The second section details the nature of peer relations across caste locations in the programmes under study, highlighting divisions as well as attempts at building solidarities. The third section discusses the dilemmas of intervening in peer relations as part of the feminist pedagogical work of women's studies teachers. This entire discussion on what feminist pedagogy has to do with power dynamics among students in the classroom is premised on an abstract idea of the (feminist) pedagogue. The social location and institutional authority of the teacher and how it is tied to the logic of our universities that are rooted in a mainstream epistemic model, limits such possibilities necessarily. However, this aspect cannot be addressed within the scope of this article, and has been discussed elsewhere (see Anand, 2024).

Locating the Question of Peer Relations in Frameworks of Feminist Pedagogy

Much of the scholarship on feminist pedagogy in the Indian context has been by feminist sociologists (Rege, 1995; Chaudhuri, 2002; Chadha, 2016; Pujari, 2017; Rayaprol, 2011; Chari-Wagh, 2018). Rekha Pappu (2002), in pointing out the absence of pedagogical thinking in the founding period of women's studies, pre-empted the questions that have come to acquire significance with the establishment of degree programmes. She raised questions about the composition of students choosing women's studies, the impact the course has on these students and how questions of the personal and experiential arise within the women's studies classroom. Her questions about diversity and how difference comes to be understood in women's

studies particularly resonate with the deeply charged contentions around caste that have emerged in my field data. Sharmila Rege (2010a, 2010b) subsequently wrote of feminist pedagogy within women's studies programmes and the anti-caste framework of her feminist pedagogical thought intersects significantly with the views expressed in the programmes under study. The influences for most of these scholars have been Paolo Friere (1970) and bell hooks (1994). While the fundamental scholarship of hooks is useful to think about the pedagogical issues in women's studies classroom, Freirian critical pedagogy proves to be less directly relevant in its assumptions of universalist, abstract categories of teachers and students. Given that the pedagogical contentions are centred on caste in the programmes under study, I found critiques to critical and feminist pedagogies by Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) and Kathleen Weiler (1991) more relevant to analyse the ideas expressed by my respondents.

Across this body of scholarship on feminist pedagogy (Rege, 2010a; Chadha, 2016; Pujari, 2017; Ellsworth, 1989; Weiler, 1991), centring student experience and the authority of the teacher are the two fundamental aspects of such a pedagogical approach that came to be significant in the ideas of my respondents. In this article, I will focus on the ideas of student experience, especially difference among students.

The elements of pedagogical work that were specific to these programmes and tied to ideas of feminist pedagogy can be understood within two broad categories—the first pertained to teaching methods and the second to what I would term the ethical dimensions of the classroom. While teaching methods were tied to epistemic questions, these did often underlie ethical classroom practices. However, the ethical questions about questioning power relations in the classroom were emphasised much more by my respondents across the board. This ethical dimension of feminist pedagogy has to do with going beyond epistemic politics towards recognising social and institutional inequalities in the classroom and reducing hierarchy in peer relations as well as the hierarchy between teachers and students.

Thus, there is a set of ethics that the feminist classroom seeks to follow. With respect to peer relations, various kinds of group assignments are attempted by teachers across these programmes to sensitise students to their differences of location. Classroom exercises such as the privilege walk, assignments on analysing the student's own location and so on are also geared towards similar objectives. Another example would be the bridge courses at University A focused on English language skills that are meant to shift hierarchy between English and non-English medium students.

The underpinnings of these pedagogical practices are effectively rooted in a framework of critical education, even when this is not the explicit frame of reference, whereby the pedagogical intent is to enable students to locate their social positionality, understand the intersections of structures of marginalisation and privilege that mark their lives and accept that these unequal structures need to be transformed. These ideas emerged across all five programmes albeit in different and uneven ways. The epistemological politics that women's studies as a field claims thus leads to a necessary engagement with modes of transacting the said epistemic framework and its implications for institutional practices. Some women's studies degree programmes and

teachers engage with these aspects more directly than others, yet in all the locations such pedagogical intent and expectations are markedly present.

Globally, the question of difference in the classroom has been a potent one in recent decades. A recent pedagogical guide by the American psychologist Kathryn C. Oleson (2023), attempts to deal with the pedagogical challenges of diverse classrooms, particularly focusing on micro-aggressions related to social identities in the classroom and offering a model of "productive discomfort." The nature of issues she explores and addresses refer to higher education classrooms broadly; however for women's studies classrooms the questions become much more complex and charged because of the subject matter at hand. Feminist educators Susan Sanchez-Casal and Amie MacDonald (2002) note:

> One of the ethical challenges of the antiracist feminist classroom is precisely the absence of a comforting boundary between students and the object of study; the feminist classroom collapses the difference between learning about the world 'out there' and investigating how students' lives are implicated in that world—how the world 'out there' also operates in the classroom and turns students themselves into objects of study (2002, p. 5).

While their observation pertains to feminist classrooms in women's studies, ethnic studies and within disciplines, I find this aspect in the women's studies courses in my sample as distinct from feminist courses within disciplines. The proximity to the object of study in women's studies impacts this idea of critical pedagogy, i.e. of "identity" not only as object of study but also in terms of classroom dynamics and structural differences.[4]

[4]For the purposes of this article, I have used the framework of identity, referring to articulations of difference in the social locations of students, and their deployments of vocabularies of privilege and marginalisation to explicate these. In the larger doctoral project this article is drawn from, I located women's studies in relation to the framework of identity knowledges as put forth by Robyn Wiegman (2012) in the American context. There have been a range of discussions in recent years about the concept of intersectionality in the Indian context (see Mary E. John, 2023b for a critical discussion). However, it appeared less useful here since the discussion primarily relies on the sharp critiques of caste difference in the classroom that emerged in the interviews. As mentioned earlier, the classrooms under study broadly had two types of social compositions – one, only women students, from both dominant and marginalised castes, or two, women from dominant castes, and both men and women from marginalised castes. When it came to difference and associated contentions in the classroom, caste became the primary axis of analysis. Certainly the experiences of women students from marginalised castes would be marked by intersectional oppression, however this did not come through in my fieldwork as both men and women students from marginalised caste positions were focused on the caste-based tensions in their classrooms. It is also a strong possibility that my position as an upper caste woman would have made students from marginalised castes less inclined to discuss difference within; especially since, as I go on to discuss through examples, upper caste women in these classrooms often attacked men from marginalised castes on grounds of sexism and misogyny.

This is an aspect that does not find much space in the scholarship on feminist pedagogy I have cited, yet the concerns about peer relations were at the forefront of the meanings of the women's studies degree for students. Inequalities and divisions within a classroom are common enough in every discipline and every institution, everywhere. What makes it a concern here is the fact that a more egalitarian and less hierarchical peer group is expected to be an outcome of feminist teaching. What students term the failure of the building of "feminist solidarities" among peers is framed as a failure of the women's studies degree programme. Moreover, programmes such as those at University A and University E do state or aim for such objectives in their course descriptions. The problem here is twofold—one, the nature of friendship and peer relations within academic settings, two, the difference of social location among students that conditions these relationships. Of the former, there is globally some scholarship on the idea of "academic friendship"[5] and while I do think that the nature of concerns that students bring up requires an analysis of what friendship itself can mean within an academic institutional space, this aspect will not find focus here. This is because the question of peer relations in these degree programmes was framed by students much more in terms of social hierarchies and how the women's studies degree ought to enable them to build relationships with each other that reflect the idea of feminist politics that they study. There was also among teachers a concern as to whether and how students engaged with each other across social locations- whether it be an overt concern like group work exercises; or whether expressed by individual teachers as their frustration when observing discriminatory practices among students.

In order to understand how and why peer relations are an aspect of pedagogical intervention, an aspect of "centring the experience of the student" that needs to be highlighted is how experience as a category of pedagogical intervention is problematised by assertions of difference by students of women's studies. I now turn to these ideas of difference, focused on caste identity as they emerged in the classrooms under study.

Divided Classrooms

As much as most teachers sought to push women's studies as an academic field, often they reported disillusionment with the pattern of "good" students from socially privileged locations understanding and prioritising academic debates and politics of knowledge production but displaying a gap between academic understanding and a sense of "real" understanding. These students were not focused on their privilege at any depth, nor did they question the tangible inequalities within the classroom. Thus the central thread of pedagogical failure here was the inability of students to engage with inequalities within the classroom on account of the structures of privilege and marginalisation constructing their social location and that of their peers.

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[5]For instance Emmeche (2015), in a larger project to map the humanities in the Danish context, attempts to analyse academic friendship through various sites of collaboration and conflict. The study however looks at the subjects as socially unmarked.

Some teachers discussed how they found it problematic when students acquired the politically correct academic language of women's studies, but nothing further by way of critical thinking, nor any academic-political commitment. Among these teachers, a few also highlighted how political correctness in the women's studies classroom could limit possibilities of learning (T13, interview, October 7, 2016). Interestingly the axis/es of political correctness vary across locations. A women's studies teacher at University D found that the students acquired the politically correct language of academic feminism, so that questions, doubts or positions that may be problematic did not emerge in the classroom. Yet she noted greater slippages around caste as the women's studies classroom did not necessarily make explicit positions on caste, nor offered concerted training in thinking critically about caste in her view. In contrast to this, a sociology teacher at University A argued that an automatic policing of problematic caste positions occurred in her classroom due to her obvious anti-casteist position. She had been trying to understand how this limited her critical engagement with students in certain ways (T6, interview, May 3, 2016).

Conflicts and Discrimination: Caste in the Classroom

In relation to a focus on identity in the academic debates in women's studies, the question of who is speaking in the classroom also acquires significance. Students who come from locations of privilege complained about having to be politically correct. In some instances, women students from upper caste, middle class locations expressed displeasure about the fact that they "have to be careful about what I say because of my privileged position" (R.E., interview, November 24, 2017), while some women students interestingly discussed how male students felt suppressed in the classroom, how they had to be quiet or speak in acceptable terms and how the discipline and classroom is "anti-men" (M.H., July 20, 2017; R.G., May 30, 2017, interviews). The male students in question however disagreed with such an assessment when they were interviewed. These examples of the privileged students claiming or being framed in a problematic discourse of "reverse discrimination" were not as frequent as I had anticipated—ironically, precisely because most students have picked up politically correct vocabularies. During the interviews there were often slippages - for instance, one student spoke at length about her upper-caste English-educated middle class privilege, the associated social capital, while another was very passionate in discussing the critical thinking she acquired from her women's studies degree and expressed a strong investment in the discipline. But neither student focused much on the rampant discrimination and inequality in the bitterly divided classroom and institution they belonged to. Thus I discovered that while students overtly acknowledge hierarchies in the classroom and discuss how marginalised students do not find as much space, a deeper look at their interviews indicates that the larger tone is either of a "saviour complex" or directly contradicts such claims.

This became most evident when hostile divisions were reported within the classroom in multiple batches across the field sites. In one such classroom, the divide was so severe that students were seated in two halves of the classroom—students from upper caste, middle class, urban, English speaking locations on one side and

the students from marginalised caste-class, rural, non-English education on the other. Such an overt expression of discrimination in a metropolitan graduate classroom today raises significant questions about the relationship between epistemological questions and pedagogical ones in women's studies.

In three field sites, there were particularly bitter divisions in almost all classrooms at both the Master's and research degree levels with contextual differences in the nature and degree of conflict. Broadly, the students reported contentions around location and privilege with classroom peer relationships becoming a competition of political radicalism centred largely on caste. Either the classrooms were divided along caste-language lines, where the numbers of SC, ST and OBC students were adequate. The alternative scenario was of students from marginalised caste locations being a minority in numbers in the classroom and upper caste students battling each other to emerge as better anti-caste "allies," in the process instrumentalising SC/ST/OBC students more often than not. I now discuss both situations through one example each, without identifying the institutions and classrooms involved.

Larger political questions structure peer relationships significantly, for instance, the question of upper caste students being good "allies" to anti-caste struggles emerges from taking positions on political issues, campus politics, decision making pertaining to their coursework, developing peer support systems and so on. With reference to course-specific decisions, in many classrooms, collective decisions about negotiating with teachers about timetable, assignments and the like led to verbally violent disagreements centred on caste. In a particularly extreme situation, one batch had two different class representatives as it became a question of caste and language based representation—one from the upper caste group of students and one from the group of SC, ST and OBC students. Some upper caste students felt that this led to a tense bifurcation of the classroom but did not constitute a resolution, nor were students making an effort to bridge the gap anymore; the division was just accepted as it is (S.D., September 19, 2016; A.Z., November 23, 2017, interviews). Yet other upper caste students downplayed the social divide in the classroom, stating that earlier natural affinities of background brought people together but now they were working together quite well (A.A., interview, November 24, 2017). The divide became even more charged and bitter when a Dalit male professor was accused of making sexist remarks by upper caste women students. The group of SC, ST and OBC students felt the remarks had been misreported and blown out of proportion and the accusations seemed particularly unfair and reflective of the casteist biases of the complaining students. Upper caste professors had not been similarly called out for sexist or casteist remarks. Thus it became a question of sexism vs. casteism and deepened the conflict. The group of privileged students moved between recognising their privilege and an invalidation of the privilege/marginalisation gap, with the general narrative as one of having "tried [to resolve the division] but it hasn't worked out." Among the students from marginalised caste locations (many of whom were also from rural and non-English educational backgrounds), most were associated with Ambedkarite movements and expressed strongly the divisions and discrimination they were facing in the classroom. Yet despite this experience of political assertion and critical understanding of power,

they were not actually able to *assert* themselves in the classroom and were silenced within that space almost entirely. Some were even apologetic about the divide in the classroom and what they perceived as their failure in trying to create harmony. One student discussed how perhaps they could not adequately understand the perspective of the dominant caste students either, while another went so far as to espouse a relativist view of experience, claiming that "all of us have different experiences that should be considered" in arriving at a resolution (B. H., interview, November 24, 2017).

In another institution in another city, one Master's classroom was found to be similarly ridden with conflicts around lines of location, privilege and power structures in the classroom. While these contentions were also focused on caste, language and whose voice found space in the classroom, the proportion of students from marginalised caste backgrounds was much lower than upper caste students and as it turned out, it became a conflict between upper caste women about how to "allow space for marginalised voices" in the classroom, what constituted casteism and so on, with the marginalised caste students in question largely becoming passive reference points (M. A., interview, August 11, 2017). Most of the upper caste women students described in detail the measures they undertook to reduce the space they took in class and how they were trying to "enable" marginalised caste students to assert their voice in the classroom (A.N., August 16, 2017; R.M., August 24, 2017, interviews); but some upper caste women students felt these attempts were patronising and problematic (C.Y., interview, August 17, 2017) and that the effort to truly work through the inequalities in the classroom was not sustained but just an attempt to claim radical political positions around caste (H.R., interview, August 17, 2017).

Beyond these contentions about location and representation in classroom dynamics, outright discrimination and insensitivity from fellow students found significance in the experience of marginalised caste students. These ranged from upper caste students denying help for something as basic as the class schedule, to something as vicious as victimising marginalised caste students and using the details of their personal lives to make academic arguments in public spaces about "how oppressed these poor women were," or worse yet questioning if they belonged in a women's studies classroom since they could not fit the feminist criteria of these upper caste students (P.M., November 29, 2017; P.K., November 25, 2017, interviews). Further, students reported how despite pointing out multiple times that they were unable to follow the class discussion in English and could follow the same arguments in the regional language, even in classes where both the teacher and almost all students were reasonably comfortable in speaking and understanding the regional language, the upper caste students continued to pursue discussions in rapidly spoken English. They did not even attempt to break things down in simpler English, or translate the main arguments, making marginalised students feel that these are deliberate attempts to exclude them and make them feel inferior (S.L., interview, November 25, 2017).

Thus across these institutions students from marginalised caste backgrounds vociferously expressed their pain at the everyday humiliation they faced on account of what they termed the hypocritical feminist politics of their upper caste classmates. They argued that these privileged students made high political claims in the classroom

and within campus politics, especially around caste in the post-Rohith Vemula time, but were discriminatory in practice and did not acknowledge their own oppressive practices (R.J., November 27, 2017; A.I., November 27, 2017; M.S., August 17, 2017, interviews). Indeed some believed that contentions over caste were overdone in campus politics and the classroom for instrumental purposes because they lacked "real" commitment to feminist ethics and politics and that upper caste students took advantage of the fact that they are better equipped to express the experiences of marginalised students on account of their social capital (A.I., interview, November 27, 2017). A few students also reported instances of privileged students giving a hard time to teachers from marginalised caste backgrounds, especially if the teacher was not proficient in English (T.R., interview, November 23, 2017). Similarly the case of the Dalit professor being branded sexist as discussed above was considered unfair and a case of "vilification" (A.P., interview, November 25, 2017). Students thus felt that women's studies also needs to take account of situations where students on account of social privilege can be oppressive towards the teacher coming from a marginalised location.

One student framed this as a "lack of reflexivity of privilege of those in women's studies" where the teachers were entirely focused on inclusion in the curriculum but not the exclusions and discrimination that privileged students practiced (T.R., interview, November 23, 2017). Some privileged students did not prioritise these questions like other students in their classroom, nor spoke about addressing them, even as they acknowledged the existence of hierarchies among students, and how they materially benefit from their social privilege (R.M., August 24, 2017; L.J., November 27, 2017, interviews). That these students were focused on women's studies as a theoretical enterprise meant that questions of the power dynamics of the classroom were theoretical problems of location and social capital.

Peer Support Systems in Unequal Classrooms

In instances of efforts to develop peer support systems, results were mixed with caste locations determining much of the possibilities. One group's attempt at having reading groups to deal with the dense course material resulted in painful conversations about how privilege and identity were structural and so long as such structural inequality existed, the reading group effort was experienced by marginalised caste students as a patronising "favour" causing them deep hurt. The upper caste students in question expressed considerable agitation and emotional turmoil wondering "if they would ever be good anti-caste allies." The group however was driven by the persistent conviction of translating academic feminism into a practice of feminist ethics in their peer relations.

In two different institutions, there were reports of somewhat successful peer support groups across social locations in certain batches. The interesting point of difference was that in one case, such efforts occurred entirely outside the degree programme while in the other it was understood by students as an outcome of pedagogical intervention. In the first case, one batch of students across caste locations

was able to build a peer support group for academic work successfully and conducted reading and assignment discussions in groups. In their opinion, they collectively felt intimidated by the teachers and lost because of the interdisciplinary course content, so they turned to each other drawing on their relative strengths as individuals and in terms of their diverse disciplinary trainings. The group was emphatic about the fact that their successful peer support system was not forged by the course content or classroom teaching, besides the fact that the classroom teaching was difficult for almost all of them in various degrees (D. J., June 9, 2017; S.J., July 13, 2017, interviews). In another programme, students brought out how group assignments where they were deliberately put into heterogeneous groups enabled them to understand how people from different locations have their own strengths and problems and therefore to work with people from different backgrounds (M.N., September 5, 2017; H.U., September 7, 2017, interviews). This in turn impelled them to critically reflect on their own social locations and how that has determined their trajectories and their everyday (U.R., interview, September 7, 2017). For instance, an assignment in their Master's first semester course required them to trace their family histories and discuss them in groups to understand each others' locations and contexts and students described how such exercises helped them understand and look out for each other, such as stopping the teacher if a classmate is lost, translating arguments during lectures and so on (K.K., interview, September 6, 2017). One student argued that such pedagogical efforts helped them to understand "standpoint in practice" (H.U., interview, September 7, 2017).

Yet this pedagogical intent may not always translate into intended outcomes. In most cases, students are able to recognise and understand the structural difference in their locations but this does not necessarily translate into more egalitarian peer relations. What in a women's studies classroom makes certain students think about their own privilege in a "real" sense but not others? The question to ask here, if there indeed is a gap between what students understand quite well academically but not in some tangible social sense, is why this would be a concern for a women's studies degree and its possible pedagogical models? Should it not be enough to impart the academic understanding of social justice? As it turns out, apart from the concerns of feminist ethics that participants in a women's studies classroom may have, there are tangible ways in which such gaps play out in the classroom – and indeed impact the learning processes of students, both privileged and marginalised (any privileged student claiming reverse discrimination in a women's studies classroom cannot be understood to be achieving the intended learning outcomes!). The tense and unequal equations among students determine which students find space in the classroom. Feminist scholars discuss centring student experience as one of the foremost principles of feminist pedagogy as mentioned earlier. But it is equally important to think about which student experiences and voice claim epistemic and social space in the classroom. Ellsworth (1989) and Weiler (1991) have highlighted how privileged students get more space, as also about the range of experiences amongst the marginalised students.

Peer Relations as a Function of Feminist Pedagogical Work

The majority of students brought out that while there were many discussions and even harsh conflicts around caste, class, language amongst themselves, the course and their teachers did not take account of these. Social location and identity were never explicitly discussed in the classroom and therefore they felt that the classroom was not equally open for all students—some termed it a failure of the feminist principle of "the personal is political" (H.B., July 5, 2017; M.H., July 20, 2017; A.J., August 14, 2017, interviews). These students recognised that they had collectively failed to develop a peer support system but rather had antagonistic relationships based on competition and pressure. One student quite directly stated that it marked the failure of women's studies as a whole that their degree course did not enable them to build solidarities among themselves because there were significant hierarchies and structural problems in the classroom which they were unable to address (H.B., interview, July 5, 2017). Another student argued that women's studies research degrees train in disciplinary standpoints but do not foreground social standpoints (P.M., interview, November 29, 2017). Students thus frame the women's studies degree as holding some pedagogical responsibility for the social hierarchy among students within the classroom.

Teachers shared some of the strategies they have adopted. One found that teaching Linda Alcoff's well-known essay "The Problem of Speaking for Others" (1988) initiated much debate in the classroom and made students "reflect on the operations of the classroom and their politics," therefore bringing to the surface questions of political positions. Despite such efforts, she observed there was an "appropriation of privileged students working on Dalit questions" (T42, interview, August 21, 2017). Another mentioned how she gave students both regional language and English readings so as to enable them to develop peer systems where students can translate for each other (T35, interview, November 24, 2017). In one programme, teachers deliberately assigned diverse groups for students to understand the contradictions of the distance in their social locations. However, they also discussed some instances of social differences among students becoming more charged through group assignments. With reference to diverse classrooms and foregrounding "difference," Weiler notes that,

> [I]n settings in which students come from differing positions of privilege or oppression, the sharing of experience raises conflicts rather than building solidarity. In these circumstances, the collective exploration of experience leads not to a common knowledge and solidarity based on sameness, but to the tensions of an articulation of difference. Such exploration raises again the problems left unaddressed by Freirean pedagogy: the overlapping and multiple forms of oppression revealed in 'reading the world' of experience (Weiler, 1991, p. 469).

Thus, pedagogical strategies that attempt to deploy some mode of peer group work can produce mixed results. In another programme, students shared how such pedagogical interventions were attempted by certain teachers but across different batches have been reported only as "patronising" and counter-productive – "the tendency of [Teacher X]

to assign students to help others is problematic and often created tensions as students accused the 'weaker' students of not putting enough effort and getting frustrated" (C.Y., interview, August 17, 2017). This narrative of "'weaker" students not pulling their weight was common enough in the mandatory group work too that was discussed above—but the critical difference is the pedagogical method deployed. Assigning group projects is different from assigning "better" students to "help" "weaker" students—"remedial" efforts as students labelled these only reproduce the humiliation of students from marginalised caste-class backgrounds. In addition to this, students from marginalised locations talked about how the extra effort they required from even the well-meaning peers and teachers made them feel like they were a "burden" (A.I., November 27, 2017; M.S., August 17, 2017, interviews). Some students believed that such peer group activities are conflict ridden and often break down but they are of value because they open them to a wider understanding of feminism and on a personal level, at least initiate a process of self-reflection which an individual may or may not take further. They reported that it is not the end product but process that is considered important and factored into assessments (H.U., September 7, 2017; U.R., September 7, 2017, interviews). Therefore, as a pedagogical strategy, group assignments and other such exercises do hold potential to impact peer relations and how students understand social location and the axes of privilege and marginalisation that construct their own locations.

There is a recognition by some teachers that pedagogical strategies may or may not work towards privileged students recognising their structural advantages, or marginalised students coming out better off with a sense of how the disadvantages they face are more structural than individual. Often students understand these as epistemic questions but that does not necessarily translate into understanding them in their own social interactions. At best it can create some discomfort about the existing form of peer relations and friendships and how social and institutional interactions in general operate; at worst, students remain unaffected by the process in any real sense. The worst outcome is where the privileged become vociferous about "reverse discrimination" and develop a stronger idea of "merit"—such cases were also reported. In any case, teachers attempting such interventions acknowledged that even if students get some sense of discomfort and understanding through that discomfort, the space of a degree is not enough for some kind of radical transformation. This is echoed by Ellsworth (1989) in her experiences of developing anti-racist feminist pedagogies in her course:

> By the end of the semester, participants in the class agreed that commitment to rational discussion about racism in a classroom setting was not enough to make that setting a safe space for speaking out and talking back. We agreed that a safer space required high levels of trust and personal commitment to individuals in the class, gained in part through social interactions outside of class—potlucks, field trips, participation in rallies and other gatherings. Opportunities to 'know' the motivations, histories, and stakes of individuals in the class should have been planned early in the semester (1989, p. 316).

As important as I think it is for feminist pedagogues to think about "social interactions outside of class," this aspect did not feature in a significant manner in my data—partially because I never asked about this. Thus for the purposes of the discussion here I shall keep the focus on student interactions within the classroom. Even in classrooms where pedagogical interventions in peer relations are undertaken, there are of course disagreements among students as well as discrimination. Yet the exercise of understanding each other's location puts the battles up front rather than pushing them under the table. This in my view is the most critical aspect of feminist pedagogical work. Based on the discussion above, it appears that classrooms where faculty intervention does not exist are much more highly polarised – the sources of such polarisation are obviously not merely the academic content and the classroom dynamics, but rather wider ones such as the nature of student politics, regional and institutional specificities. For instance, marginalised students everywhere reported being quite lost in the early semesters, not being able to follow the lecture or the discussion that English medium students lead, and having nurtured feelings of inferiority due to differences in the cultural capital of the students. What I find noteworthy is that these aspects do not find as much focus in classrooms with pedagogical intervention in peer relations as they do elsewhere and more importantly these do not lead into bitter divisions in the classroom, or a rejection of women's studies teachers or the discipline for failing feminist ethics.

The pedagogical effort to intervene in peer relations does not "resolve" the hierarchies among the socially diverse body of students but I would argue by making these power differences visible and enabling discussions around them, the teachers create a space to validate to some extent the discomfort and pain marginalised students experience in the classroom and provide academic legitimacy to their experience of marginalisation. The beginning point of Ellsworth's discussion of critical pedagogy in the context of the racism at her university is that the course she developed was premised on the existence of racism as an undeniable reality, not something the course would debate. The course was meant to focus on *how* to deal with racism pedagogically, not whether it exists or not. In my view, the promise of feminist pedagogical promises lies in the ability of teachers to institute exercises within degree courses to directly take a position on the power dynamics within a classroom; the impact of such interventions notwithstanding. Within the institutional limits of the university, it is not feasible to expect that degrees can train students in the practice of feminist ethics and produce perfectly feminist students—if at all one can define what that would entail. Certainly the outcomes and impact of feminist pedagogical intervention cannot be determined by the pedagogue. What is clear however is that the overload of the ethical expectations that this article has attempted to bring out necessitates a more direct pedagogical engagement with classroom dynamics.

Conclusion

The attempt to foreground difference epistemologically at times involves pedagogic techniques that encourage students to reflect on their own social location, and since this occurs in a classroom setting, by extension, it means locating oneself in relation to peers. The pedagogical intent in this case cannot be interpreted as being limited to

the transaction of certain epistemological frameworks. Inadvertently—or rather as an underlying impulse that the feminist teacher does not always want to make explicit—the pedagogical intent of these techniques involves an ethical component. In other words, utilising such techniques of understanding inequality and difference seeks to enable the student to understand and tangibly act upon the inequalities—at least in their immediate setting. Thus in my view, feminist pedagogical techniques are directed at creating feminist classrooms. However these methods are not geared towards actually engaging with peer relations in any direct sense, yet this is the dominant expectation of students from feminist pedagogy

More than the pedagogical strategies in and of themselves, my assertion is that the data brings out the merits of instituting feminist pedagogical practices within the curriculum. It is evident from the discussion above that the outcomes are mixed. The precise practices can provide possible models but these models are context-specific and even in the same programme, teachers reported having to adapt and evolve their pedagogical strategies with different batches of students. Nor can there be any one model that can account for the overflowing expectations of feminist pedagogical ethics in women's studies programmes.

Furthermore, with regard to the emphasis on good pedagogical practices in student narratives, an important pattern that I observed was that such positive accounts of feminist pedagogy acquired centre-stage in the accounts of marginalised students. Privileged students, despite expressing much admiration and awe for these pedagogical practices, were much more focused on the personal impact in *their* lives. In my opinion, such patterns highlight that pedagogical strategies to enable marginalised students need to be combined with equally robust pedagogies to destabilise the privilege of students from socially dominant locations, at least within the classroom. Certainly the strategies such as group assignments take account of and engage with both these aspects but the differential learning outcomes suggest that problematising privilege for the privileged student proves much more difficult—as it is in the social world in general. As discussed above, it remains a concern for some teachers that the women's studies degree holds the possibility of enabling privileged students to acquire languages of marginalisation to enhance their epistemic, social and institutional power. Therefore, as important as it is to develop support systems for marginalised students to overcome their structural disadvantages, unless the privilege of the dominant students is shaken meaningfully, the classroom will not be enabling for the best of marginalised students.

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Defining Bodies, Health, and Work of Dalits: The Decisive Role of Caste in Kerala, India

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Abstract

Caste discrimination affects the health of Dalits beyond limited access to health services or wider determinants like education, employment, income, and housing. Kerala is a good example for this, despite social development changes in the state, caste still plays a significant psychological role in defining health and work for lower castes. However, psychological research often exhibited a strong conformity bias ending up in victim blaming by articulating lack of personal responsibility, ignoring Dalit efforts. Despite being labeled as apathetic, Dalits in Kerala have actively participated in employment, government programs, and public events, demonstrating their resistance and empowerment. The objective of this study is to investigate Dalit resistance efforts against being labeled as "less able-bodied" by upper caste and subsequent exclusion from daily wage labor.

A qualitative study was conducted among Dalits in a rural village in Kerala using case study method. The data collected were analyzed thematically using an inductive method and a phenomenological approach by allowing themes to emerge from the data and identifying patterns, similarities and differences.

The study findings indicate that Dalits strongly resist being labeled as "less able-bodied," which leads them to eschew labor. This resistance stems from their understanding of health as the absence of disease and functionality, and their resulting active maintenance of good health and active engagement in daily wage labour. For them absence of disease is the way to express availability for labor and being able to work without any difficulties is their way to express fitness for work.

Keywords

Health, Psychological pathways, Caste discrimination, Resistance

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Introduction

Advances in social determinants of health and health care have significantly improved the health status of people around the world (CSDH, WHO, 2008). While developments have improved overall health, Indigenous populations and marginalized caste groups often lag behind in health gains compared to other social groups. In India, this disparity is particularly evident, with Indigenous communities and lower castes constituting the social groups with the poorest health outcomes (Subramanian et al., 2006). Caste, a pervasive and oppressive social system prevalent worldwide, particularly in India, has a detrimental impact on the health of the lower caste (Thapa et al., 2021). Scholars have documented its detrimental impact on the health of lower caste individuals through different pathways including barriers to healthcare access and adverse social determinants of health (Ahmed & Mahapatro, 2023; R. Baru et al., 2010; R.V. Baru & Zafar, 2022; Johri & Anand, 2022).

Caste discrimination affects Dalit health beyond limited access to health services or wider determinants like education, employment, income, and housing. Kerala, a state in South India despite a relatively high level of social development even before independence, has still not able to produce any evidence to overcome the social exclusion and marginalization of lower castes. Studies and reports have consistently shown that lower castes in Kerala face increased disadvantages, including higher morbidity rates and limited access to healthcare services. When considering key indicators of population health and overall well-being, such as infant mortality rates, maternal mortality rates, and under-five mortality rates, lower caste communities in Kerala consistently lag behind other groups, with the exception of indigenous communities (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013; Simon, 2007). The persistence of these disparities is a reminder that reformist measures of Kerala which improved the welfare of all made little improvement in the life and health of marginalized (Devika, 2010). The development strategy followed by the state is thus under question as to it's capability to achieve social equity and equality beyond enhancing the wellbeing of all.

Evidence from around the world shows that the body assumes a pivotal role in the subalternization processes. Practices involving clothing and body modification have played a significant role in the subalternization processes during European colonization in Africa (Martí, 2012). Within the context of colonialism in India, medicine emerges as one among numerous tools employed for the purposes of colonization, racialization, stigmatization, and the marginalization of indigenous populations (Arnold, 1993). Even though colonization lost its power in India, caste based discrimination still exists and it became stronger in the marginalization of lower castes by defining and labeling their bodies and health. The fear that providing modern education to the children of lower caste communities would lead to a labor shortage in the fields was prevalent among the upper castes in the state (Kali, 2000).

The existing literature reveals a lack of significant efforts to enhance the skills and capabilities of Dalit workers in response to evolving labor market demands. Kerala's most marginalized Dalit communities possessed valuable agricultural capacities,

particularly in rice farming. However, the state never recognized these capabilities as potential assets that could be further developed and transformed into comprehensive capabilities (Devika, 2010). Despite implementing general welfare measures in Kerala that improved the population's overall well-being, little progress was made in terms of skill development among Dalits. For instance, the land reforms of the 1970s primarily provided homestead lands to landless laborers, which improved their living conditions but failed to nurture their existing inclination towards agriculture into fully-fledged capabilities (Devika, 2010). Hence the government through its welfare measures instead of substantial expansion of the access of Dalit labourers to what is now recognized as basic capabilities, devalued and ignored the possibilities of their existing dispositions and skills and left them free in an unfamiliar competitive labour market to be labeled by the dominant forces.

Dalit resistance against caste-based discrimination in local temples remains prevalent in Kerala, with numerous successful examples of Dalit resistance.[1] Political and civil society organizations of Dalits focus on land rights, education, health, and have brought positive changes to the lives of many Dalits in the state. Dalits have resisted displacement for developmental projects including land acquisition for big projects, as well as protests against minor projects at the village level.[2] Such resistances are prominent when we understand the fact that collective action of Dalits faced hostility in the state from different spheres of public life in the state (Bhaskaran, 2011). To know how Dalits deal with such hostilities and how they overcome the generalizing notions of universal victimhood, it is important to locate narratives of Dalit daily life, agency, and resistance in the wider collective Dalit resistance. Hence it would be interesting to know resistance towards labeling Dalit as less able bodied and keeping them away from daily wage labour in the context of wider Dalit resistance in the region and state.

Methodology

The study investigates Dalit resistance efforts against being labeled as "less able-bodied" and subsequent exclusion from daily wage labor by other social groups. The study used a qualitative case study design to explore the labeling of Dalit resistance efforts against being labeled as "less able-bodied" by the upper caste and subsequent exclusion from daily wage labor. The data collection for the study was conducted

[1]There are recent and old examples of successful Dalit resistance against not being allowed to enter the temple or perform any religious rituals. In January 2018, Dalits of Vadayampady, Ernakulam district, tore down a caste wall erected by the upper-caste Hindus to keep Dalits from going near the Bhajana Madam Devi Temple (T. A. Ameerudheen, 2018). In November 2021, Dalits entered the 'Jatadhari Devasthanam,' a temple in Swarga, Enmakaje Panchayat, Kasargod, Kerala, and climbed 18 steps. In doing so, they effectively declared an end to the age-old custom that had prevailed in the village (T. Ameerudheen, 2021).

[2]Examples of such resistances range from resistance against land acquisition for big projects like Cochin International Airport Limited during the early 1990s and protests against minor projects at the village level, like the protest against the construction of a waste treatment plant in Keezhattoor village in 2018.

from March to August 2021 in a village, Pozhuthana in Wayanad district and Malabar region of Kerala. Since the study was about labeling Dalits and their resistance, the village was selected based on the presence of Dalits and other social groups. During 2011, the village has a population of 18,404 individuals residing in 4,255 households. In 2015, the religious composition of the village was 37.06 per cent Muslim, 22.82 per cent Hindu, 17.72 per cent Scheduled Tribes, 5.75 per cent Christian, and 6.62 per cent Scheduled Caste (Dalit).

Data Collection and Sampling

The study employed a purposive sampling technique to select samples that could provide the best information to obtain the study objectives after getting familiarized with the field through a previous survey. The sample size for the study was determined by following the principle of saturation in the process of data collection. The goal was to have a large enough sample size to sufficiently answer the research objectives while not giving repetitive data without any additional perspective or information. Data collection involved fifteen in-depth interviews, four group discussions, and eight key informant interviews with academicians, local health workers, local politicians, and members of worker's unions. Continuous data analysis (data coding and initial theme building) was carried out during the data collection. After the twelfth interview, the initial analysis did not result in obtaining any additional perspectives or information without giving repetitive data. Hence, the researcher concluded the data collection after the fifteenth in-depth interview, ensuring that saturation of themes was achieved.

Data Analysis

To gain a deep understanding of Dalit experiences, perspectives, and resistance against being labeled less able-bodied, the study employed thematic analysis with an inductive and phenomenological approach. Themes were allowed to emerge directly from the data itself, rather than imposing predetermined categories. The study focused on capturing the lived experiences and perspectives of Dalit participants. The data analysis involved a multi-step process: first, transcripts were reread extensively to grasp the participants' experiences and viewpoints in their totality. Second, key portions of the data containing important insights were pinpointed, and third, these segments were assigned codes that captured their core content. In the fourth step, codes were grouped into broader categories based on similarities and differences, forming potential themes. In the fifth step, initial themes were refined and finalized, and clear names were given for further analysis. This approach ensured a data-driven exploration, delving into Dalits' lived experiences and resistance strategies against the imposed label.

Ethical Consideration

This study did not involve any medical interventions and posed no potential risks to participants. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all respondents after providing sufficient information about the study, including the voluntary nature of

participation and the absence of direct risks or benefits. To protect confidentiality, information that could identify respondents is anonymized in the study report. There are no potential conflicts of interest for the author in presenting the results or at any stage of this research work.

Results

Both caste-oriented labeling of Dalit daily wage laborers as less able-bodied or less skilled by other communities and resistance from Dalits towards such labeling are routed in caste-related cognition, emotion, and behavior of Dalits and Upper caste. This necessitates psychological exploration of caste-based labeling of Dalits and Dalit's resistance towards such labeling. At the same time, it is important to place the exploration in the wider socioeconomic and cultural life histories of Dalits and other communities. In this backdrop of wider Dalit resistance happening in the region and state, the results of the study are presented by reporting the major themes and subthemes that evolved about the labeling of Dalits, the occupational challenges they face, and their idea of health, and by presenting the perspectives of the different stakeholders who participated in this study. The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data, along with some responses from respondents recorded by in-depth interviews, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The responses of respondents recorded by in-depth interviews

Theme	Subtheme	Respondent	Respondents comments
Making sense of health	Definition of health	Dalit man, 50-year-old	*Being able to do day-to-day activities of life and having no major diseases……*
	Self-responsibility	Dalit daily wage labour	*…when we heard about people facing dizziness and fainting after taking tablets for 'elipani' (leptospirosis), we were a little reluctant to take it…but after the health inspector told us why the dizziness was happening and that it could be avoided if it was taken after a meal or snack, we all took the medicine.*
	Acute and chronic susceptibility	Dalit man, plantation worker	*After the work of spraying pesticide, I will not be able to do anything. Usually, I go lie down on the verandah for some time to get relief from fatigue. Not just the present health issues from it, these are heavy pesticides and will have serious health consequences in the future.*
Labeling	Lack of hygiene	retired government servant	*…use of river water for household use will create health problems….this is one of the reasons for continuous health problems among Adivasis and Dalits living on the river banks.*
	Health damaging behavior	local politician	*…there are good changes. But still they don't see whether family is hungry or not, they drink whatever they want with the days wage…*
	Reluctant to change	local health workers	*…even though we tell them many times, they will not turn up to get treatment immediately after a health issue. They will do lot of home remedies and will turn up to the PHC only when the disease is versioned…..*
	Lack of collective efforts	Local politician and member of community based palliative	*…..very few among them participate in such programmes…. it is not just about whether they have money or not, it's about whether they have commitment towards the society or not….. not just in health, in other collective efforts of the community too they turn up in less number…..*

Occupational challenges	Physical and skill demands	Upper caste Hindu men	*….they have better health, hence perform better in work also…..Bengalis (migrant daily wage labours from north India) are very fast. They do any job without any difficulty….they carry heavy load in head to second and third floor quickly….it is not possible for local daily wage labours….*
	Quality of work	Muslim men	*……. beauty is not important for them. When we do any work we think about many designs and the most trending or a variety one will be used…you look at their houses. They will not give much importance to beauty of building.*
	Availability and ability for work	Dalit men, plantation worker	……Always it is not possible to deny work. Sometimes I go for work with health issues….in a month, getting 10 or 15 days work is lucky. It is not possible to deny it by pointing health issues…..if it is too difficult to manage, then only I skip the work……

Labeling of Dalit Bodies, Behavior and Social Life

In the village, Dalits face the burden of labels and stereotypes associated with their caste, which significantly contribute to their health-related challenges. First, local health workers, including health inspectors and doctors, hold a perception that Dalits lack hygiene and reside in unhygienic environments. The observations leading to such a perception among health workers include inadequate sanitation facilities, improper garbage disposal, and a lack of clean water sources in Dalit colonies, which can contribute to the spread of diseases and health issues among Dalits. Moreover, villagers from other social groups also adopt the same observations made by local health workers, extending them beyond the living environment to Dalits' bodies and behaviors. They view Dalits as practicing poor personal hygiene, such as bathing in polluted water, inadequate hand washing, oral hygiene, and wearing unclean clothing.

These practices, which are essential for maintaining good health according to the villagers, reinforce negative stereotypes about Dalit hygiene and living conditions, leading to discrimination and exclusion. The real-world consequences of such stereotypes are particularly pronounced for Dalits. Even today, not visibly widespread as it exists earlier, individuals from other castes, such as Brahmins, Nayar, and Thiyya, particularly older members of these castes, refrain from eating food from Dalit households due to concerns about hygiene and purity.

The lack of access to clean household water compels Dalits to heavily rely on river water. However, upper-caste individuals consider this practice unhygienic and detrimental to health, despite it being the only available water source for many. Affluent households, especially upper-caste Hindus, believe that using river water for domestic purposes poses health hazards. One retired upper-caste Hindu government servant said,

> *The river water is highly polluted due to chemical spraying in coffee plantations. During rainfall, the chemicals sprayed on the plantations flow into the river. Additionally, waste is dumped into the river. The use of river*

water for household purposes will lead to health problems. This is one of the reasons for the ongoing health issues among Adivasis and Dalits living along the riverbanks.

Consequently, the usage of river water by Dalits for household needs is stigmatized as an unhygienic practice, further perpetuating negative perceptions about their hygiene, living conditions and overall health status

Dalit workers in the village are often labeled, with claims that their poor hygiene practices contribute to high and persistent health issues. As a result, their physical health is compromised, affecting their efficiency in daily wage labor. In essence, these labelers attribute the lack of hygienic behavior as the primary cause of the high morbidity and resulting physical weakness among Dalits. Additionally, studies conducted in the region have consistently observed higher levels of morbidity among scheduled castes and scheduled tribes compared to their counterparts. However, it is important to note that the main factors contributing to increased morbidity rates among Dalits are attributed to poor socioeconomic conditions (Navaneethan & Kabir, 2009; Krishnan, 2009), which are themselves shaped by inter-caste disparities (Deshpande, 2000).

Second, health-damaging behavior, such as the use of alcohol and tobacco products, is seen as an example of a lack of self-responsibility among Dalits, which is yet another form of labeling. Both members of local political parties and local health services along with higher caste Hindus and Muslims opined that Dalit men from the village consume alcohol at hazardous levels compared to men from other social groups except Adivasis. Further it is opined that alcohol consumption is linked to the cultural practices of Dalits and they neglect the acute and chronic impact of alcoholism on health. A Muslim shopkeeper said,

...father and children drink. That is not a problem for them. . .they are not at all worried about the long-term health issues of drinking. If they have worries, they would have kept their children away from all this.

Additionally, the higher spending on alcohol and tobacco products when the family still falls in the trap of hunger is considered a lack of responsibility towards family. A local politician in the village said,

…there are good changes. But still they don't see whether family is in hunger or not, they drink whatever they want with the day's wage…

Instead of viewing alcohol addiction among Dalits as a social problem, it has been understood as a behavioural problem and in turn Dalits are labeled as someone who lacks self-control and responsibility towards health and family.

Third, there is a perception among local health workers, politicians, and upper-caste members that Dalits are reluctant to change, which is seen as an innate trait. One upper-caste Hindu man who employs Dalits on his agricultural land believes that

untreated health issues and the consequent exacerbation of existing health conditions are common among Dalit families. Local health workers share a similar opinion, believing that delaying treatment for even communicable diseases is common among Dalit families, leading to the spread of such diseases to all family members if one member is affected. One of the local health workers said,

> *Even though we tell them many times, they will not turn up to get treatment immediately after a health issue. They will do lot of home remedies and will turn up to the PHC only when the disease is worsened.*

Such labeling is done without understanding the health-seeking behavior of Dalits in their socioeconomic context and their practice of self-treatment and local health traditions. Evidence shows that home remedies among Dalits are routed in their local health tradition and their conceptualization of health and illness (Nandu, 2021). Further, it is identified that viewing Local Health Tradition as one of the bases to build upon for a continuation of care, from home and community, to health centres and dispensaries, to hospitals will serve the people best (Saxena & Priya, 2009).

Members of local political parties and health services have pointed to several examples of what they see as Dalits' reluctance to change. These include continued addiction to alcohol even after efforts from various sources to sensitize the community, high rates of student dropout in Grades 9 and 12, and a lack of effort to clean their surroundings to prevent vector-borne diseases during the monsoon season. This labeling reinforces stereotypes about Dalits and ignores the fact that change is often difficult and requires systemic interventions that address the underlying socioeconomic and cultural factors. There are some superficial shreds of evidence to support the arguments of labelers, but it is crucial to consider the context in which these behaviors occur. For example, the high rates of student dropout among Dalits are due to a number of factors, including economic hardship and social discrimination; prevalence of alcohol addiction is not a moral failing but induced by structural factors including poverty and economic hardship, social exclusion, discrimination and cultural factors; their living environment is less hygienic because they are forced to live in congested caste colonies (Pramod, 2020).

Finally, local politicians and health workers believe that there is a lack of collective effort from the Dalit community in improving the health of the community as whole, which is another form of labeling that places blame on the community. They cite the lack of large-scale Dalit participation in community-led initiatives for health, such as community-based palliative care services and treatment relief committees[3] in the village, as evidence of this. One member of the local political party and an active member of community palliative services said,

[3]The treatment relief committees are local informal forum of villagers that formed to provide assistance, support, and relief to poor individuals facing sudden health related challenges. Such committees involved in a wide range of activities such as facilitating medical aid, distributing food and supplies, and offering financial assistance.

> *Very few among them participate in such programmes.... it is not just about whether they have money or not, it's about whether they have commitment towards the society or not ... not just in health, in other collective efforts of the community too they turn up in less number.....*

Even though Dalits participate in such committees and programmes, compared to other communities their participation is lower. The social networks of Dalits that facilitate their involvement in public activities of the village are limited by discriminatory practices towards Dalits and their weak economic, social, and political position (Nandu, 2021). Similarly, at the household level, missing medical help during the time of need is seen as lack of responsibility without addressing the lack of resources leading to missed healthcare. When we understand the accumulation of unmet health needs among Dalits in the village in relation to what is happening outside, we will understand that missing medical care among Dalits is not because they lack responsibility or just because they wanted to wait and see if problem improved without medical attention. The major reasons for unmet needs for health care utilization include non-affordability due to expensive health care, inability to manage time because of work, care for children or for others, lack of transportation leading to barriers in traveling long distances, fear of health professionals, health organizations and treatment procedures, and lack of knowledge about good health workers and institutions (WHO, n.d.).

Marginalization of Dalit Labours

The labeling of Dalits as frail and less able bodied has contributed to the marginalization of Dalit laborers in the village, resulting in various occupational challenges. These challenges form the second theme, which is influenced by the occupational practices among Dalits. This theme encompasses factors that affect their occupational status and their ability to resist attacks on these practices. It is further divided into three sub-themes: physical and skill demands for work, quality of work, and the availability and ability to work.

First, the theme of occupational challenges is shaped by the sub-theme of physical and skill demands for work. Hard physical work is inherent in their traditional occupation as agricultural laborers. However, with a major shift in agriculture from food crops to cash crops, the majority of Dalits have become daily wage laborers in plantations and other sectors such as construction. This shift has occurred without any improvement in the capabilities of Dalit agricultural workers. Now they find themselves in a new sector or on plantations as daily wage laborers, competing with daily wage laborers from other communities who are already engaged in such work. This shift has led to a mismatch between the skills possessed by Dalit workers and the skill requirements of different sectors, as well as the skills possessed by other daily wage labours.

Dalits possess exceptional skills in agriculture, such as farming techniques, knowledge of weather conditions, the natural cycle of plants and animals, and soil and water management, to make cultivation highly productive. However, when they enter the field of daily wage labor outside of agriculture, these skills are not utilized, and they lack many of the skills required for the new work, such as masonry, measuring, cleaning, quality maintenance, equipment operation, problem-solving, and time management. This skill mismatch has resulted in a decrease in the amount of work done by Dalit workers compared to others. Unfortunately, this aspect is often overlooked, and the poor performance of Dalit laborers in terms of 'work quantity' is attributed solely to their lack of physical strength and poor health. The work of Dalit daily wage laborers is frequently compared to that of migrant workers from northern India, as they are increasingly replacing unskilled Dalit laborers in the village. One upper-caste Hindu villager said,

> *They have better health, hence perform better in work also. Bengalis (migrant daily wage labours from north India) are very fast. They do any job without any difficulty….they carry heavy load on their head to the second and third floors quickly….it is not possible for local daily wage labours….*

The physical fitness and dietary habits of migrant laborers are considered crucial factors by the villagers, as they believe these attributes contribute to the higher speed and quantity of work performed by migrant laborers. Many in Kerala prefer migrant laborers over local daily wage laborers due to several factors, as noted by Peter and Gupta (2020). Migrants are often single, which makes their employment more convenient. They are also perceived as being less expensive, more subservient, hardworking, and available throughout the year. Consequently, in various fields that involve physically demanding work, migrant workers are extensively employed in comparison to native laborers (Peter & Narendran, 2017).

The second sub-theme focuses on the quantity and quality of work, as evidenced by codes such as "quality of work." These codes shed light on the challenges encountered by Dalit workers in meeting work requirements and achieving satisfactory results. The villagers differentiated the quality and quantity of work performed by Dalit workers, often perceiving it as lower compared to other communities. This distinction is frequently based on aesthetics and the level of precision observed in construction projects completed by individuals from various backgrounds. For instance, a Muslim resident of the village employed a Dalit mason to construct a boundary wall for his house, said as follows,

> *They won't be able to do such works in perfection…the strength of the wall and beauty in appearance both is important in perfection…strength will be there in their work, but they cannot always ensure that perfection…..*

The villagers identified this 'lack of perfection' in the personal shortcomings of Dalit individuals and in their cultural practices as a community. A mason belonging to the Thiyya community mentioned that,

> *...beauty is not important for them. When we do any work we think about many designs and the most trending or a variety one will be used...you look at their houses. They will not give much importance to beauty of building.*

To such arguments, the response provided by a Dalit mason in the village was intriguing. He said,

> *.....I do consider beauty. But some of the designs using for beauty will compromise the strength of the building. Hence I do not try such designs and if someone is asking to do, I politely withdraw from the work.....if they are insisting sometimes I do such works in owners responsibility.*

His words indicate that, to him, the physical strength of a building or structure holds greater significance than its architectural beauty. In the village, Dalits primarily rely on traditional, locally tested knowledge and construction practices that have been passed down through generations. Unlike other daily wage laborers, they have limited exposure to new technologies and construction skills, which are familiar to laborers who have strong social networks enabling them to stay connected with latest designs and technologies.

The third sub-theme that shapes the theme of occupational challenges is "Availability and Ability for Work." This sub-theme includes codes such as "expressing availability for work" and "able body for work," which emphasize the importance of physical fitness and availability for work. The availability of work poses a significant problem for Dalits, as they only receive 10 to 20 days of daily wage work per month, which is insufficient to meet even the basic needs of their families. Several factors contribute to the limited number of work days. These include a shift towards cash crops resulting in a shortage of agricultural work, a lack of occupational diversification among Dalits, inadequate skills or experience in handling machinery for construction work, and intense competition with daily wage workers from other communities and migrant labours. In fact, there is a preference for migrant workers from North India in many daily wage jobs that Dalits used to perform in the village. The reason cited for this preference is that migrant laborers can complete more work in a day.

Regarding the ability to work, certain types of work themselves contribute to poor health. Despite being aware of the health issues associated with specific daily wage labor, Dalits continue to engage in such work due to the un-affordability of taking time off. Experiencing hunger is not an uncommon thing among poor Dalits in the village, and a loss of wages for even a few days would lead to several days of hunger for their families. To add one more dimension to this, a Dalit daily wage labour, Kumaran said that,

> *Not doing work means you are not healthy…those who are simply wasting time by not doing any work means he is physically or mentally not fit.*

For him not working implies poor health and being physically or mentally unfit. The central part of the respondent's conceptualization of good health is the ability to function normally. Being incapacitated to do work is considered a sign of bad health. However, the decision to be incapacitated is not solely based on physical and biological factors, but is often influenced by various pressures. He opined that it is not affordable for him to deny all the work days he gets by showing his incapacity to do the work. Instead, he hides his incapacity or manages it through self-treatment to express his fitness for work and ensure that the work is done without any disturbance. Even though physically incapacitated from doing work, not going for work that is available after several days of joblessness is not affordable for Dalits who are daily wage laborers in the village. Kumaran also said,

> *Always it is not possible to deny work. Sometimes I go for work with health issues….in a month, getting 10 or 15 days work is lucky. It is not possible to deny it by pointing health issues. If it is too difficult to manage, then only I skip the work.*

Even though he is aware of his inability to work due to health issues, not having that job would pose even greater difficulties for his life and family. Therefore, by successfully completing the work, he demonstrates that his body possesses enough capacity to perform the work.

Shaping of Resistance from Health and Healthcare as Utilization

The theme of making sense of health among Dalits in this study is shaped by three subthemes. The first subtheme is the definition of health. What does health mean to a comparatively poor Dalit living in the rural village of Kerala? *'Being able to do day-to-day activities of life and having no major diseases...'* was the response of a 50-year-old Dalit man who works as daily wage labor in the village. Whether or not such perceptions are valid or have the endorsement of the scientific community is open to question, but at any rate, such an understanding appears to be an inevitable result of their living conditions. In their definition, the focus is on the physical strength of an individual human being, with functional activity and the absence of major diseases. The physical strength of an individual and functional activity is expressed through their work, which is daily wage labor.

Further, the second part of their definition is about major diseases. A major disease is understood as any health issue that incapacitates work or day-to-day activities. In their definition, health can be with or without any mild illness or disease, as long as one retains the necessary ability to perform the functions they wish and need to perform they are healthy. So, what saves one from bad health? For them, it is through

minimizing the risk of being incapacitated and ensuring strength to the body through having enough to eat. What is central to their view is the work-food-health relationship, and that is an important articulation among Dalits in the village, especially those who are comparatively poor.

The next subtheme that shapes the theme of "making sense of health" is "self-responsibility." This subtheme refutes the argument that Dalits are least concerned about their health. Instead, it shows that Dalits recognize the importance of self-responsibility for good health and do not neglect it. This argument is made even though Dalits acknowledge that health-damaging behaviors such as alcohol addiction and tobacco use are more prevalent among them than in other social groups. These two observations are not contradictory. One can see that they acknowledge health-damaging behaviors as a psychosocial problem and point out that they are caused by various socioeconomic and cultural factors that go beyond their conceptualization of good health.

Furthermore, Dalits in the village exhibit a strong understanding of individual and collective responsibility, evident in their concerns about local disease outbreaks and their perception of their bodies being highly vulnerable to such outbreaks. For instance, they engaged in preventive measures such as taking prophylaxis for leptospirosis following a severe flood in 2019. They also practiced preventive measures like social distancing, using soaps and sanitizers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and implement vector control measures at the household level to prevent dengue outbreaks during monsoon seasons. A Dalit housewife, who serves as the secretary of a self-help group in the village mentioned as follows,

> *When we heard about people facing dizziness and faintness after taking tablets for 'elipani' (leptospirosis), we were little reluctant to take it. But after the health inspector told us why dizziness is happening and it can be avoided if it is taken after a meal or snack, we all took the medicine.*

Her words show that despite initial skepticism in the village regarding the use of doxycycline tablets for leptospirosis prophylaxis, Dalits in the community decided to undergo this preventive measure. They recognized the potential risk of exposure during floods and understood the importance of prophylaxis. This serves as a significant example of their awareness of the susceptibility of their bodies to local disease outbreaks and emphasizes the significance of individual and collective responsibility in preventing such outbreaks.

Coming to the acute and chronic susceptibility to disease, a Dalit man employed in the tea plantation said,

> *After the work of spraying pesticide, I will not be able to do anything. Usually, I go and lie down in the verandah for some time to get relief from fatigue. Not just the present health issues from it, these are heavy pesticides and will have serious health consequences in the future.*

His words demonstrate their belief in the susceptibility to both acute and chronic diseases, which they perceive as capable of accumulating and resulting in negative health consequences. They are also well aware of the detrimental effects of acute health issues associated with employment, and they emphasize the importance of rest and leisure in alleviating work-related fatigue. Moreover, Dalits are aware of the potential health risks if they do not take steps to enhance their quality of life.

Discussion

Analysis of the data shows that there is caste-oriented labeling of Dalit daily wage labours as less able-bodied by other communities, and there are counter-narratives or resistance from among the Dalits towards such labeling. Both the labeling and resistance are routed in the day-to-day life activities related to the work and health of Dalits and others in the village. Labeling includes lacking hygiene, following health damaging behavior, reluctant to change, and lacking collective efforts leading to occupational challenges among the Dalits. These challenges are mainly in the areas of physical and skill demand, quality of work done, and availability and ability to work. In other words, labeling Dalits as less able bodied is leading to occupational challenges among the Dalit daily wage labourers. Dalits strongly resist being labeled as "less able-bodied," which eschew them from labor. This resistance of Dalits stems from their understanding of health as functionality and the absence of disease, and their resulting active maintenance of good health and active engagement in daily wage labour. For them absence of disease is the way to express availability for labor and being able to work without any difficulties is their way to express fitness for work.

As elsewhere, the rigid connection between being lower caste and from a lower social class leading to social psychological repercussions among Dalits, such as humiliation exists in the state of Kerala and study region. At the same time, evidences shows that the intensity of such repercussions can be diluted through the realization of self-worth in the form of collective pride and dignity (Sinha, 2020). Further, it could be understood that the everyday acts of subaltern negotiation involve acts of resistance in the face of hegemonic power structures (Chandra, 2015). This study shows that Dalit's lives in the village are not only shaped by their marginality but are also shaped by their agency, resistance, and power, which they practice in their daily life. As shown in the data, actively engaging in daily wage labour at the time of availability and performing the work at maximum perfection even during health issues is an example of resistance against being labeled as apathetic. The interventions of early Dalit leaders, especially the prominent Pulaya leader Ayyan Kali, in Travancore provide enough evidence to believe that very early itself representatives of people who actually worked on the land did value their existing dispositions and skills, and were eager to respond to emerging market opportunities through developing these into capacities and conjoining them with abilities (Devika, 2010). However, the present study shows that even though Dalits are eager, labeling them as apathetic reduces their chances of improving their skills in the day-to-day life.

In Kerala, through the institutionalized martial culture and the *chekavan* tradition, the Nayar and Thiyya community which are above the Dalits in caste hierarchy maintained a 'strong body' image and consequent view of health as a continuum of fitness (Nandu, 2021). Over the long period of casteism-linked martial arts, the accumulation of knowledge about the physical strength of the body contributed to the political and ideological articulation of caste-centric strength of the body. Thus, the human body cannot be regarded as merely a matter of biological interest. Such an understanding of health by dominant castes labeled Dalits and Adivasis as of poor health, especially of poor physical strength. Dalit workers in the village are labeled as having high and persisting health issues due to poor hygiene practices and behavioural issues, hence having compromised physical health and efficiency in daily wage labour. Even though it is true that Dalits and Adivasis in the region and state have higher morbidity compared to other social groups, the reasons are not attributed to behavioral issues. Higher morbidity rates among Dalits are attributed to poor socioeconomic factors (Navaneethan & Kabir, 2009; Krishnan, 2009) influenced by inter-caste disparities (Deshpande, 2000). Other than anyone else, Dalits from the village understand this fact that it is structural factors and caste discrimination which limits their chances of improving health and work. Hence they resist labeling by articulating their points in the public spheres available to them like expressing Dalit views on alcohol addiction in the village level meetings, SHG meetings and at the work sites.

The public opinion among Dalits in the village no longer looks upon the excessive drinker as one who lacks will power or is worthless. Instead, they consider those who are alcoholic are not just alcoholic, and fulfill their familial and social responsibility in the form of going for regular works at the time of availability, looking after family matters, getting married, having offspring and leading life. Further they cite success stories of de-addiction treatment by showing examples of those who are alcohol addicted got treated and rehabilitated in their village. Hence the labeling of excessive drinkers among Dalits as worthless and following health damaging behavior is resisted by the Dalits through their developing informed public opinion on alcohol addiction. They understand that alcoholism is a form of illness, and that with proper medical and psychiatric treatment it can be treated. The developing informed public opinion no longer looks upon the excessive drinker as one who lacks will power, has sinned, or is worthless. Instead, an increasing number of people are coming to realize that alcoholism is a form of illness, and that with proper medical and psychiatric facilities rehabilitation can be achieved (Straus, 1950). When such structural and social determinants of health are the reasons for high morbidity, blaming the behavior of the affected is the easiest and most common way to criticize them.

The burden of labels and stereotypes constitutes representational violence and everyday suffering, both of which are associated with the condition of subordinated caste identity and the caste subordination of Dalits. The social life of ex-slave castes or ex-untouchable caste identities is, in fact, functioning structurally as a social fact, which significantly contributes to Dalits' everyday life, including their health-related challenges. The historicity of the Dalit untouchable body and the cultural

symbolic attribution of their body as an object of untouchability also functions as representational violence. The portrayal of a 'less-abled' body can be seen as structural violence, contributing to the everyday suffering of Dalits in their contemporary lives.

The findings of the study show that the representation of the Dalit body as an object of social untouchability, reinforced by negative stereotypes about their hygiene and living conditions, contributes to social discrimination and everyday exclusion. The notion of caste purity related to untouchability and the bodily hexis of dominance and subordination are constitutive factors of cultural habitus, as well as the notional and institutional dispositions of caste hierarchy, which reproduce social prejudices regarding community hygiene and public purity. The availability of common resources, including water—for example, the use of river water by Dalits for household needs—is also stigmatized as an unhygienic practice. Dalit workers in the village are labeled as bodies of poor hygiene, an enduring representational vestige of impurity, which is culturally equated with Brahmanic notions of impurity and the unhygienic practices associated with the dominant practice of untouchability.

The importance of this study is that the labels, attributions, and representations of Dalits by other social groups reinforce social dominance. Dalits are stigmatized as lacking hygienic behavior, which is negatively attributed as the primary cause of their high morbidity and physical weakness. The Dalit body is represented as inherently unhygienic and less able. This caste-based prejudice reflects a 'caste of mind' mentality held by the general public, without considering the material conditions and structural factors at play in social power relations. It also overlooks the everyday living conditions of Dalits in particular, and the broader functioning of caste society in general. Caste prejudice and caste discrimination are important factors that influence the social common sense and public sensibility, treating Dalits as a less able-bodied community on the one hand, and shaping views on public health, notions of disease, and labor activities on the other.

The study is also important in concluding that Dalits are actively resisting caste discrimination and working to improve their health and well-being. This is an important reminder that Dalits are not passive victims of discrimination, but rather active agents of change. It is important to recognize that caste discrimination is a major determinant of health and work for Dalits. Welfare measures including interventions in public health and employment should be designed to empower Dalits and help them resist caste discrimination.

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From a Wretched Past to an Uncertain and Undignified Future: The Open Secret of Manual Scavenging in India

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Abstract

India promises liberty, equality, justice and fraternity with dignity of life through the Constitution to every citizen without any discrimination. However, a particular section of society has been deprived of these promises due to their birth, gender and occupation. This section happens to be part of the generically termed 'Dalits' who are the lowest of the lower castes among the Hindus. They are known as manual scavengers who carry human excreta and clean dry latrines, sewers, and septic tanks more often with bare hands. This practice of manual scavenging is involuntary in nature. The scavengers not only suffer from extreme forms of social exclusion but also gross violations of human rights and dignity. However, ironically, despite several efforts as well as denial of its existence by the government, this inhuman practice still continues to exist in India. In fact, it has given birth to a new subtle form of untouchability which is an anathema to the constitutional promise. Therefore, the main aim of this article is an investigation of the nexus between caste and occupation. This article, in fact, suggests that for the annihilation of this practice, there is the need for an inclusive approach and overall behavioural change.

Keywords

Caste, social exclusion, untouchability, Dalit, manual scavenging

Introduction

'Incredible India', 'Shining India', 'New India', 'Largest Democracy with the longest written Constitution', are the some of the oft-used epithets by which India aspires

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to be known in the world. It also claims to espouse the philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. Be that as it may, India acquired its identity through its modernist living document titled "The Constitution of India" which promised a future based on the values of liberty, equality, justice and above all fraternity, to all citizens. In consequence, it assures the dignity of every individual. This promise has, however, not entirely materialized in the last seventy years of India's independence as a historically marginalized section of society is being deprived of this constitutional promise because of their birth, occupation, and gender (Chakravarti, 2012). This particular section is known by the rubric 'Manual Scavengers'.

The practice of manual scavenging is mainly due to the continuation of the hierarchical and hereditary-based caste structure of India, which is involuntary in nature (Government of Maharashtra, 1990). They are discriminated and deprived in every sphere including social, economic, educational, cultural, religious, and political. Their location itself in the mainstream is considered so impure that they are forced to live outside villages, not allowed to go to temples, shops, bathing ghats and access other basic services. Even after death they are not allowed to cremate the body in the graveyard. It can therefore be said that the stigma a manual scavenger faces, begins from his/her mother's womb and remains even after death. Considering the precariousness of the life condition of these people, any sort of remediation of their life's situation depends largely on the recognition of who they really are.

Who are the Manual Scavengers?

The answer to the question as to who is a manual scavenger is mainly drawn from official government documents. It took over four decades for independent India to come out with a formal definition of the idea of manual scavenging. For it was only in 1993 that The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (prohibition) Act, gave a definition of who is a manual scavenger albeit a narrow definition. As per this Act, a manual scavenger is 'a person who is engaged in or employed for manually carrying human excreta' (The Act, 1993). After exactly two decades, this definition was expanded in 2013 with the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act whereby a manual scavenger refers to "a person engaged or employed on a regular and frequent basis by an individual or local authority for disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit into which human excreta from insanitary latrines is disposed of, or on a railway track, before the excreta fully decomposes" (The Act, 2013). However, as argued above, it is well known that manual scavengers are, invariably, drawn from a group of people popularly known as the Dalits, who were/are considered as the lowest of the low castes within the caste system in India. They are known by different names in different states in India, for example, Bhangi, Balmiki, Mehtar, Hadi, Dom, Thoti, Chachati, etc. (Ravichandran, 2011). In fact, it is in this disgraceful occupation that the ugly intersectionality of caste and gender is prominently noticeable.

The Varna system under the Hindu social order divides Indian society among the Hindus into four categories, namely, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Shudras and based on their birth into any one of these, an individual is assigned specific duties and roles in it. In other words, in the Indian social structure, occupation forms the core of the social, political, economic and ritual relationship (Singh, 2020). Needless to say, this system authorizes that the Brahmin's job is to conduct prayers, Kshatriyas to be rulers, the Vaishyas to do business and the Shudras responsibility is to provide services to the upper three castes. However, there is a hapless category of people known as the Untouchables or Outcastes or Dalits who fall outside this four-fold categorization of Hindu society. They are assigned the worst and most degrading works like pig rearing, butchering, skinning of dead animals, manual scavenging and other so-called 'dirty works' of society. Thus, it is incontestable that the purely caste-based work of manual scavenging is the most inhumane and degrading activity one can think of. More perniciously, rather than simply remaining an occupation, a social identity is forced upon those who are made to do this humiliating work. Therefore, there remains an inalienable relation between caste and occupation as far as the Dalits doing such demeaning work and thereby making nonsense of the popular claim that there does not really exist caste-based occupation in the India of today.[1] In fact, society itself believes strongly that the Dalits are born to do a large number of unclean occupations despite the Constitution and laws prohibiting caste-based practices. Undoubtedly, due to enormous social and economic compulsions, the Dalit people are compelled to not leave these undignified occupations.

Having said so, however, it needs to be underlined that as far as the work of manual scavenging is concerned, not all the sub-castes that fall under the broader category of Scheduled Castes or Dalits do this work. Manual scavenging, therefore, is a sub-caste based occupation. That is to say, it is fair to say that all the people who are known as the Dalits are not manual scavengers but it is for sure that all those people who do manual scavenging are necessarily Dalits. This certainly is in expected lines considering the truism of the Indian caste system being one based on graded inequality and hierarchy. Therefore, there exists a hierarchy within the different sub-castes that falls under the category of Scheduled Castes as some are engaged in relatively clean occupations like fishing, cleaning clothes, barber, etc., who actually enjoy better social status. On the other hand, there are other sub-castes engaged in so-called unclean works like manual scavenging, skinning of animals, butchery and so on. It may not be wrong, therefore, to say that sub-castes who do these 'dirty' works are exploited not only by the so-called upper castes but they also face the wrath of other sub-castes among the Dalits.

However, despite the existence of data (from both government and civil society) about the number of people engaged in the practice of manual scavenging, yet there is hardly any data available on the specific sub-castes among the Scheduled Castes who

[1]It is interesting to note that priesthood is one of the glaring examples of occupations sanctioned by the caste system as it is an occupation which is socially and culturally reserved for the Brahmins.

are engaged in it. In fact, most data about manual scavengers generically mentions them as Dalits without specifying their sub-castes. Additionally, people engaged in manual scavenging have different caste nomenclatures in different states of India. What is common to all of them however is that these communities are regarded to form the lowest strata within the category of Dalit. In fact, the very names of these sub-castes are unabashedly casteist and highly derogatory. For example, in north India, they have different names like Bhangi, Balmiki, Chuhra, Halalkhor, LalBegi, Mehtar, Mazhabi, etc. In east India, they are known as Dom, Har, Hadi, Hela, and Sanei, etc., and Mukhiyar, Thoti, Arundharthiyar, Chachati, Pakay, Dravidar, Relli, etc., are in south India. In west and central India, they are known as Mehtar, Bhangias, Halalkhor, Ghasi, Olgana, Zadmalli, Barvashia, Metariya, Jamphoda and Mela, etc. (ILO, 2014).

Patriarchy and Manual Scavenging

Besides caste, patriarchy is also a major factor in manual scavenging. The majority of manual scavengers happen to be women who have no other option but to inherit this despicable job from their mothers/mothers-in-law. Though there is no government data on the number of female manual scavengers, but surveys conducted by different organizations like Human Rights Watch 2014, Rastriya Garima Abhiyan 2011, India Exclusion Report 2019-2020, Sulabha International and others reveal that over 90 per cent are women manual scavengers. Further, this number is high among young married women. In general, households with dry latrines prefer women to clean the excreta. One major reason for the concentration of women in manual scavenging occupation is the traditional Jajmani system, i.e., ownership rights to clean a select number of dry toilets, which ties generations of women to the job of manually cleaning the dry latrines in the village (BARTI). Thus, manual scavenging, where the Dalits and, particularly, women among Dalits are forced to carry human excreta and clean dry latrines, sewers, septic tanks more often with bare hands, is an occupation which has its origin/root from the caste and patriarchy system in India (Chakravarti, 2012).

In general people also prefer to hire women as they find women doing the manual scavenging work at their homes works out to be more convenient and beneficial for them. Their work gets done in exchange for some used clothes, leftover food or a few rupees. In fact, there are numerous instances where women manual scavengers were given as little as Rs. 10-20/- (Singh, 2020). Moreover, these women do not have the option of exercising their agency to refuse the work. If at all they do so, they have had to face the wrath of people, both from their own community as well as outside. In fact, research done by Human Rights Watch (2014) shows that whenever women from these communities refused to do manual scavenging work they have been subjected to hatred, violence and social boycott. As such, there is persistent pressure exerted on these women from their families, village, and community to continue this generational inhuman practice. A study conducted by R. Singh and Ziyauddin (2009) poignantly shares the story of women manual scavengers in Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh where some women tried to challenge their social and economic status by changing their

jobs. In effect, because of their 'act of defiance', due to a social boycott and lack of support from both private and governmental agencies they were forced to return to their original profession. Also, women who gathered the courage to quit are not left with any other viable livelihood alternative for which they possess the required skill set. In fact, rehabilitation programmes undertaken by the government are also highly gender biased.

In this context, it may not be out of place to mention the gender bias that women manual scavengers face. The gloves and t-shirts that are provided to them are largely useless because these are made keeping mainly men in mind. Therefore, women often use their stoles or a section of their sarees to cover their face while working. The protective gear does not provide substantial protection to the women manual scavengers. As per the report of Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan 2018, this practice is largely responsible for the poor health condition of women manual scavengers. The study observed that they suffer from numerous health problems, e.g. nausea and headache, anemia, diarrhea, vomiting, jaundice, tuberculosis, skin infections, and so on as they are exposed to unhygienic conditions on a regular basis. Hysterectomies (surgical removal of uterus) are high among women manual scavengers, which sometimes, can also lead to the removal of ovaries (Hussain, 2022). Another survey done by the Bundelkhand Dalit Adhikar Manch under the leadership of Kuldeep Baudh also attests to this fact that due to the toxic work environment, hysterectomies are increasingly high among women manual scavengers of Jalaun (Uttar Pradesh).

Reasons for its Continuance

There are several factors held to be responsible for the existence and continuation of the practice of manual scavenging. Inexplicably, some of these factors are rarely discussed either in official documents or in the scant literature pertaining to it. We argue, therefore, that this oversight is partly responsible for the failure in the eradication of manual scavenging in our society. In fact, many of these factors seem to have helped to make manual scavenging 'legitimate' in the eyes of the manual scavengers.

To begin with, it is often not taken into account that in our society it is assumed, more so by the manual scavengers themselves, that they are destined to do scavenging work only. That is, God has given them birth to do this work. Needless to say, this blind assumption is mainly due to prevailing societal norms and beliefs that have acquired a sense of legitimacy with its long-standing robust presence. Due to this societal-made unwritten law, they have also taken for granted that these pathetic conditions are either due to evil work in their previous birth or god's order or wish for them to accomplish in this birth (Parida, 2016). Unfortunately, this factor has scarcely been taken into account at the governmental level. This is where the role of research in policy making comes in. Moreover, partly due to the prevalence of this fatalistic attitude, manual scavengers are scarcely aware of their rights. In fact, more often than not, they consider these laws as simply farcical.

The second reason is the officially recognized one which is to do with the continuation of the existence of dry/insanitary latrines (latrine which requires human excreta to be cleaned or handled manually either in an open drain or pit into which the excreta is discharged or flushed out before the excreta fully decomposes) particularly in rural and urban slum areas (The Act, 1993). As long as dry latrines exist, it is impossible to eradicate the practice. Even today there are many villages in India where we will not find a single sanitary latrine with the modern flush system. In addition to this, a weak drainage system in India also stands in the way to root out the practice of manual scavenging. Contextual to this practice, is the stigma/taboo attached to toilets in our society, wherein toilets are generally kept away from homes at a safe distance. From a hygiene point of view it is understandable but it also strongly correlates to the fact of the presence of dry, insanitary latrines.

Lastly, the above two factors largely depend on the third one which stands in the way to annihilate the practice. It is partially the lack of interest by the government. In fact, one could certainly add the culpability of the myriad number of NGOs, think tanks, academicians, and scholars for being part of this serious neglect to address the issue of manual scavenging by not really devoting the attention it truly deserves. Of course, in no way we are trying to claim here that the government(s) has/have simply not tried to do anything. But the point essentially is that the very existence of manual scavengers today even after more than seven decades of independence does gesture towards an apathetic attitude of the government(s). During the elections, the issues of the Dalits become the 'hot topic' for political parties of every hue but discussions on the occupation of manual scavenging, for some reason, remain to be the least attractive (Mander, 2014).

Many cases of manual scavenging are underreported. The laws that are made for this are also not strictly implemented and followed up. Furthermore, few NGOs are actively working in this field. If at all, the NGOs that are working in this field are mainly centered in urban or semi-urban areas (Nigar, 2018). Of course, there are some NGOs who claim to work in the rural areas as well, but, sadly, they have failed to arrest the act of manual scavenging there.

The above discussion points to the fact that the existence of manual scavenging and its resultant consequences falls squarely foul on the emancipatory scheme of the Indian constitution.

Is the Constitution Panacea to Manual Scavenging?

The practice of manual scavenging which is purely based on exploitation, deprivation, injustice and inequality contradicts the basic provisions of the fundamental law of the land. If this is so, then it is a reasonable question to ask that are not the constitutional provisions themselves, or for that matter, the application of them, both necessary and sufficient to be the panacea of this shameful practice? It is well known that The Preamble to the Constitution of India emphatically promises justice, liberty, equality, fraternity (assuring the dignity of the individual) for all citizens of India. In fact, these

values have been amplified more concretely in the sections on Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution. For example, Article 14 proclaims that the state shall not deny to any person equality before the law or equal protection of laws within the territory of India. It means that all are equal in the eyes of the law. However, one tends to believe that this is so only on paper. In fact, the state has (equal protection of laws) failed to protect this particular section of the citizens. According to Article 15**,** the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, and place of birth or any of them. There should be equal access to shops, public restaurants, hotels, and the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort without any discrimination. Going against this principle, manual scavengers in many parts of India are not even allowed to enter temples, go to shops, bathing ghats and access other basic services. Their location itself in the mainstream is considered so impure that they are forced to live outside the village. Article 16 declares that there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state and no citizen shall be denied this on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent or place of birth. One needs proper education in order to get equality of opportunity in the area of employment. In fact, the interplay between caste and occupation stands in its way to making proper use of 'equality of opportunity'. As per Article 17, the practice of untouchability is not only abolished and its practice in any form forbidden, but it is also an offence punishable in accordance with the law. Though the term untouchability has not been clearly defined, but it is understood as that social practice where some people are deprived and discriminated solely on the basis of their birth. Manual scavengers who are untouchables among untouchables are at the receiving end. Further, the practice of manual scavenging as it exists today both in the public and private spheres provides a new, subtle form of untouchability which is an anathema to the constitutional promise. In this context, Guru (2000) rightly argues that in the present context, terms like exploitation, domination and suppression have to be replaced by the term marginalization. This form of marginalization is both social and cultural marginalization. It may safely be argued that it is a new form of the practice of untouchability.

Moreover, though not justiciable under the scheme of the Constitution, it is certainly a fundamental direction to the state in policy formulation, within the Directive Principles of State Policy, Article 46 directs the state to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of people, and in particular, of the SCs and STs and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. From the above articles it is clear that discrimination and exploitation in any form on the basis of caste is strictly prohibited and also a punishable offence. At the same time, it is directed to the state to protect the weaker section and take different steps for their upliftment keeping in mind the injustices they faced in the past and present forms of discrimination. It is therefore incumbent upon the state to fulfill the constitutional promise and ameliorate the condition of this hapless section of people.

Measures Taken by the Government

Of course, the Government of India has formed different committees and commissions, and also introduced various schemes to address the problem and for prohibition of manual scavenging. Some of these are Malkani Committee, Pandya Committee, Valmiki Malin Basti Awas Yojna, Schemes for Welfare and Rehabilitation of Manual Scavenger, Total Sanitation Campaign, Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers, National Scheme of Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers (Mander, 2014). In fact, the first major legislative step to eradicate manual scavenging was taken in 1993, known as *Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993* which came into force from 26/01/1997. Under this act, construction and maintenance of dry latrines and employment of persons to clean them was prohibited (The Act, 1993). But as per the House Listing and Housing Census, 2011, released by the Registrar General of India, about 7 lakhs out of more than 26 lakh insanitary latrines are serviced by humans (Annual Report, 2017-2018). The act of 1993 did not bring much success. To address the problem and make it a serious offence the government of India brought another apparently 'stringent' act in 2013 known as *Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013* with three main objectives: a) Elimination of insanitary latrines b) Eradication of manual scavenging and c) Rehabilitation of manual scavengers in alternative occupation (The Act, 2013). In addition, a National Survey of Manual Scavengers in 170 districts of 18 states was conducted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, in 2018-19. As per the survey, 34,749 manual scavengers were identified. A total of 49,354 manual scavengers have been identified in the National Survey up to 31/3/2019 (Annual Report, 2018-19). A bitter truth clearly reflected from the data is that this practice is very much in existence in India.

Campaigning to Eradicate Manual Scavenging

There are numerous organizations both at the local and national level that have been campaigning to end the inhuman practice of manual scavenging. The most prominent organizations include the Safai Karmachari Andolana, Maila Mukti Yatra, Dalit Solidarity Network, BhimYatra, Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan (RGA), Sulabha International, and the Social Awareness Society for Youth (SASY). It is through these organizations that we are able to obtain the reality of this practice. The Safai Karmachari Andolana, which covers most states of India, aims to educate those engaged in manual scavenging about their rights and entitlements. Its demand is not only restricted to the elimination of this evil practice but also to modernize and mechanize the sanitation system. In fact, it claims that its demand is for the liberation of manual scavengers rather than their empowerment (D'Souza, 2016). The Mahila Mukti Yatra conducts campaigns in various states where it creates awareness and inspires those engaged in the practice to liberate themselves from this undignified work. The Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan (RGA) is another campaign working since 2000

for the eradication of manual scavenging. Its main objectives are to fight for the dignity of the manual scavengers, create awareness about this socially imposed practice, ensure education for their children, and work for their development. As a result of this campaigning, around 7,000 individuals, of which the majority are women, have quit the practice of manual scavenging (Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan, 2011). The Sulabha International, active since 1970, has been campaigning against this practice. However, it is more focused on the working conditions of women manual scavengers and also emphasizes on strong women economic empowerment programmes with the help of Skill Development Programme. Finally, the Social Awareness Society for Youth (SASY) is an important Dalit Human Rights Organization working in Tamil Nadu, the state where the highest number of deaths of manual scavengers has been reported. This organization focuses largely on matters related to manual scavenging, sewer tank deaths, and incidents of caste-based discrimination against sanitary workers and related incidents in government schools in Tamil Nadu (The Hindu Bureau, 2023). SASY rightly claims that a majority of cases are not recorded properly. In fact, most cases emerge only when a person dies while cleaning septic tanks. Above all, SASY makes the most pertinent point that it is the combination of caste and poverty that is largely responsible for the continuation of the reprehensible practice of manual scavenging.

Are We Genuinely Serious About It?

What is unfortunate is the fact of a 'politics of denial' by the Indian State as well as the units/states within India as they claim the non-existence of manual scavenging. In fact, as recently as July 2021, the Union Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment has denied in Parliament that any death has taken place in the country due to manual scavenging. On the contrary, Bezwada Wilson (National Convenor of the Safai Karmachari Andolana) has painstakingly pointed out that 472 manual scavenging deaths were recorded in India during 2016-2020 and 26 deaths took place in 2021 (*The Hindu*, 2021).

This persistence of the occupation violates the basic sense of dignity promised by the Constitution, which is premised upon, to use Rawlsian language, the primary good of 'free choice of occupation against a background of diverse opportunities' (Rawls, 1971). Further, as argued above, the practice of manual scavenging as it exists today both in public and private sphere provides a new, subtle form of untouchability which is an anathema to the constitutional promise (Guru, 2000). Hence, we need to ask ourselves, as to why this practice continues to exist even after seven decades of Independence. If it is about occupation as Gandhi says, have we ever seen/heard any upper caste person doing scavenging work in the homes of lower caste people? This makes one concur with Ambedkar that it is not only about occupation, in fact, it is more than that which is about 'purity-pollution' of the caste system. As per Hindu tradition, there are two sorts of occupations, viz., pure work and impure work. The filthy and unclean occupations (scavenging), which the Untouchables perform, are impure work and are done by the scavengers (Ramaswamy, 2011).

Therefore, it is clear that the fundamental law of the land which itself acts as a charter of social reform has failed to address this issue. This is against constitutional morality and is nothing but a fraud on the constitutional promise. For the scavengers not only suffer from an extreme form of social exclusion but also gross violations of human rights and dignity. Hence, it is necessary to challenge the politics of denial of the state and thereby the blatant violation of the constitutional promise with regard to one of the most disadvantaged sections of Indian society whose past and future happens to be a story of wretchedness, uncertainty and indignity.

In Lieu of Conclusion

The act of both 1993 and 2013 prohibited this practice but this, unfortunately, seems to be on paper only. It is the abdication of both legal and moral responsibility on the part of the government and society respectively. It is unfortunate that there are many villages in India, where people are hardly aware of the laws relating to manual scavenging. Paradoxically, where some people are well aware, they try to hide it. This shows that societal irrational beliefs have been superseding the modernist project of the Constitution. Therefore, as a concluding remark, this article would like to propose that every manual scavenger should be made aware of his/her rights. Of course, knowing about somebody's right is not sufficient until there are alternative modes of occupation and other benefits in order to get rid of the practice of manual scavenging. For this purpose, proper study and surveys need to be carried out in villages with the active involvement of government agencies, civil society organizations, activists, academicians and so on. In fact, committees should be formed in every region comprising Dalit youths of that area. For there is every possibility that these cases may not be reported. Above all, to use the cliché, there is need for proper implementation of laws and stringent punishment for those who violate it. Besides this legal force, the moral responsibility lies on each one of us to make possible 'behavioural change'.

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Politicising the Public Space: On Dalit Women Sanitation Workers in India

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Abstract

Caste determines the life worlds of people in India in particular and South Asia in general. Historically, it is observed that caste has conditioned the nature of public spaces. Upper castes can appropriate the public spaces legitimized by caste ideology and practice. However, colonial and post-colonial India witnessed changes in the caste system due to its (modern) legal interventions. Paradoxically, caste persists in its crude and subtle forms. It has also acquired new forms in post-independent public spaces. Caste determines certain bodily dispositions within the so-called public spaces. The ambiguous nature of modernity and the weight of tradition have drastically transformed the public space. A socially regulated economy and public institutions are determining the people, space, and mobility of the castes, too. This article investigates the nature of the stigmatized labour of Dalit women sanitation workers (who come under the manual scavenging community) within diverse public urban spaces. It analyses the various questions related to the Dalit women sanitation workers who work in select public universities, urban housing colonies, and slums in Delhi, India. It probes the Dalit women sanitation workers' day-to-day life in caste-ridden spaces of urban- "public" spaces. One of the central questions that needs to be addressed is whether the socioeconomic space of these Dalit women workers has changed in contemporary India. Why do Dalit women have to do stigmatized work in public spaces? How are purity and pollution reinforced in elusive ways? Thus, it initiates a critique of the Indian feminist understanding of public spaces. This article acts as a way to engage with the epistemic priority of women sanitation workers to problematize Brahmanic feminism in India. Can there be any social-political engagement with the public space in the case of Dalit women sanitation workers? At the level of theory, this article critiques the dominant-Habermasian idea of the public sphere and Nancy Fraser's counter-public to reflect on conceptual practice grounded in the Dalit women sanitation workers and public space.

Keywords

Caste, Gender, Dalit, Sanitation, Work, Public Space

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> "Their Orthodox pity is no taller than a Falkland Road pimp
> It's true, they haven't raised any ceremonial tenet for us in the sky
> After all, they are the feudal lords; they've locked all light in their vault
> In this lowered life imposed on us, not even a pavement belongs to us
> They've made us so helpless; being humans become nauseating to us
> We can't find even dust to fill up our scorched bowels
> The rising day of justice, like a bribed person, favours only them
> While we are being slaughtered, not even a sigh for us escapes their generous hands"
>
> **—"*Their Orthodox Pity*", Namdeo Dhasal**

Introduction

Sanitation workers are extolled by the state and several government institutions in contemporary India. During and after COVID-19, the "scavenging community" is highlighted in the "public" spaces and given a certain kind of recognition by showering of rose petals, flowers and garlanding. Suddenly, a new vocabulary for them has emerged in the so-called "public" spaces. They became the "protectors," "warriors" and "viragana," in the language of the public spaces. These tropes had acquired different forms during the first phase of COVID-19. Social media platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram abounded with hate trolls against the Dalits (ex-untouchables), saying that lower castes should die with COVID-19. The manner in which the word Bangi is used in popular and social media discourses reveals the caste-bias towards sanitation workers (Katulkar, 2023, p. 10). As per casteist trolls, it was further written that they deserve death because they are the beneficiaries of reservation policies. Simultaneously, notions of purity and pollution from colonial to post-colonial times polarised the social equations during the pandemic (Patil, 2021). The construction of the hygiene of the nationhood is also contested (Irshad, 2021, pp. 23–40). The sanitation women workers in particular and overall manual scavenging community therefore, have a different trajectory of work, labour, and stigma in caste-based-neoliberal India. This article investigates the nature of stigmatized labour of Dalit women sanitation workers (who come under the manual scavenging community) within diverse public urban spaces. It analyses the various questions related to the Dalit women sanitation workers who work in select public universities, urban housing colonies, and urban slums in Delhi, India. It probes the Dalit women sanitation workers' day-to-day life in caste-ridden spaces of (urban) 'public" spaces. A central question to be addressed is whether the socio-economic space of these Dalit women workers has changed in current India or not. Why do Dalit women have to indulge in stigmatized work in public spaces, which is based

on caste? Or does their caste location force this type of work upon them? How are purity and pollution reinforced on them in elusive ways? What circumstances forced them to do this form of work? How do they look at their life in the context of their work? How do they see the larger societal approach to them and their work? How does this form of work affect their health? Are they aware about the laws, technological developments and their rights? Thus, the article also offers a critique of the Indian feminist understanding of public spaces and acts as a way to engage with the epistemic priority of women sanitation workers to problematize Brahmanic feminism in India. Can there be any social-political engagement with the public space in the case of Dalit women sanitation workers? At the level of theory, this article attempts to offer critiques to the dominant-Habermasian idea of the public sphere and Nancy Fraser's counter-public to reflect on conceptual practice grounded in the lives of Dalit women sanitation workers and the public space. Before delving into the intricacies of their life circumstances grounded in caste-class-stigmatized occupations, one has to return to the core debates around the working classes and labour across the globe.

Ideas and Departures

Conditions of working classes are changing throughout the world. The nature and meaning of work and labour categorizes the people. It further leads to various ideologies of the status quo and its linkages to forms of power. Occupations, thus, are being read in the more extensive views around the category of labour. One question that still looms large is whether the idea of work has to be romanticized or the work itself has to be dismantled. Debates on abolishing the work have unleashed new conceptual tools to look at the challenges of the workers. It is noted that Anarchists and the exponents of the New Left have constructed robust critiques of the category of work (Jager, 2018). Dominant understandings of labour often tend to ignore the interlinked social dimensions. It is embedded in the social spaces and the construction of knowledge. Thus, the geopolitics of the ideas (Mignolo, 2011) of labour demands diverse and context-specific readings. Marxist feminist accounts on workplaces, households, and social reproduction are limited due to their understanding of the nation-state as the macro-realm for social reproduction than exploring global social transformations (Ferguson & David, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, Marxist questions around labour were later questioned by the Afro-American thought. Catherine Lu argues that the oppressed social locations and states complicate the lives of vulnerable sections belonging to certain races, genders, and classes (Lu, 2014). Questions of race, labour, and Postbellum capitalism are probed in the works of W. E.B. Du Bois (Major, 2022). Consequently, post-racial society witnessed several critiques and debates around the category of 'labour' through diverse lens of class, race, gender, ideology and praxis. The political writings of black leftist-feminist women have articulated the connections between race and work (Burden-Stelly & Jodi Dean, 2022). It can be observed that Indian conditions of caste, gender and labour have a different trajectory from the aforementioned geopolitics of ideas around class, race and gender. In order to unearth

the peculiar social and political dimensions in an Indian context, it is essential to probe the concept of the public in India. It is connected to the vicissitudes of modern democracy. In the milieu of democracy, rights are granted to the citizens, which create new possibilities for people across various social stratifications. Critiques of democracy through the perspectives of contradictions between the social and the political help us to explore the situatedness of Dalits. Ambedkar analyzed how caste operates as the notion of the mind (Ambedkar, 1989, p. 68). The existence of caste at the psychological level becomes the dominant "public". In other words, the public operates within the dominant ideological space of the caste. The multiple dimensions of caste, gender and work thus have to be deciphered via rigorous methodological approaches.

Research Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative research method that focusses on different narratives of Dalit women sanitation workers. It captures their lived experiences through interviews of 15 women sanitation workers. The names of the respondents are changed to maintain respondent confidentiality. The age group of the respondents is 20–57 years and snowball sampling method is used. Interviews were conducted in the city of Delhi. Their lives revolve around the universities, urban housing colonies and slums. Thus, the interviews can map the various layers of their social locations, home and work places. Interviews of two faculty members from the manual scavenging community were also carried out to explicate the changing contours of caste, occupations and development. The author of this article conducted the interviews in Hindi and later translated them into English. As a Dalit, the author previously knew some of the respondents. It helped to gain their trust during the interview sessions. Still, most of them denied providing interviews at the premises of their work place, fearing that they will lose their job if they were reported to their immediate heads, like the contractor, administration, or the supervisor. Therefore, interviews were conducted at their homes. The questions were the following: Why Dalit women have to do stigmatized work in public spaces which is based on the caste system? What circumstances forced them to do this form of work? How do they look at their life in the context of their work? How do they see the larger society's approach towards them and their work? How does this form of work affect their health? Are they aware about the laws, technological developments and their rights? The idea of the public operates as a larger theoretical background to these questions. It is important to go through some of the rudimentary and nuanced dimensions of the category of the public.

Analysing the Public

While analysing the debates on public sphere, the critiques have created different momentum globally. In order to engage with the debates on 'public' in Habermasian perspectives, one needs to go back to the genealogy of that debate. Habermas argued

that cultural and social differences should be explicated to differentiate from abstract political practices to ensure equality. Consequentially, autonomy in private lives via individual rights can be interpreted if the concerned people are able to foreground it in the public dialogues (Habermas, 1998, pp. 210–225). Paradoxically, the equal rights to coexistence and cultural forms of life may be problematic for the caste-bound patriarchal space of sanitation women workers. The question of the public changed in the discourse on the public in the later perspectives. This article does not engage with all those perspectives. The select perspectives are deliberately chosen because that helps to deepen the core theoretical concerns of this article. Debates around the creolization have raised major challenges to contemporary theories and political struggles of the marginalised sections. In the case of the social and political theories' deep meditations on the creolisation of the political, it is argued that "Our approach would be to consider the historical development of modern western societies as entangled in the complex construction of three expressive spheres: the public, the private and the subaltern" and further suggested that "…the civility of [a] pronounced public sphere and a secluded private sphere despite their apparent gendered opposition, owed its Western hegemonic meaning to regulatory civilization, resourced by and defined against a subaltern sphere-the slaves, the colonised, the natives and the racially segregated others" (Hesse, 2011, pp. 58–59). As a result, the vital question to be raised is whether Dalit women sanitation workers act as a counter public in the Nancy Fraserian sense? Fraser argued that "the subaltern counter publics are…parallel discursive areas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). Therefore, Dalit women labourers questions have to initiate the theoretical departure from the feminist nuances in Fraser's subaltern counter publics. The social nature of the public space, especially in the context of the Dalits, has to be analysed with that of their predicaments about the social/public space. One has to also investigate the relationships between experience and workplaces and how Dalits experience those work places. In the backdrop of critical readings, how can work locations be understood as a factor that constitutes the vicious work environment? For example, numerous respondents analyzed the persistence of caste-based hate against sanitation workers as central to the workplace. Hence, hexis (Bourdieu, 1977) of Dalit sanitation women workers reverberate within the social hierarchy. Social spaces thus condition their bodies and existential predicaments. It is vital to ponder theoretical shifts that emanated around the changing nature of the bodily dispositions and caste.

Gopal Guru argued that, "First, in India, the discourse on untouchability is built up around the idea of touch. Unlike other societies, socially dominant groups within India have developed a distinct understanding of touch. The idea is embedded in their minds with enormous power to fragment, discipline, segregate, and quarantine large chunks of humanity. What is so distinct about touch is its moral `economy,' which achieves this fragmentation with no investment of power; that is to say, it is withdrawal from, rather than engagement with, bodies that creates the other - the untouchable. Thus,

touch is powerful because it privileges some bodies through insulation rather than assimilation" (Guru, 2006).

Modern law has transformed the conflictual-social corollary. However, power and consequential inequality operate in peculiar ways. In the Henri Lefebvrean sense, social space is a product of the (caste-linked) society (Lefebvre, 1991). As a result, the relational facets of space in the case of Dalits have to be analyzed with the authentic social, psychological, and economic conditions of Dalits. The social nature of labour thus debunks the panegyrics on a homogenized understanding of labour and labourers. Caste in its various forms determines the social and political milieus in India. It is core to the social profile of South Asia. The social regulations impact the political system in India (Ambedkar, 1989, p. 222). It determines the nature of the "public" space as well. Though the Indian feminist understanding of public spaces has been influenced by the intersections of feminism, Marxism, and postmodern understandings, the debates on the public and private spheres in India have been peripheral to the social and political interlinkages. The ideas of private and public have to be revisited against the social backdrop of the changing forms of caste. There were new possibilities offered by the reform movements and freedom struggle (Aloysius, 2005). Nevertheless, those debates on social reform movements and freedom movements need to be more adequate in examining the various levels of the public and private in the case of Dalits. In order to map the specific nature of an understanding of the public, one has to rethink the public against the backdrop of anti-caste assertions. It can be argued that the critiques within social and political engagements from the marginalized sections add reflexive dimensions to existing democratic articulations. The complicated boundaries between the public and private categories can be understood through the voices of Dalit women sanitation workers.

Groove of the Wretchedness

A Dalit labourer who does not have property is forced to return to menial caste-based occupations. They become cynical about the caste-driven occupational world. Most of them are not able to access public education due to poverty and lack of cultural capital. Landed dominant and middle castes cum political class regulate the economy in peculiar ways. The Indian political order that oscillates between caste and neoliberal economic flagellations also reorient the caste-based labour-subjectivities in a dubious manner. One also needs to be cautious about the Dalit interpretations of feudal- semi-feudal Indian conditions and the dominant perspectives, especially the left-oriented accounts on feudal and semi feudal conditions. Feudal and capitalist phases of patriarchy are based on the control of the labour of the women and the distribution of its surplus (Holter, 1984, pp. 178–179). Caste-based feudal and semi-feudal conditions enslave the Dalit women sanitation workers to socially regulated -neoliberal Indian patriarchy. Many respondents mentioned that they had to face sexual harassment from the contractor. The precarious and informal nature of their occupation thus pushed them into forms of patriarchy. One of the crucial questions that have to be answered

is whether Dalits engage and recover themselves in this sort of labour or not. Are they able to confront the larger challenges related to labour? The socially regulated Indian economy determines the social mobility of the Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular. What are the methodological problems engendered in analysing similar conditions of Dalits and Dalit women? It is important to enter in to the debates on labour in the Indian feminist accounts and caste-gender-labour in the Dalit accounts. As part of the Dalit women sanitation workers larger issues, it is essential to ruminate on the dimensions of migration and labour. Research on migrant labour highlights the complexities related to Dalits. It is observed that, "Social group profiles of migrants do not match with the overall high level of work participation among SCs. Lower social and caste status propels/compels greater involvement of women in paid work. However, in the context of urban women migrants such pattern is not visible. This clearly means that more diversified and less stigmatised service occupations in urban areas, have obviously opened up more opportunities for upper caste women than for traditional female workers, who are drawn more from SC and ST" (Neetha, 2017-2018, p. 18). Employment of women therefore is gauged through the category of the labouring poor (Neetha, 2013). The labouring poor are fragmented on the basis of caste, gender and labour. Dalit labourers' alienation is to be rearticulated in the context of private property and labour. Does their estranged labour have anything to do with their property or not? Dalit workers are co-opted into a system of caste that further alienates them. Freedom in a Marxian sense is inadequate to probe the case of Dalit labour. Caste, labour and alienation of Dalit women thus arrest their freedom in deleterious fashion. Time also has to be counted in relation to the labour of the sanitation women workers. The continuity of labour has to be understood in the context of caste. There are synchronic and diachronic dimensions to the category of labour. It becomes a recurrent category throughout their life. The questions of skilled and unskilled workers and its separation from knowledge formation have been central to academic and activist circles. Does capitalism erase the differences between the skilled and unskilled labour? Work and workers have to be read within the Brahminic political economy of capital. Dalit labour processes within Brahmanic capitalism have to be understood in relation to the pre-capitalistic Dalit labour process. Such an endeavour will help us to analyse the shifting contours of specific labour process. Dalit labourers from colonialism to that of neoliberal globalisation have a different trajectory altogether. A key aspect in the case of the sanitation women workers is the exploitative nature of work. Economic and caste-based conditions push Dalit women and men to this form of work. The cardinal question is if this form (sanitation work) of wage can be justified or not. Is there any mode of production through which Dalit women's labour question can be addressed? Dickenson described how women without paid jobs are not related to capitalist means of production. They produce commodities without use value (Dickenson, 1997, p. 131). Caste and labour and its extension to the neoliberal phase of capitalism ramify the various issues related to Dalit women sanitation workers. A large number of respondents said that, "We are forced to work even without wage, respect and dignity therefore is a distant dream." What are the

current conditions of the questions of labour across the globe? The issues of labour are linked to the ascendency of neo-fascism in the context of the divided and fragile leftist political formations. It is further noted that the left has a conflicted approach on neoliberal globalization. However, it is against the dominance of finance against globalization. These political changes lead to the end of trade unions (Prabhat Patnaik & Utsa Patnaik, 2023). Henry Bernstein observed that classes of labour, gender and caste lead to the active and passive reserve army of labour (Bernstein, 2023, p. 61). The question related to division of labour can be seen as complicated in the case of Dalit women labourers. Caste and un/free labour in India expose the crude and direct forms of bondages and oppressions. Economy operates within the complex social order (Neetha, 2013).

The Unheard Voices

Dalit articulations in different Indian states have their modes and ideological resonances. Some have tried to or have been engaging in internal social reform in the Hindu religion. During the interview, the women sanitation workers responded that the Arya Samaj movement impacted Hindu religion and their socialization. They further added that Mahatma Gandhi influenced their families, and they introduced themselves as Harijan. One of them said, "Gandhiji said that they (sanitation workers) are the children of God, Harijan, and therefore, they have to purify themselves; they should do the work of cleaning toilets." A radical breakthrough by Babasaheb Ambedkar's ideas and history of political practices brought changes in the lives of those who know his struggle to uplift Dalits via constitutional rights. Ambedkar's engagements with Buddhism paved the way for the political awakening of some of these women. Thus, the quest for reform within Hinduism and the radical critique of Hinduism also reappear in the context of the idea of the public. The adjective, public, therefore, in the space of Dalits has to be reformulated according to the epistemological moorings of Dalits. In parallel cases, the "Public "as a category and practice becomes a space of contradictions. Most Dalit women sanitation workers mentioned how caste and their occupation impact their quotidian life. Some mentioned their existence as caught in the dangerous zone of caste and labour, adding that they cannot escape from this sort of vicious social formation. Domestic violence is a common phenomenon among the sanitation women workers' homes; therefore, it needs to be seen as the response of the oppressed Dalit to the larger forms of caste-based humiliation in the public space. Hence, one can argue that internal patriarchy thus is created through the external caste-based patriarchy. As Gail Omvedt informs us of how social patriarchy turns out to be part of the power relations in the dominant-violent Indian society (Omvedt, 2000, p. 6).

The majority of women said that even if they wish to come out of unhealthy, caste-stigmatized work, they cannot exit the public spaces related to caste labour. They are branded as "garbage" since they are marginalized or ghettoized into a particular area. Most of them are conscious of the manual on caste-based residential

segregation of sanitation workers. They further said that the dominant space of the public thus looks at them as someone who carries the stigma and filth from generation to generations. Most respondents, irrespective of their religious orientations and ideological inclinations, articulated that the dominant society reproduces their caste bias in everyday life and looks at them from the perspective of highly toxic untouchability. It has to be annihilated in order to debunk the relations of caste, gender, and labour, conflictual realms that decide society and the public. Caste is analyzed as an ideological, social realm that divides the labourers and the labourers (Ambedkar, 1989, p. 47). Women are also conceptualized as the gateway to the caste system (Ambedkar, 2004). For instance, it operates through the Hindu religious-social order. Gender is also conceptualized as an abstract labour (Holter, 1984). Relations of caste, gender, and labour structure the social cum public space of the Dalit women labourers. Nevertheless, a position like that cannot ignore the fundamental intersections of caste and gender in India. In the context of Dalit women, the nature of education and economic-demographic complexities are unexplored (Neetha, 2013), and it raises pertinent questions of gender and lower caste-working class. Shubham Kumar and Priyanka Preet noted that 95 per cent to 98 per cent of 1.2 million manual scavengers are women. A gender-based approach is needed, as the caste-based approach. These women are pushed into abhorrent practices of dumping the placenta post-deliveries, clearing sewage, carrying filth in cane baskets, cleaning dry latrines, and so on. They face social exclusion and sexual harassment in their day-to-day work. They are forced to do menial work for meagre wages of Rs. 10/- to Rs. 20/-, with meals for cleaning dry latrines during festive occasions. Some are forced to work without any payment. Their children face discrimination in educational institutions (Kumar & Preet, 2020).

Moreover, while doing this research, some respondents emphasized the ways in which they are kept apart at their workplaces, which one can call 'public spaces' like universities and hostels. Many women working in the universities said, "These women, who teach in these universities hardly look at us or talk to us. We are not allowed to sit in the corridor or corner of any corridor or public spaces to eat food on the university campus by many female faculty members. If by mistake, any of us happens to sit in public spaces, especially when they are unwell, female faculty members used to shout at them." Other respondents mentioned that female students in hostels and universities do not allow them to touch drinking water. Some offer water (in old plastic bottles) in order to avoid bad fortune. This type of inhuman approach stems from the rituals and superstitions related to caste and Hindu religion. Some are conscious of the differences based on caste and gender among women. They mentioned the stark differences based on the social locations of lower and upper-caste women. Dalit feminists have critiqued Brahmanic authorship and intellectual subordination of the Dalit women. Sisteriarchy grounded in epistemic hierarchy undermines the egalitarian claims of the hegemonic feminist movements in India (Patil, 2013). Dalit feminist existential and political predicaments related to gender and property must be addressed differently. There are hegemonic, Brahmanic constructions of Dalit women. Brahmanic feminist and women's/gender studies in India have ideological and epistemological limitations

in theorizing the peculiar social and political worlds of Dalit women (Patil, 2023). Globally, the geopolitics of hegemonic feminism thus is limited because it is informed by Brahmanic feminist accounts related to India. Dickenson discusses the neo-colonial trap in the essentialisation of third-world women (Dickenson, 1977, p. 122). Work inside and outside the home, therefore, requires critical readings. It acquires different implications in the case of the Dalit women sanitation workers.

Housework outside the home has to be differentiated (Dickenson, 1977, p. 122). Is it possible to differentiate work in the context of Dalit women in general and Dalit women sanitation workers in particular? Dalit women sanitation workers from the lower economic spectrum have different natures of work inside and outside their home. At the level of caste, sanitation women workers do not have to face caste discrimination within their homes and their more extensive caste networks. At the same time, the world outside is casteist in nature. They are alienated from domestic work, forced to do external sanitation work, and manual scavenging. A large of number of respondents pointed out the burden of carrying this occupation from their ancestors to contemporary times. Scholars have also discussed that the unnatural conditions of sexual division of labour have to be seen in relation to property and labour (Dickenson, 1977, p. 126). Dalit women's ownership of their labour is imposed and determined through caste, and they are deprived of all forms of social, cultural and political capital. Some sanitation workers said that those who got jobs at university are lucky due to their access to education. They further mentioned that a lack of education denies their survival and dignity, saying that they had to enter into these occupations at a very early stage of life due to poverty and the demise of their family members. They are forced to continue it even in their old age. Approximately eleven of them mentioned that their relatives continue to clean open drains, septic tanks or pits, sewer railway tracks, open defecation, etc. Remarks like, "Our women (Dalit women) mostly do this form of work" are heard. Like other respondents, they reiterated that the stigma of being a 'scavenger' constantly haunts them. They stated that some tried to come out of this "dirty work." However, people do not accept them, even their presence in their homes, or as domestic help or cook. An upper caste faculty member from the university remarked to another faculty member (who is from the community of manual scavengers) that, "You are from the caste of (manual scavengers), whatever you may achieve or bring any change in yourself, you will remain as lower caste". Talking about how she had to hear caste abuse from an upper caste university teacher, she was told by a particular university teacher and her senior and junior teachers/faculty members "not to come in front of them." Another Dalit lady-faculty member recollected that an upper caste lady faculty member/colleague told her that she is from the caste of manual scavengers. Contractual jobs, thus, do not provide any form of social security to these sanitation women workers. The social location of Dalit women sanitation workers is caught in the caste-determined property, gender, and labour.

A rigorous understanding of the Dalit labourer may unpack the mystified construction of the Dalit labourer. Indian feminism has a distinct take on the contradictions related to the property of women. Gender and land rights-related

research have not addressed the intricacies of caste, gender, and property (Agarwal, 2023). Those accounts could not deal with the relations of property and Dalit women. However, a distinct approach to studying the caste and labour relations in the context of Dalits has to be taken, especially to reflect on Dalit women sanitation workers. The means and modes of production in the case of Dalits have to be mapped in its entirety. Sanitation women workers' question of work and labour is distinct in nature. They have to survive by selling their caste-based, stigmatized labour. The real questions that must be raised are who forced them into this occupation. Why are they ambivalent about the entire mechanism of caste, work, and labour? Anti-caste cum labour movements' constant struggles to eradicate obnoxious forms of labour have to be remembered in the context**.** Those movements and assertions emphasized the nature of the social in the context of the mind and the body. There were attempts to liberate them from the psychological and social burdens associated with stigmatised forms of labour. Dalit movements critique the rest of the non-Dalit, upper caste dominated/Brahmanical ideology-driven political organizations in their approach to decent work and struggle against the caste of labour.

While analyzing women's social space, it is necessary to revisit the debates on structure and agency. Social mobility in a patriarchal society needs to be measured through the intersections of race, caste, and ethnicity. Structure and agency can be stigmatized due to diverse social locations and the geopolitics of hegemonic-feminist knowledge. Eurocentric and partial dominant feminist understandings must be differentiated based on their epistemic undercurrents. In other words, it suffers from certain epistemological limitations in engaging with non-European feminist epistemological investigations. Thus, the question of the public and its conflict with various social spaces leads to big questions related to social complexities within the nation-state. The gendered deployment of the public, therefore, has to imbibe politics of citizenship and belonging (Phadke, 2012). The structure and work in the case of Dalit women sanitation workers are debilitating their self-dignity and social mobility. Brahmanic feminist accounts that essentialized the agency of the Dalit women have to be challenged by unfolding the nuances of caste, gender, and labour.

Radical Transformation through Law?

It is observed that, "Even after 73 years of independence, manual scavenging is a blot on our collective conscience that refuses to disappear, despite the landmark legislation in the form of Prohibition of Employment as manual scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013…and a Supreme Court judgment in the *Safai Karamchari Andolan and Ors V Union of India and Orscase* (2011)" (Kumar & Preet, 2020). Why does manual scavenging persist even after the ban? Questions of law in the case of manual scavengers raise concerns related to destigmatize labour and questions of livelihood. What is the role of National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE)? As a technology, it has been able to create the impression that it is can lessen the stigma related to manual scavenging. Is there any kind of organization? Do

the left-based political organisations address the question of manual scavengers? If so, what are their ideological prerogatives? Are they informalized and contractual workers or not? The existence of manual scavengers reminds us of the perpetual link of labour to caste. Activists and workers link this form of work as a form of slavery. Therefore, whether our modern legal system through its reforms can annihilate the stigma remains a quandary. It is noted that, "On September 6, 2013, the Indian Parliament passed The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (2013 Act), committing itself yet again to ending manual scavenging. Seven months later, on March 27, 2014, the Indian Supreme Court held that India's constitution requires state intervention to end manual scavenging and "rehabilitate" all people engaged in the practice. This meant not only ending the practice but also ending the abuses faced by communities engaged in manual scavenging." (HRW, 2014). Educated Dalit youth are forced to return to caste-based occupations. Upper castes exert physical violence over those Dalits who resist various forms of caste-based labour. It is observed that "India's Constitution bans the practice of untouchability, and the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, prohibits compelling anyone to practice manual scavenging. Aimed specifically at ending manual scavenging, the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 (1993 Act), declared the employment of manual scavengers and construction of dry toilets to be punishable with fines and imprisonment. Superseding the 1993 Act, the 2013 Act goes beyond prohibitions on dry latrines, and outlaws all manual excrement cleaning of insanitary latrines, open drains, or pits. And, importantly, it recognizes a constitutional obligation to correct the historical injustice and indignity suffered by manual scavenging communities by providing alternate livelihoods and other assistance" (HRW, 2014).

However, the shift from social movements to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the legal discourse is a distinct development. The litigation around manual scavenging, as explored by Alena Kahle and Sagar Kumbhare, needs to be understood in the context of the various issues faced by Dalit NGOs. Dalit actors find themselves caught between caste rules and modern laws related to sanitation work and manual scavenging. The social control and social change in the trajectory of Dalit NGOs reflect in the potentials and limits related to the law. The political and legal opportunities for Dalit actors create challenging questions for caste-based bureaucracy. These institutional structures do not recognize the gravity of the work done by Dalit women. Instead of the political institutions and modern laws, the ideological realm of the hegemonic caste-ruling classes endorses caste-driven polluted work. The opportunity structure of the Dalit NGO is assessed through its right to information requests and manual identification of the court cases through a database. The path towards the elimination of heinous caste-driven work for Dalits is arduous in nature (Kahle & Sagar, 2023, pp. 77–96).

The persistence of manual scavenging, which is a form of sanitation work, despite legal interventions, has to be viewed as a banality of everyday crime. The complicity of larger society in legitimizing forced labour leads to a certain form of social abuse. This form of majoritarian consensus related to sanitation work arises from the continuous,

conscious imposition of caste-based occupations. There is an inherent violence in those forms of social exclusion. Drawing on Ambedkar's perspective, one becomes a sanitation worker or scavenger not because of their work, but because of their caste and birth. The violence legitimised through caste-based occupation is analysed as genocidal in nature. The intention that constructs the sanitation work or crime is caste. It designates birth and caste as central to the practice of crime/sanitation worker or manual scavenger. The citizenry that permits the reproduction of such work results in the crime of indifference. The detached attitude of the larger society thus legitimizes manual scavenging (Shankar & Kanthi, 2021).

Hence, the issues of sanitation worker or manual scavengers are completely deprived of their lack of access and entitlements. Their economic rights are affected due to their caste-driven nature of work. It impacts their civil, cultural, and political rights. It further strengthens their living mode of exclusion. In other words, they are excluded from political participation. It affects their social and economic opportunities. Manual scavengers thus are wholly sidelined from the economic, political and social terrain (Singh & Ziyauddin, 2009, pp. 521–523). Therefore, most Dalit women sanitation workers are sceptical towards the laws and debates related to rights. Some admitted their ignorance about the laws. These gaps in understanding laws and rights question the Dalit development in northern India. For example, illiteracy and not having basic facilities like proper food, shelter, and water to live a decent life creates fundamental questions regarding ongoing development. It is asserted that, "The non-condition-based complete prohibition approach based in recognition of human dignity has to be invoked in addition to 'complete rehabilitation and complete mechanization of sewage work'" (Wankhede, 2021). The valorisation of "safe sanitation" work has to be critiqued to altogether abolish manual scavenging (Wankhede & Alena, 2023). For instance, almost all respondents said that, "Indian society is like a zamindar to manual scavengers." So, their work is part of a custom based on the caste system. They also mentioned that a hooligan-like society is hardly afraid of laws. The law is constantly violated in the case of lower castes. They explained that this kind of work is also like a caste atrocity in their lives. Therefore, the gap between the existing legal developments and the continuum of caste-labour-occupation is being questioned by Dalit women sanitation workers. They questioned the superficial grounds of the shifts from customs to modern laws. According to them, nothing has changed through laws and legal interventions. Thus, one must accept that the life of sanitation women workers and the scavenging community has not changed so far.

Apostles of Liberation through Technology and Future?

Irrespective of the advent of a "robot manual scavenger"/first manhole cleaning robot, "Bandicoot" in Kerala and sewer-jetting machines in Andhra Pradesh (Preet & Chaturvedi, 2019), why does manual scavenging remain in other states in India? Time-related to the labour of Dalit women workers may change according to the technological development. Does it bring any radical change in their self-dignity and identity? The replacement of Dalit labourers by machines may result in the annihilation

of caste, which is also a matter of contention. However, has labour brought any radical change, as Marx envisaged? The transformative nature of labour in the writings of Marx (Dickenson, 1997, p. 128) is antithetical to the Indian questions of caste, gender, and labour. The question of technology and the changing nature of untouchability pose severe challenges before the policy regime on labour. It is analysed that "Within the government program itself, there is no proposal to invest in mechanized cleaning via collection tanks. The lack of investment acts directly on the caste system, as it requires employing Dalit labour in manual cleaning. With this, the caste system remains a contemporary structure, based on an organization founded on the relationship between purity and impurity, with the violent line of untouchability that sustains it" (Alves, 2022). Caste itself continuously challenges the ideas of science and rationality in India. Technology is also detested by the upper castes for its effective ways of questioning social inequalities. Dominant societal and political approaches towards technology may also reveal the nature of the public debates around manual scavenging. Let us ponder upon the future of women who are part of sanitation work. Can the oppression of Dalit women sanitation workers be interpreted as structural injustice? Macro-level transformation is essential to eradicate structural injustice (Wolff, 2024). It can be observed that the societal agents who resist change are maintaining their dominance. (Haslanger, 2024). Structural inequalities are aggravated through vulnerabilities such as precarity and fragility. These vulnerabilities are linked to "the social" (Schiff, 2024). Structural inequalities can be explored beyond the binary oppositions of agency and structure. Most theorists travel this conceptual route. Is it possible to divulge and divert from that conceptual path? How far can such debates be developed? Is decolonial thinking on the hegemonic constructs of gender and caste helpful or not? There is a tendency to romanticize the past. Internal colonial caste-based conditions of Dalits (Ambedkar, 1989, p. 80) foreground different critiques on colonial and neo-colonial developments. The romanticizing of the past also leads to celebrating its oppressive continuum. Global transformation of the precariat in the oppressing, neo-liberal economic era coexists with the economic crimes of the global rich. Rights and governance have been reduced to certain forms of algocracy (Aneesh, 2006). Thus, "the features of exploitation today can only be understood by placing social reproduction and its brutal colonization by capital at the centre of value generation. If we do not embrace an inclusive theory of value, we cannot theorize capitalism and its meaning for millions of workers." (Mezzadri, 2023, p. 69). The legal discourse will be able to engage with the questions of the "accepted customary rights" to that of crime in the current social order (Koonan, 2021) in a radical fashion. A crucial aspect is whether Dalit women sanitation workers can survive the new socio-economic realities and politicize the public.

End of Conscience?

Can a society repent for its numerous caste-driven crimes and discrimination? This premise is pivotal to the premises of Dalit women sanitation workers. As one of respondents, Sita asked "Is this society not ashamed of pushing only certain sections

of that society into the degraded work?" This question has to be analyzed beyond the cynicism that taints the assertions of Dalits. Can such caste-male-based order be annihilated by modern society or not? The diverse shades of the narratives of lower caste women sanitation workers invoke the genuine spirit of democracy. It has the potential to circumvent the aspirations for democracy within the limits of crony capitalism. Dalit women, from their lessons from nauseating, sanitation/manual scavenging show the shallow structure and form of depoliticized political systems. It also probes the potentials and possibilities of social movements and civil societal formulations. Debates on the repression of various capital(s) in the context of the development of Dalit women sanitation workers also debunk the geopolitics of ideas related to caste-gender bind, and hegemonic developmental discourses. The ways to solve the caste-based work through legal developments coexist with the persistence of the policy regime's take on technology in the field of sanitation and manual scavenging workers. These policy dilemmas and political inertia on the issues of caste-based work, for Dalit women sanitation workers, unveil the pitfalls of the debates on reason, science, and technology. They (women workers) position it as a quandary linked to a polarized, social order and consequential division of labour. Death is also analyzed as an offer from an inhuman caste-inflicted societal space. Health issues of Dalit women labourers lead us to rethink debates around caste, gender, and public health. These suppressed voices also question the credentials of the feminist and women's movements. They pose a significant question around the vestiges of caste, gender, and sanitation / manual scavenging irrespective of the egalitarian claims of Brahminic women's and feminist movements in India. These sanitation women workers are able to challenge homogenous political constructions around class by deciphering the intersections of caste, gender, and occupation. It has the potential to challenge debates on Marxian perspectives and praxis around class, caste, and labour. The aforementioned social and political reflections of Dalit women re-configure the idea of the public through its rigorous interventions.

Conclusion

Purity, pollution and caste have become recurrent practices in the changing ideological forms of caste. The plight of sanitation women workers remains the same even after 77 years of India's independence. Though in 1944, Babasaheb Ambedkar established the union of sanitation workers and exhorted sanitation workers to give up traditional caste-driven occupations (Lal, 2018, pp. 79–81), still the Dalit community have a long way to go and constantly struggles against the odds. Ambedkar's main aim was to end untouchability and annihilate the caste system. Numerous Dalit civil society organizations are tirelessly working to provide a respectful and dignified life to the sanitation workers. However, Dalit feminists in particular and the Dalit community in general should be vigilant towards the forthcoming challenges for the most deprived and marginalized community of sanitation workers. Dalit feminists have to take part in the continuous struggle against the changing forms of ideology of caste, gender

and work. They need to forge solidarity with other Dalit organizations and leaders in order to ensure the social and upward mobility of the Dalit women sanitation workers. Educated women from the community of sanitation workers have to strengthen their ideological positions and praxis through Ambedkar's perspectives and Buddhism. It may lead them to reorient their social and political struggles.

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Do Teachers have in-group Bias about Student Caste and Socioeconomic Status in India?

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Abstract

This article studies the extent of teacher's in-group bias in occupational expectations and grading on the basis of a student's caste and socioeconomic status. The article adopts an experimental approach and draws on data generated from 122 teachers from 19 schools in Delhi, India. The caste and socio-economic status of students were randomly assigned to a set of essays written by them such that the assigned characteristics were not related to essay quality. The results show that high caste teachers hold higher occupational expectations from their in-group category and are biased against the low caste category. For instance, high caste teachers assign 0.53 per cent or 0.019 points higher occupational expectations to high caste students and assign 5.6 per cent or 0.19 points lower occupational expectations to low caste students. The magnitude of coefficients is small but significant at 5 per cent level (P value<0.005). In terms of marks assigned, results show, that high caste teachers assign 2.36 points or 3.22 per cent higher marks when the assigned characteristics belong to a high caste; indicating in-group bias/favor for the same caste. The coefficient is positive and significant at 5 per cent level (P- value < 0.05). In contrast, high caste teachers are shown to be biased against low caste students as they assign 2.41 points or 3.41 per cent lower marks when the assigned characteristics is a low caste. Given the ultra-competitive nature of schooling in India and the importance of grades in determining access to higher education in India, even a point disadvantage is substantial.

Keywords

Teacher in-group bias, grading, occupational expectations, caste, socio-economic status, Delhi, India

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Introduction

Across the globe, teachers play a vital role in molding students in ways that affect their academic achievement, and determine future options in life. In addition to being instructors, teachers serve as the gatekeepers for the academic progress of their students, and their opinions and impressions frequently have a significant impact on the paths that students take. However, biases, especially those pertaining to social categories like caste and socio-economic status (SES), have the potential to undermine the objectivity of these judgements, and may impede the chances that students have in life. The issue of in-group bias among teachers—favoring students who share the same caste and socio-economic status—is examined in this article along with its implications for educational equity. The propensity for people to give preference to members of their own group over members of other groups is known as in-group bias. The notion of social identity, which holds that people get a feeling of identity and self-worth from belonging to certain groups, is the foundation for this (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When teachers intentionally or unintentionally give preference to pupils with a similar social background—such as the same caste or socio-economic class—it is referred to as in-group bias in the educational setting.

Caste and socio-economic status are two deeply interconnected social structures that profoundly influence people's experiences and possibilities. According to Deshpande (2010), caste is a traditional social structure that is common in nations like India. It divides society into rigid categories that frequently determine an individual's social, economic, and educational opportunities. In contrast, socio-economic status refers to an individual's financial situation, level of education, and employment status, and it affects their ability to access opportunities and resources (Sirin, 2005). People from lower caste and lower SES sometimes suffer even more disadvantages because caste and SES interact in many ways. These socio-economic variables are extremely important in educational settings because they impact everything from children's access to high-quality education to how teachers treat them.

There is strong evidence of in-group biases in teacher methods for grading from empirical research. Research carried out in several settings has demonstrated that educators typically give preference to students who belong to the same caste or economic background. Hanna and Linden (2012), for example, found substantial caste-based discrimination in grading in their study conducted in India. Despite identical academic achievement, teachers gave greater marks to students from higher castes than to their peers from lower castes. There exists similar evidence of socio-economic discrimination in evaluations of educators comes from Western countries. According to a 2014 study by Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson, teachers frequently gave students from higher socio-economic backgrounds higher marks even if their actual academic performance was comparable with that of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This discrimination in grading can be linked to teachers' beliefs that children from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more capable, have more social capital and more help at home (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2014).

In schools, in-group bias manifests itself through a variety of psychological and social factors. Stereotype activation is one such mechanism. Based on a student's caste or socio-economic status, teachers may have preconceived notions about their academic aptitude. For instance, stereotypes about students from lower castes or socio-economic backgrounds may suggest that they are less capable or driven, which may affect teachers' expectations and test scores (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). The Pygmalion effect is another way by which a student's actual performance is influenced by the teacher's expectations regarding their abilities. Higher expectations for in-group students can reinforce the initial bias through increasing good interactions, extra support, and favorable evaluations (Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003). In addition, social alienation and empathy gaps might be involved. Assessors may be more sympathetic and connected to pupils from comparable social backgrounds, which could result in better evaluations and higher marks. Research indicates that people prefer and have more empathy with those that they see as being similar to themselves, which supports this phenomenon (Batson et al., 1995).

In-group bias in teacher evaluation has a significant impact on equity in education. Teachers who show preference for students in their own caste or socio-economic class reinforce social injustices and challenge the meritocracy of education. It is possible for students from underrepresented groups to be unfairly punished by earning lower grades even though their performance is equivalent. This can have an impact on their motivation, sense of self-worth, and future chances (Farkas, 2003). Furthermore, unfair grading procedures may help to maintain social hierarchy. One important factor influencing social mobility is academic performance, and children from lower caste and lower socio-economic origins may not be able to move up the social mobility ladder due to biased assessments. Thus, social and economic inequality are sustained over generations and the cycle of disadvantage is further strengthened (Breen & Jonsson, 2005).

A diverse strategy is needed to address in-group bias in education. Implementing extensive teacher training programs with a focus on cultural competence and anti-bias education is one crucial tactic. These initiatives can support more equal grading procedures by assisting educators in identifying and mitigating their own prejudices (McKown & Weinstein, 2008). In addition, structural adjustments to the educational system can lessen the negative effects of in-group bias. Standardized testing and anonymous grading schemes are two examples of these modifications that can lessen the impact of teacher bias on student assessments. Additionally, encouraging diversity within the teaching profession can be beneficial since a more varied set of educators may be less inclined to favor any one student group over another (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Additionally, research emphasizes how critical it is to create an inclusive school environment that promotes diversity and advances equity. Individual teacher bias can be reduced in schools by actively implementing strategies to support students from different backgrounds. These strategies can foster an atmosphere where all students feel appreciated and supported (Banks, 2015).

To combat in-group bias in grading on the basis of caste and socio-economic status, this article presents findings on whether teachers are biased or favor students belonging to the same caste and socio-economic status. Methodologically, the article uses an experimental approach to identify a teacher's in-group discrimination. Data was collected on the actual characteristics (caste and socio-economic status) of teachers and the assigned characteristics of students via an experiment conducted in Delhi, India. To this purpose, 10 students aged 13-14.5 years were invited to write essays on the topic "My future career ambition". Student's caste and socio-economic status were then randomly assigned to essays such that assigned characteristics were not related to essay quality/actual characteristics. Since, each of the 122 teachers graded 10 essays, the experiment generates 1,220 observations for analysis. Consistent with the existing literature, it is hypothesized that teachers may have in-group biases towards students of their own caste and own socio-economic status.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a novelty of this article. Section 3 provides a literature review. Section 4 presents the research methodology. Section 5 presents the initial results. Section 6 discusses the results based on OLS model; section 7 provides a discussion and section 8 concludes.

Novelty

This study examines teachers' in-group bias in grading based on student's caste and socio-economic status (SES), intending to add to the body of research already available on educational equity. Although significant research has been done on discrimination in education in general, this study provides an entirely new perspective on how caste and SES interact with teacher evaluations as it seeks to fill various gaps in the literature and present fresh viewpoints in this field of study.

Few studies have examined the combination of caste and SES in teacher grading, even though previous research on these two demographic factors has frequently focused on them independently (Hanna & Linden, 2012; Sirin, 2005). By examining how these interconnected identities (caste and SES) impact teacher grading, this study offers a more sophisticated understanding of in-group bias in educational settings. Because it recognizes that single-axis studies have not adequately captured the experiences and biases faced by students, an intersectional/combination approach is crucial (Crenshaw, 1991). Although there is strong evidence of caste- and SES-related biases in education in South Asia (Deshpande, 2010) and Europe and USA (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2014), this study attempts to bridge these findings in a setting where both factors are firmly ingrained. In settings where caste and SES are both prominent social categories, this approach enables a context-specific analysis of how historical and socio-economic hierarchies affect teacher behavior and student results.

The study explores the social and psychological processes that give rise to in-group bias in teacher evaluations. It provides a thorough analysis of how these biases appear in the classroom by looking at stereotype activation (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), the Pygmalion effect (Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003), and empathy gaps

(Batson et al., 1995). This shows a better comprehension of the ways that biases influence educational evaluations. Additionally, this study uses an experimental design where teachers grade essays and assign expectations for their students' careers based on predetermined student traits. This analytical technique makes it possible to conduct a thorough analysis of the extent to which bias exists in the classroom.

It is expected that the study's conclusions will have a far-reaching impact on educational practice and policy. Through the identification of distinct mechanisms via which caste and SES biases function, the research will contribute to the development of focused interventions aimed at reducing bias and advancing equity. The results of this study can be used to inform recommendations for teacher preparation programs, structural changes to grading procedures, and tactics to promote inclusive educational environments. Furthermore, the study also seeks to advance theoretical frameworks concerning intergroup relations and social identity in educational contexts. Through the integration of concepts from intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the study provides a more thorough understanding of the ways in which social identities influence interactions and outcomes between teachers and students. Future studies examining additional intersecting social categories in educational environments can be guided by this theoretical contribution.

Literature Review

Understanding and resolving educational disparities depends on knowing whether teachers display in-group bias when assigning grades to students based on similar social identities like caste and socio-economic class (SES). With the use of theories like the Pygmalion effect, stereotype threat, threat in the air, social identity theory, and intersectionality theory, this literature review delves into the research on in-group bias in education. These frameworks aid in clarifying the ways in which biases function as well as how they affect students' academic performance.

Evidence of Discrimination in Grading in Schools in the Indian Context

Research by Thorat and Attewell (2007) found that students from Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) face significant bias in educational settings, including in grading. Their study, which involved an extensive correspondence survey of students and teachers, revealed that students from lower castes often receive lower grades than their upper caste peers, even when academic performance is equivalent. The researchers concluded that teachers, often unconsciously, harbor stereotypes about the intellectual capacities of lower caste students, leading to discriminatory grading practices. Another study by Deshpande and Ramachandran (2019) highlighted that Dalit students often receive less favorable evaluations compared to students from upper castes. Their study showed that such biases are more prevalent in rural schools, where caste hierarchies are stronger, but also noted that even in urban settings, where caste discrimination might be more subtle, it still impacts the grading process.

A study by Sarangapani (2003) found that students from low-income families are often graded less favorably compared to their wealthier peers. This study, which explored rural and urban schools across different states, noted that teachers' perceptions of students' backgrounds influence their expectations. As a result, students from poorer families were often subjected to lower academic expectations and received grades that reflected these biases rather than their actual performance. Similarly, Jha and Kelleher (2006) found that SES-related discrimination in grading is particularly pronounced in schools where students from different economic backgrounds study together. In mixed schools, wealthier students often receive higher grades, while students from lower-income backgrounds are seen as less capable, even when their academic performance is similar.

The intersection of caste and SES is particularly problematic in Indian schools. Ramachandran (2004) documented how Dalit students from low-income families were doubly disadvantaged in the grading process. Teachers, influenced by both caste and economic biases, tended to assume these students were less capable of academic success, which resulted in them receiving lower grades than their upper caste or wealthier peers. The study showed that this intersectional discrimination is prevalent even in schools that claim to uphold egalitarian values. Subramanian (2017) found that in addition to outright bias, teachers tend to show more leniency towards students from higher castes and wealthier backgrounds. These students are often given the benefit of the doubt in subjective assessments like essays and oral exams, while Dalit and low-income students are graded more harshly. This has a cumulative effect on their overall academic records, limiting their access to higher education and perpetuating socio-economic inequalities.

The Pygmalion Effect

The Pygmalion effect, sometimes referred to as the Rosenthal effect, is a psychological phenomenon that shows that people/students perform better when an authority figure has higher expectations from them. The groundbreaking study by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) showed that teachers' expectations could have significant effects on students' performance. When teachers have high expectations from students they will give extra attention, encouragement, and positive reinforcement, which will improve students' academic performance. In Rosenthal and Jacobson's 1968 study, "Pygmalion in the Classroom," for instance, teachers were given false data about their student's potential for academic progress. Instructors were informed that in the upcoming school year, a major intellectual growth spurt was anticipated for a subset of students who were chosen at random. According to the findings, these students surpassed their peers on IQ testing at the conclusion of the school year. The study found that when students behave in ways that support the teachers' expectations, it could become a self-fulfilling prophecy caused by the expectations of the teachers. Teachers who have higher expectations of certain students probably interact with these students differently, that leads to this situation. Students might perform better as a result of

receiving increased attention, assistance, and encouragement. On the other hand, low expectations may result in less encouraging actions, which may impede the academic progress of students.

The Pygmalion effect in the context of caste and SES implies that teachers are biased towards students from similar backgrounds such as similar caste and socio-economic status, which may lead to higher expectations for these students, resulting in preferential treatment. According to Inzlicht's study (2003), students' demographic traits such as caste and socio-economic status may have an impact on teachers' expectations, which in turn may affect how well students interact and are evaluated. Because of this bias, educational disparities may persist when students from higher castes or socio-economic status (SES) receive better marks and greater support, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Stereotype Threat

When individuals become aware of negative stereotypes about their social group, they may feel anxious and perform worse. This phenomenon is known as stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Students from lower caste or socio-economic origins may do worse in school because they fear that they confirm negative presumptions about their group's ability. Studies conducted by Steele (1997) and Spencer et al. (1999) have demonstrated that stereotype threat has a major effect on academic achievement. For instance, a 1999 study by Spencer et al. examines how stereotype threat affects women's math ability. Both male and female undergraduate students who had strong backgrounds in mathematics participated in a series of studies carried out by the researchers. A difficult mathematics test was administered to participants under two different conditions: one that neutralized stereotype threat by stating that there were no gender differences on the test, and another that activated stereotype threat by telling participants that the test had previously revealed gender differences in performance. The findings showed that while the performance disparity between the sexes was much smaller in the no stereotype threat condition, women performed noticeably worse than males in the stereotype threat condition. These results imply that these stereotypes can seriously hinder women's arithmetic ability by raising anxiety and decreasing working memory.

In a similar vein, Steele's (1997) study investigates the idea of stereotype threat and how it affects the academic achievements of African American students. Through a series of experiments, Steele shows that when there is a greater chance of racial stereotype confirmation, African American students perform much worse on standardized tests. The study found that the psychological strain and anxiety brought on by being aware of unfavorable stereotypes is responsible for this decline in performance. The study also emphasizes the wider effects of stereotype threat, such as how it contributes to educational inequalities and restricts the academic and professional success of marginalized groups. In the present context of caste and SES, lower-caste students in India may feel more stressed and anxious during exams because

they are aware of the assumption that they are viewed as less capable under the present caste and socio-economic system. Teachers' preconceived notions and prejudices are strengthened when students perform poorly due to fear (Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996).

Threat in the Air

The phrase "threat in the air" refers to a larger interpretation of stereotype threat, which includes environmental elements that contribute to a persistent perception of being discriminated against or assessed based on one's social identity (Steele, 1997). This idea is pertinent in learning environments where students from underrepresented groups are conscious of the biases and lower expectations that their peers and professors hold.

Students from lower caste and lower-SES households may experience a persistent sense of threat at schools where caste and SES play prominent roles. This can have a negative effect on their academic engagement and performance. Teachers' biases can create a hostile learning environment in the classroom that undermines students' self-esteem and hinders their ability to succeed academically (Aronson & Inzlicht, 2004).

For instance, Aronson and Inzlicht (2004) investigate how stereotype threat affects African American and Hispanic students' academic performance and ability to self-regulate. The study explores how self-regulatory resources (mental and emotional capacities) might be depleted by exposure to stereotype threat, resulting in poorer academic performance and a higher risk of academic failure. The study shows through a series of experiments that students exposed to stereotype threat suffer from increased stress and cognitive load, which hinders their capacity to concentrate, persevere, and perform well on difficult assignments.

Social Identity Theory

According to Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory, people get a significant portion of their identity from the social groups they are a part of. According to this hypothesis, people are driven to prioritize their in-group above out-groups to boost their perception of self-worth. The study describes how in-group bias and out-group discrimination are caused by social identity, classification, and comparison processes. Teachers may unintentionally give preference to students who belong to the same caste or socio-economic status (SES) since they consider them to be members of their own group.

Studies have demonstrated that this kind of in-group bias can take many different forms, one of which is biased grading procedures (Dee, 2005). Using a nationally representative sample of teachers and students, Dee (2005) examines the effect that gender has on student achievement. In order to isolate the impacts of gender interactions between teachers and students on academic performance, the study used a quasi-experimental methodology. According to Dee, students perform far better academically when they have a teacher of the same gender, especially in reading and

math. Boys exhibit a higher level of this impact, making noticeable progress under the supervision of male teachers.

According to the study, gender dynamics in the classroom may have an impact on learning outcomes and experiences through mechanisms like gender-specific teaching approaches, role modeling, and differential expectations. Differences in academic performance may result from teachers giving students from their own caste or socio-economic status (SES) more positive feedback, allocating more resources, and setting higher expectations for them. The status quo of social hierarchies and the need to preserve a positive social identity promote this favoring.

Intersectionality Theory

Crenshaw (1991) established the concept of intersectionality, which examines the ways in which different social identities interact to produce distinct experiences of privilege and oppression. Intersectionality theory sheds light on the combined disadvantages that students who belong to various oppressed groups—such as those who are lower caste and lower SES—face when it comes to teacher grading. Collins (2000) and Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) highlight the significance of taking into account several intersecting identities in order to fully comprehend the extent of bias and discrimination. Due to the compounding effects of teachers' opinions and stereotypes, students who are marginalized by both caste and SES may face more severe biases in grading. Their educational chances and results may be more negatively impacted cumulatively by this intersectional disadvantage. It should be noted that intersectionality theory integrates with Pygmalion effect, social identity theory and stereotype threat and act in the same way and reinforce each other in their bias.

Empirical Evidence of in-group Bias

Several empirical research that has examined in-group bias in educational contexts have shown how teachers' social identities have an impact on how they grade assignments. For example, Hanna and Linden (2012) found that in India, even in cases when students from lower castes performed equally academically, teachers were much more likely to give preference to those from higher castes. As a result, these students received better scores than their classmates from lower castes.

In a similar vein, Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2014) found that teachers in the US frequently gave students from higher socio-economic backgrounds higher grades. Teachers' beliefs that students from higher SES backgrounds were more capable and received better home support were linked to this bias, which resulted in preferential treatment. Dee (2005) examined the effect of teacher racial and ethnic biases on student performance and found that teachers tended to hold higher expectations from students who shared similar background and gave them better evaluations and feedback. This research lends credence to the idea that social identity-based in-group bias has a major impact on educational attainment.

Implications for Educational Equity

The existence of in-group bias in teacher evaluations bears noteworthy consequences for equitable education. Teachers who show preference for students in their own caste or socio-economic class reinforce social injustices and challenge the meritocracy of education. It is possible for students from underrepresented groups to be unfairly punished by earning lower grades even though their performance is equivalent. This can have an impact on their motivation, sense of self-worth, and future chances (Farkas, 2003).

Furthermore, unfair grading procedures support the maintenance of social hierarchy. One important factor influencing social mobility is academic performance, and children from lower caste and lower socio-economic origins may not be able to move up the social mobility ladder due to biased assessments. Thus, social and economic inequality are sustained over generations and the cycle of disadvantage is further strengthened (Breen & Jonsson, 2005).

Research Methodology

This section outlines the research methodology used to test the research hypothesis. In general, it is difficult to uncover teacher's attitudes of discrimination especially in terms of expectations and grades awarded. Among others, the use of survey-based questions suffers from the possibility of social desirability bias as teachers are unlikely to confess to discrimination.

Furthermore, research on discrimination becomes difficult because discriminatory attitudes may not be intentional, and may lie in the sub-conscious and may arise from pre-conceived stereotypes. It is possible to uncover such issues, at least to some extent, by conducting field experiments.

Experiment Overview

The experiment took place in Delhi in three stages. The first stage of the experiment, involved essay writing by 10 students aged 13-14.5 years on the topic "My future career ambition". Students were given a guideline to write essays so that their essays were similar in structure. The essays were collected and caste and socio-economic status was randomly assigned to essays such that one essay out of 10 was kept as a blind essay on which no manipulation of caste and socio- economic status was done. In the third stage, a packet of 10 essays was graded by each of the 122 teachers. After grading was completed, packets were collected and payment was made to teachers to compensate for their time. Each teacher was given about 4 euros or INR 400.

Table 1: Experiment Overview

Location	**Indian capital; Delhi**
First stage	Essay writing by 10 students aged 13-14.5 years on the topic "My future career ambition"
Second stage	Randomization of student caste and socio-economic status on essays such that one essay out of 10 was kept as a blind essay.
Third stage	Grading session by 122 teachers from 8 private and 11 government schools generating sample of 1220 observations.

Experiment Details

In the month of July, we went door to door to invite 10 students in Delhi aged between 13-14.5 years to write an essay on the topic "My future career ambition". The essay writing took place under our invigilation in a hall at home, on a Saturday when all the children were available. Some children wrote the entire essay in front of us while others went back home and handed in the essay on the next day.

Children between the age group 13 to 14.5 years were chosen and the topic was not subject-specific, because we wanted essays which could be graded, such that every teacher who had a basic BEd (Bachelor of education) degree was eligible to check the essays. The essay title "My future career ambition" was selected for various reasons. First, it gave us an idea about the student's career ambitions. Second, the topic of the essay invited students to write about their occupational ambitions, parental occupations and background. This is important as providing information on their caste and class would seem natural rather than forced.

We gave a guideline to students to write the essay. In the first paragraph, we asked students to introduce their interest and motivation related to career ambition and occupational paths. In the second paragraph, we asked students to write about their parental occupation/background and how it motivated their career ambition. In the third paragraph, we asked students to write, what they had done so far to achieve their career ambition (extracurricular activities, study interests, reading). In the fourth paragraph, we asked students to write about struggles that they may have faced to achieve their career ambitions. In the fifth paragraph, we asked students to mention how their goal if achieved would contribute to society. All essays were written in English.

Second Stage: Randomizing Caste and Socio-Economic Status on Essays

The aim of this article is to assess whether teachers discriminate in holding occupational expectations and whether these expectations perpetuate discrimination in grades awarded based on student's caste and socio-economic status. To identify this, student's caste and socio-economic status was randomly assigned to the essays such that one essay out of 10 was kept as a blind essay on which caste and socio-economic status was not assigned. Randomization is expected to ensure that caste and socio-economic status assigned on the essays is not related to essay quality or actual student's characteristics. It must be noted, that only student's caste and socio-economic status was adjusted in the essay. Everything else, including the spellings and structure remained exactly the same as written by the students.

To ensure that teachers noticed the assigned caste and socio-economic status on the essays before grading it, we asked teachers to respond to three multiple choice questions before grading and after having read the essay. Teachers were told, that this served as a check that they had read the essay carefully. In the first question,

teachers had to mention student's ambition. In the second question teachers had to mention student's caste and in the third question, teachers had to mention student's socio-economic status. This ensured that teachers had read the essay carefully and did notice student's caste and socio-economic status before grading.

Teachers were asked to mark the essay out of 100 and also rate the essay out of 5 for the question "whether the student will be able to achieve his/her career ambition". A score of 0/5 indicates that teachers have low expectations in terms of student's achieving his/her ambition and score of 5/5 means that teachers have the highest possible expectations in terms of student's achievement of his/her career ambition.

Third Stage: Grading Session by Teachers

We obtained a list of all private and government schools in Delhi affiliated to the CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) and then randomly selected 100 schools out of that list and then sent an email to all the schools which had provided their email address; requesting them to allow us to conduct research at their school. In the email, we explained the brief idea of the research ensuring that the actual intent of the experiment was not revealed. We visited those schools first which had accepted the email/request and granted permission to conduct the research at their school. Later, we visited other schools based on principal's recommendation.

Finally, the schools which accepted the brief idea of research and allowed access to teachers, became a part of the study. In total, 122 teachers from 8 private and 11 government schools participated in the research. Each teacher was requested to grade a packet containing 10 essays on the basis of content, style and language thus generating 1,220 observations for analysis.

Teachers were also requested to fill the three multiple choice questions based on the essay, after reading but prior to grading. This was done to ensure that teacher's notice student's caste and socio-economic status before grading the essay. After grading, teachers were requested to fill a survey form which obtained information on a list of teacher characteristics. The questionnaire included questions on teacher's gender, age, education status, years of teaching experience, school type, location of school and total time taken to grade the essays.

Results

Table 2 depicts the teacher's in-group bias in holding occupational expectations in terms of student's ambition and marks awarded on the basis of interaction of teacher's caste and student's caste. The figure demonstrates that high caste teachers may hold higher occupational expectations and also assign higher grades to their in-group category. For instance, high caste teachers assign 0.2011 points (5.5 per cent) higher occupational expectations and 2.54 points (3.47 per cent) higher marks to high caste students relative to low caste students which is significant at 5 per cent level. In contrast, low caste teachers do not appear to be biased against high caste category as

they hold 0.13 points (3.58 per cent) higher occupational expectations and assign 0.66 points (0.8 per cent) higher marks to high caste category relative to low caste. This result is however not significant.

Table 2: Teacher's in-group bias in occupational expectations and marks based on interaction of teacher and student caste

Variable	Teacher Expectation given out of 5	Marks Assigned out of 100
Low caste teacher and low caste student	3.5 (0.73)	74.89 (13.16)
Low caste teacher and high caste student	3.63 (0.71)	75.55 (10.66)
High caste teacher and low caste student	3.42 (1.0)	70.62 (19.69)
High caste teacher and high caste student	3.6 (0.88)	73.16 (16.74)
High caste teacher and blind caste student	3.86 (0.81)	79.33
Low caste teacher and blind caste student	4 (0.47)	79.7 (7.43)

Note: Standard errors are given in brackets.

The graph further reveals that both high caste teachers and low caste teachers hold highest occupational expectations from the blind category and also award maximum marks to the blind essay, significant at 5 per cent level.

Furthermore, table 3 depicts how teachers of high caste and low caste, award marks and hold expectations based on student's socio-economic status.

Table 3: Expectations and marks awarded based on interaction of teacher's caste and student's SES

Variable	Teacher Expectation out of 5	Marks out of 100
Low caste teacher and low SES student	3.55 (0.71)	75.26 (12.06)
Low caste teacher and high SES student	3.57 (0.74)	75.1 (12.16)
High caste teacher and low SES student	3.47 (0.98)	70.62 (18.71)
High caste teacher and high SES student	3.55 (0.91)	73.17 (18.10)

Note: Standard errors are given in brackets

The table shows that both high caste teachers and low caste teachers may be biased against students from low socio-economic status in holding occupational expectations. Based on table 3, high caste teachers hold 0.08 points (2.3 per cent) lower occupational expectations from low socio-economic status category relative to high socio-economic status category, significant at 5 per cent level. Similarly, low caste teachers also hold 0.02 points (0.56 per cent) lower occupational expectations from low socio-economic status students relative to high socio- economic status students, however this is not significant.

Consistent with these results, there is also a bias in grading as high caste teachers assign 2.55 points lower marks to low socio-economic status students relative to high socio-economic status students, significant at 5 per cent level. Low caste teachers in contrast, are not shown to be biased against lower socio-economic status category while grading as they assign 0.16 points higher marks to low socio-economic status category relative to high socio-economic status category. This is however not significant.

Results from Ordinary Least Square Linear Regression Model

This section will explore teachers' in-group (same caste) and out-group (different caste) bias on the basis of interaction of teacher's characteristics and student's characteristics and aims to identify the origins of teacher's discrimination in terms of who discriminates.

The average effect of the interaction of teacher's caste and assigned student 's caste on occupational expectations

Table 4 presents results for the average effect of interaction of teacher's caste and assigned student's caste on teacher's occupational expectations after controlling for grader fixed effects and student's socio-economic status. Each row in the table represents an individual OLS regression.

The results demonstrate that high caste teachers hold higher occupational expectations from their in-group category and biased against low caste category. For instance, high caste teachers assign 0.53 per cent (OLS estimate/mean of estimate*100) or 0.019 points higher occupational expectations to high caste students and assign 5.6 per cent or 0.19 points lower occupational expectations to low caste students. The results are significant at 5 per cent level.

The magnitude of coefficients is small but significant at 5 per cent level (P value<0.005). The low caste teachers however, are not shown to favour or discriminate in holding occupational expectations on the basis of a student's caste as the coefficients show an insignificant result.

Table 4: Average effect of interaction of teacher's caste and assigned student's caste on occupational expectations

Separate OLS regressions		OLS
	Teacher expectation	Constant
High caste teacher_ High caste student	0.0194** (0.066)	3.41** (0.02)
High caste teacher_ Low caste student	-0.193** (0.069)	3.59*** (0.031)
Low caste teacher_ High caste student	0.137 (0.102)	3.49*** (0.015)
Low caste teacher_ Low caste student	-0.128 (0.122)	3.50*** (0.01)
Grader fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Student's SES	Yes	Yes
N	899	899
Standard error in parentheses		
**p < 0.05, *p < 0.01, *** p< 0.01		

The average effect of the interaction of teacher's caste and assigned student 's caste on marks

Table 5 presents the results for the average effect of interaction of teacher's caste and assigned student's caste on marks assigned after controlling for grader fixed effects and student's socio-economic status. Each row in the table represents an individual OLS regression for the same.

Results show that high caste teachers assign 2.36 points or 3.22 per cent (OLS estimate/mean of estimate*100) higher marks when the assigned characteristics belong to high caste; indicating in- group bias/favour for the same caste. The coefficient is positive and significant at 5 per cent level (P- value < 0.05). In contrast, high caste teachers are shown to be biased against low caste students as they assign 2.41 points or 3.41 per cent lower marks when the assigned characteristics is low caste. The coefficient is negative and significant at 5 per cent level, demonstrating discrimination of high caste teachers against low caste students. However, for the low caste teachers, the results are insignificant which depicts that low caste teachers may not discriminate or hold in-group bias on the basis of student's caste while grading.

Table 5: Average effect of interaction of teacher's caste and assigned student caste on marks

Separate OLS regressions		OLS
	Marks student	**Constant**
High caste teacher_ High caste student	2.36** (1.04)	70.72*** (0.54)
High caste teacher_ Low caste student	-2.41** (1.09)	72.95*** (0.51)
Low caste teacher_ High caste student	1.46 (2.15)	71.62*** (0.24)
Low caste teacher_ Low caste student	0.102 (2.15)	71.62*** (0.24)
Grader fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Student's SES	Yes	Yes
N	900	900
Standard error in parentheses		
**p < 0.05, *p < 0.01, *** p< 0.01		

Overall, the results from the above 2 sections suggests that the discrimination against low caste students arises from high caste teachers and not from the low caste teachers. High caste teachers are shown to favour their in-group category that is high caste category and are discriminate against low caste category in holding occupational expectations and grading.

Average effect of interaction of teacher's caste and student's socio-economic status on occupational expectations

Table 6 presents the results for the average effect of interaction of teacher's caste and assigned student's socio-economic status on occupational expectations after

controlling for grader fixed effects and student's caste. Each row in the table represents an individual OLS regression for the same.

Table 6: Average effect of interaction of teacher's caste and assigned student SES on expectations

	Separate OLS regressions	OLS
	Teacher expectation	Constant
High caste teacher_ High SES student	0.074 (0.058)	3.46*** (0.02)
High caste teacher_ Low SES student	-0.058 (0.05)	3.52*** (0.03)
Low caste teacher_ Low SES student	-0.019 (0.065)	3.49*** (0.016)
Low caste teacher_ High SES student	-0.019 (0.063)	3.49*** (0.016)
Grader fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Student's SES	Yes	Yes
N	899	899
Standard error in parentheses		
**p < 0.05, *p < 0.01, ***p< 0.01		

Results show that both high caste teachers and low caste teachers may discriminate against students from low socio-economic status as high caste teachers hold 1.67 per cent (OLS estimate/mean of estimate*100) or 0.05 points and low caste teachers hold 0.53 per cent or 0.019 points lower occupational expectations from low socio-economic status students, respectively. The coefficients hold a negative sign but are not significant. The high caste teachers may favour high socio-economic status students as they hold 2.08 per cent higher occupational expectations from them but the coefficient is small in magnitude and insignificant.

These insignificant results thus depict that teachers may not discriminate or favour students on the basis of socio-economic status in holding occupational expectations. This further suggests, that a student's caste may still be a dominant factor that may lead to teacher's discrimination in expectations in the current era of economic development and high socio-economic status only acts to mitigate the discrimination faced by low caste category.

Average effect of interaction of teacher's caste and student's socio-economic status on marks awarded

Table 7 presents results for the average effect of interaction of teacher's caste and assigned student's socio-economic status on marks after controlling for grader fixed effects and student's caste. Each row in the table represents an individual OLS regression for the same.

Results demonstrate that high caste teachers favour high socio-economic status students while grading and discriminate against low socio-economic status students.

For instance, high caste teachers assign 2.37 points or 3.25 per cent (OLS estimate/mean of estimate*100) higher marks when the assigned characteristics belong to high socio-economic status and assign 2.42 points or 3.42 per cent lower marks when the assigned characteristics belongs to low socio-economic status. The coefficients are significant at 5 per cent level. However, for the low caste teachers the coefficient on marks assigned is insignificant which depicts that low caste teachers may not hold a bias for or against different socio-economic status category students in awarding marks.

Therefore, the overall results suggest that teachers may not discriminate on the basis of student's socio-economic status in holding occupational expectations but while grading, high caste teachers favour high socio-economic status students and discriminate against low socio-economic status students. Hence, teacher's discrimination is more likely to run only along lines of caste in holding occupational expectations; but discrimination does run along class lines when teachers grade essays/work of low socio-economic status and high socio-economic status students.

Table 7: Average effect of interaction of teacher's caste and assigned student's SES on marks

	Separate OLS regressions	**OLS**
	Marks	**Constant**
High caste teacher_ High SES student	2.379** (0.89)	70.71*** (0.414)
High caste teacher_ Low SES student	-2.42** (0.90)	72.95*** (0.54)
Low caste teacher_ Low SES student	0.839 (1.28)	71.63*** (0.244)
Low caste teacher_ High SES student	0.715 (1.092)	71.65*** (0.244)
Grader fixed effect	Yes	Yes
Caste	Yes	Yes
N	900	900
Standard error in parentheses		
**p < 0.05, *p < 0.01, *** p< 0.001		

These results are a matter of concern because marks awarded not only determine student's rank and admissions to universities but also affects their motivation to pursue higher education.

Discussion

The empirical results of the study on teacher in-group bias are summarized in this section, with a particular emphasis on whether or not teachers exhibit in-group bias or preference toward students based on socio-economic status (SES) and caste. The results are compared to comparable findings from earlier research to place the findings in the larger body of literature. The study also discusses the possible study limitations and future research directions.

According to the study, teachers often demonstrate in-group bias by giving preference to students who belong to similar socio-economic backgrounds and castes. Even in instances in which their academic achievement was comparable, students from higher castes and backgrounds with higher SES backgrounds obtained better scores than their peers from lower castes and backgrounds with lower SES. This bias was clearly seen in the grading methods. The results show that high caste teachers hold higher occupational expectations from their in-group category and biased against low caste category. For instance, high caste teachers assign 0.53 per cent or 0.019 points higher occupational expectations to high caste students and assign 5.6 per cent or 0.19 points lower occupational expectations to low caste students. The magnitude of coefficients is small but significant at 5 per cent level (P value<0.005). In terms of marks assigned, results show, that high caste teachers assign 2.36 points or 3.22 per cent higher marks when the assigned characteristics belong to high caste; indicating in- group bias/favour for the same caste. The coefficient is positive and significant at 5 per cent level (P-value < 0.05). In contrast, high caste teachers are shown to be biased against low caste students as they assign 2.41 points or 3.41 per cent lower marks when the assigned characteristics is low caste. These findings align with the social identity hypothesis by Tajfel & Turner (1986) that people acquire self-esteem from their group memberships and are likely to favor students who share their group identification.

Moreover, the results of this study are consistent with research carried out by Hanna and Linden (2012) who discovered that low caste students were subjected to discrimination by upper caste teachers. In line with the results of the current study, teachers were seen to assign lower grades to students from lower castes than to their peers from higher castes.

According to Dee's (2005) study on racial and ethnic biases in the US, teachers frequently held students who shared their background to higher standards and gave them better evaluations. This is consistent with the in-group bias that the current study's high-caste teachers showed.

Additionally, Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2014) demonstrated how students' socio-economic status (SES) affected teachers' assessments, with higher SES students receiving more favorable evaluations. This confirms the recent finding that high-caste teachers give higher marks to students from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

Burgess and Greaves (2013) examined teacher bias in the UK and found that teachers gave greater marks to students who shared their ethnic background, which is consistent with the results of this study and highlights the prevalence of in-group favoring. Similarly, McKown and Weinstein (2008) emphasized how prejudices within the teaching profession can affect the way that teachers interact and set expectations for students. The results of this study were further supported by the observation that teachers were more likely to have higher expectations and more favorable interactions with students who shared their racial or ethnic origin.

Limitations of the Study

The results of the study are context-specific and might not apply to different educational or cultural contexts. To further understand the prevalence and effects of in-group bias worldwide, future studies should examine it in a variety of settings.

Moreover, it's possible that the study's experimental setup left out important details about the complexity of interactions in actual classrooms. Longitudinal and observational studies may offer more information.

Furthermore, the study's main indicators of bias were grading and occupational expectations, which would not account for all instances of discrimination or favoring. Future studies should use a variety of measures in order to offer a more thorough comprehension of in-group bias.

Future Research Directions

Future studies must take into account the scenarios provided. Longitudinal studies that monitor the academic trajectories of students, for example, can offer more comprehensive insights into the cumulative effects of in-group bias on educational attainment and social mobility.

Furthermore, by comparing research across cultural and educational contexts, cross-cultural comparisons might improve our comprehension of how in-group bias functions worldwide and pinpoint context-specific elements that affect its incidence and consequences.

Finally, intersectionality should be included in studies. In order to create a more nuanced understanding of how many social factors interact to impact educational experiences and outcomes, future research should examine the intersectionality of caste, SES, and other social identities (e.g., gender, race, and ethnicity).

Conclusion

One significant issue that undermines educational equity and feeds societal inequality is in-group bias in teacher grading. Research from a variety of settings shows that teachers frequently give preference to students who belong to the same caste or socio-economic class, which biases assessments and disadvantages students from underrepresented groups. Targeted interventions, including teacher preparation, structural changes, and the development of inclusive school environments, are needed to address this problem at both the individual and institutional levels. Educational systems can move toward more equal procedures that guarantee all students have the chance to thrive based on their merit and talents by identifying and resolving in-group bias.

The study shows how teachers' social identities affect their expectations and assessments of students, underscoring the important role that in-group bias plays in educational environments. These results highlight the necessity of focused initiatives to combat bias and advance equity in education. Through the integration of concepts

from intersectionality and social identity theory, the study offers a thorough framework for comprehending and resolving in-group bias in educational settings. It takes a variety of approaches to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments that address the structural as well as the individual causes of bias.

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Article

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The Visible 'Caste Gaps' amid an 'Invisible' Caste System in West Bengal, India: A Study of Discrimination in Bengali Society

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Abstract

The invisibility of the caste system in Bengal is so firmly ingrained in the psyche of the upper-caste Bengali Hindu population that any acknowledgement of the same by the bhadralok class appears to be a pipe dream. This moral high ground of the bhadralok directly stands antithetical to the rampant cases of caste-based discrimination in the aforementioned state on a regular basis. However, this very inconspicuous nature of the caste system in Bengal has been hogging the centre stage of academic attention in recent years and has become a well-studied phenomenon in the process. Several scholars have catapulted fresh discussions on the visibly strong undercurrents of the caste system in Bengal and accorded a new legitimacy to the different ways in which caste caters to exclusion and discrimination on socioeconomic lines. Still, Bengal's caste system remains relatively mild and lenient in popular perceptions compared to other states, owing to its strong pedigree as a cultural hotbed. Amid this invisibility of caste in public understanding, the economic (and occupational), religious, ideological and cultural gaps exuding from the allegedly 'invisible' caste system between the 'bhadralok' class and the marginalised communities are ironically very visible. Nevertheless, such existing caste gaps in several fields have remained relatively unexplored as there is not a great deal of scholarship acknowledging the tangible presence of these gaps. Therefore, I have, in my article, attempted to analyse these patent apertures and the lack of reciprocity in occupational, cultural and ideological transactions between the bhadralok and the so-called 'chotolok' as the byproducts of the deeply ossified caste hierarchy in Bengal that has gradually whittled away the human agency of the state's severely disadvantaged marginalised groups.

Keywords

Bengal, Caste System, Discrimination, Bhadralok, Intelligentsia, Marginalised, Chatur-varna, Occupation, Functional Specialisation, Graded Hierarchy, Culture

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Introduction

The caste system in Bengal is a compelling discourse since, unlike the cow belt or certain South Indian states, caste-based division is not overtly conspicuous in Bengal, especially in the 'discourse of Bengali Bhadralok/Intelligentsia' (Chandra & Nielsen, 2012) or in the politics of 'Bengali pharaohs' (Mukharji, 2017). Contrary to other states, 'where caste violence and caste-based political parties have a high visibility' (Bandopadhyay, 2016), Bengal appears comparatively calm. This has, with time, given birth to the idea that the caste system is largely absent in Bengal and has no palpable effects on the regular life of the Bengali middle class, who are mostly seen as casteless. It is also generally perceived that caste does not exhort prodigious control over the politics of Bengal, and over thirty-four years of Communist rule, the influence of caste in the Bengali political spectrum was virtually inconsequential. However, contrary to popular perceptions, the strong undercurrents of the caste system and its visibility in Bengal have been provided with a new legitimacy through the back-and-forth debates from a plethora of social scientists with renewed vigour and enthusiasm such as Uday Chandra, Kenneth Bo Nielsen, Praskanva Sinharay, Sarbani Bandyopadhyay, Partha Chatterjee, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Dwaipayan Sen, Dayabati Roy, etc. Nevertheless, instead of focusing on the much-hackneyed question of the unobtrusiveness of caste in Bengal, which has been the subject of contention among the academicians for many years, I have tried to highlight the burgeoning 'caste gaps' between the Bengali bhadralok community and the so-called 'chotolok' classes (the marginalised groups). The reason for focusing on the existing caste gaps is due to their strange absence in modern historical and literary discussions and an eerie silence in acknowledging them even in the face of mounting evidence, especially by the bhadralok class. In an interview with 'The Wire', Sekhar Bandopadhyay, while discussing the Bengali bhadralok class and their apparent discomfort in accepting the Bengali Hindu caste system, quotes John Bloomfield and mentions that the 'bhadralok stood for the liberal, democratic society as long as their own privileges were not touched' (Gupta, 2019). Although the gaps between Bengali literati and the Scheduled Communities are well-known and obvious phenomena, documentation of these apparent lacunae in mainstream literature is limited and sporadic. Regardless of their nature and origin, societies around the world prototypically function through an elite/non-elite binary, and Bengal is no exception to this customary rule. However, Bengal makes a captivating case owing to its middle class wielding limitless and unbounded political hegemony and socioeconomic ascendancy. We must look into four fundamental factors that played a pivotal role in creating and carefully maintaining these evident gaps. Some of these elements may come across as dull and run-of-the-mill for their wonted and platitudinous nature. However, these factors are imperative to understand how deep-rooted the gaps have become over the years through a series of developments and transitions. These are as follows a) the metropolitan/peripheral socioeconomic division, b) a graded hierarchy, c) the consumption of culture and the inherent dissimilarities, and d) the disparity of the Communist movement in theory and praxis. For this topic, notably, I have excluded the

relationship between the Bengali bhadralok class and the Scheduled Communities in the colonial period. One of the reasons for such exclusion is that the British Raj and the concomitant colonial factors made this phenomenon more convoluted than it appears now, with the Britishers at the apex of the social order and the Bengalis, irrespective of class or caste, at the very nadir. While the caste system was operating vigorously in every nook and corner of colonial Bengal, this entire caste rhetoric amid an alien rule deserves a separate discussion. Regardless, I have attempted to highlight the birth and steady progress of the bhadralok class, considering colonial developments and how their rise was intrinsically linked to the proliferation of the urban economy and the formation of the comprador class in Bengal's biggest metropolis, Calcutta.

The Birth and the Development of the Bhadralok Class: A Short Overview

To begin with, one needs to be familiar with the working of the Bengali middle-class intelligentsia. Although the districts are heavily invested in the process of generating seemingly dominant traditional upper-caste figures, this Bengali Intelligentsia, I believe, is more of a Calcutta / Kolkata intelligentsia due to Kolkata being the hotbed of the 'babu culture' and its imposing socio-cultural influence over other districts. The real reason behind the unstructured formation of Bengali literati was probably a British attempt to formulate a class of Bengali people who could work as a medium of communication between the Raj and the rest of the Bengali population. Apart from this possible 'safety valve' to dissuade potential revolts and counter-offences, other factors that played their part in the making of this massive politico-social behemoth are 1) the internal trade between the 'Bengali Zaibatsus' and the East India Company, and 2) the occidental influence of education, customs and culture. 'Zaibatsu', or conglomerate, is a term that gained prominence during the Meiji Restoration in Japan under the emperor Mutsuhito. Zaibatsus such as 'Mitsubishi', 'Mitsui', 'Sumitomo', and 'Yasuda' acted as 'holding companies' and 'introduced organisational innovation to deal with the problems attendant on growth and diversification' (Okazaki, 2000, p. 1). Although not as prodigious, potent and efficient to introduce widespread national reforms as the Zaibatsus, several Bengali large-scale family-owned businesses gradually developed that diversified the business sectors, introduced limited structural changes and increased the open cash flow in the market. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, several upper-class and upper-caste Bengal families began to get involved in trades like banking, finance, construction business, the manufacturing industry, the shipping industry, etc. The Tagore family based in Jorasanko, Calcutta, was one such example. I would like to call these families 'Bengali Zaibatsus' due to their evident economic and largely overlooked cultural significance. They established a cordial relationship with the British for the smooth operation of their businesses, and colonial officials positively reciprocated with the intention of gaining revenue and not disrupting the business equilibrium. This reciprocity between the British and certain Bengali families facilitated the transaction of ideas and cultures on both ends, with the

Bengali bhadralok being influenced significantly greater than the British. Although unofficial, the entry into the bhadralok domain always warranted the upper-caste tag. Any upper-caste Bengali with significant social and economic footing could become a member of the bhadralok community (Sharma, 2013). Most members of this middle-class bourgeois group were compradors involved in investment, trade, and other means of accumulating wealth and power through socio-political exploitation. Moreover, their politico-social hegemony was further petrified through their dominance over literature and the print media. Anindita Ghosh argues that the 'language' produced through these mentioned mediums carved out a separate cultural identity for the middle class, known as the 'new Bengali'. Subsequently, the urban literati used this 'new Bengali' identity as a tool of dominance to clamp down on the 'less privileged' classes, including women and Muslims (Ghosh, 2002).

This elite territory was predominantly a male domain laden with abject patriarchy. Female transgression into this territory was an overwhelming task since it was perceived illogical and outlandish to mention women in the same breath as their upper-caste male counterparts. Kadambini Ganguly is the most striking example in this regard, as she was singled out for her aspiration to become an MBBS graduate by her male bhadralok colleagues. 'Maintenance of female virtues were incompatible with their social liberties' for the bhadralok as they perceived 'a vast majority of women as unchaste' (Karlekar, 1986, p. WS-27).

The rise of the Bengali bhadralok class does not adhere to a particular time frame. However, Raja Ram Mohan Roy was typically considered the one of the first members of this bhadralok tradition in Bengal. Roy mediated between the declining 'Persianized nobility' of Bengal (that somehow survived as the relic of the Bengal Sultanate) and an upstart group of petty bourgeoises (predominantly Hindu Bengalis). The sudden rise and development of this nouveau riche group around Kolkata (Calcutta) during the nineteenth century changed the dynamics and outlooks of Bengali/Kolkata (Calcutta) literati. Such development of the Bhadralok class in the wake of British rule in Bengal is an exciting phenomenon and needs a separate discussion. Below is a brief timeline of events that birthed, shaped, and reshaped the Bengali literati to a significant extent.

The downfall of the Muslim nobility

The decline of the 'persianized' Muslim aristocracy in the last half of the eighteenth century took place for two reasons: 1) with the establishment of the Supreme Court, Urdu and Persian were replaced with English, and many Muslim nobles abruptly lost their jobs. Their place was gradually taken up by the English-educated and Western-cultured Bengali Hindu upper-caste groups (Bhattacharya, 2021). As the Hindu population adapted to this drastic change more swiftly and maturely than their Muslim counterparts, they multiplied their power by grabbing important government posts under British rule. This covert usurpation, I believe, was the bureaucratisation of the upper castes at the time of need. 2) With the permanent settlement of 1793, the diminishing influence of the wealthy Muslim groups was snuffed out entirely. They gradually lost their land, and correspondingly their hold over rural villages plummeted

rapidly (Bhattacharya, 2021). The upper caste Bengali Hindus promptly capitalised on this steady death of the Muslim nobility and took great strides in terms of social position and economic advancement.

Brahmo Samaj-Young Bengal Movement-Pandit Vidyasagar

The chain of radical and reformist undertakings by Bengali and foreign influencers created a significant ruckus over the rigid Hindu social structure and wreaked havoc on the 'true blue dyed-in-the-wool conservative' who openly promoted antiquated Hindu traditions. Spearheaded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj (1828), the earliest Bengali Hindu intellectuals discarded outmoded traditions, polarising maxims, and rampant discrimination. They, however, emphasised reinventing the positives of Vedic culture. The organisation was later splintered between traditionalists (Dwarkanath Tagore, Debendranath Tagore) and radicals (Keshab Chandra Sen, Ananda Mohan Bose). As a result, the 'New Brahmo Samaj' (1863) and the 'Sadharan Brahmo Samaj' (1878) popped up, and the bhadralok went to and fro with their ideas and principles.

Amid this Civil War among the Bengali nationalists, the 'Young Bengal Movement' (in the 1820s) arrived on the scene with new-found enthusiasm. Founded by Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and his Bengali acolytes such as Rasik Krishna Mallik, Krishna Mohan Banerjee, Ramgopal Ghosh, Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee, Ramtanu Lahiri, and Peary Chand Mitra, the movement brought forth rationale into the dogma-stricken Hindu society. The Young Bengal was perhaps one of the first radical outfits across the Indian subcontinent. Their influence, although short-lived, was strong enough to instruct the young literati not to follow divisive customs religiously and be pragmatic in their general endeavours. The disciples of Derozio, who were upper-caste Hindu elite, became the primary ingredients of a newly emerging English-cultured Bengali 'babu' class. Derozio's principles behoved them with the task of carrying the ideal of pragmatism forward even after their teacher's death.

While socially as charged as Derozio and the members of the Brahmo Samaj, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's case hangs alone from the rest. Despite being part of the newly emerging enlightened stream of the Bengali youth, it would be a gross misjudgment to classify Vidyasagar as an archetypal bhadralok. He dwelled less on the politics of Calcutta and more on the reconstruction of the fringes and margins of Bengal. Vidyasagar's most significant achievement was advancing the 'Widow Remarriage Act' (1856) 'to remove all legal obstacles to the marriage of Hindu widows' (Vidya, 1885, p. 2 as quoted in Bhattacharya, 2019, p. 90). For its revolutionary nature, the act dealt a mighty blow to the outmoded Hindu customs. Apart from its historical and social significance, the act considerably impacted the discourse of the steadily expanding intelligentsia because of its reformist and liberal connotations. Being 'both a social elite and a man of the people' (Hatcher, 2020), Vidyasagar acted as an agent between the rural masses of Bengal and the debonair 'babu class' of Calcutta. Although Vidyasagar transitioned into an elite later in his life, he never adhered to the 'babu' way of life. He went back and forth between the elitism of Calcutta and the egalitarianism of the villages and consequently established himself as more of a trans-cultural figure.

Vidyasagar showed how the elite should behave even with the accumulation of social, economic and educational capital in two contrasting social settings: one that is guided by wealth and prestige and the other that is regulated by poverty and misery.

The counter-revolution (Dharma Sabha)

Organisational, structural and ideological rifts slowly emerged in the newly formed literati as intellectuals like Raja Radhakanta Deb began drifting apart from the radical movement and invested their undivided attention in the re-identification of Hindu culture and religion. Deb (a Hindu College student) founded the 'Dharma Sabha' (1830) and initiated a counter-revolution to withstand ultra-revisionist onslaughts. Though he was one of the pioneers of women's education in British India, he condoned and advocated the religious dogmatism of Hindu culture. Deb was one among many influential Hindu personalities in Bengal 'who stood against the Widow Remarriage Bill' and argued that the 'Hindu Shastras strongly prohibit the remarriage of widows' (Bhattacharya, 2019, p. 90). Regardless, by the 1830s, the struggle for reforms and reinvention was solely concentrated between two Hindu groups (traditional and reformist) as the Muslims were no longer in their picture. Hindus became their biggest supporters as well as their biggest enemies in Bengal's cultural revival.

Nascent Bengali Nationalism and its effects on the intelligentsia (Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay - Aurobindo Ghosh - Abanindranath Tagore)

Bengalis were the first to indulge in the idea and practice of nationalism in its art and craft. This development took place at a much later stage in the evolution of the Bengali bhadralok groups. Bankim Chandra, in his writings (Ananda Math, 1882), Aurobindo in his political campaigns and activities (Alipore Bomb Case, 1908), and Abanindranath in his paintings (Bharat Mata painting, 1905), spread the nascent nationalism across Bengal. Several revolutionary outfits, such as 'Anushilan Samiti' (1902) and 'Jugantar' (1906), were established to launch counter-strikes on the oppressive British machinery. Soon after, other states, such as Punjab and Maharashtra, partook in underground revolutionary activities and helped shape the movement further. A very curious development in the rhetoric of nationalism was that, in many instances, the traditional upper-class bourgeois bhadralok figures, emboldened with a largely unchallenged socioeconomic preponderance, became interchangeable with their middle-class counterparts. Notwithstanding the certain Bengali Zaibatsus', a significant chunk of the upper and middle-class intelligentsia, infused with the spirit of revolution against the British, were diluted with each other and often fought as a collective. Thus, the rigid definition of the Bengali intelligentsia was shattered, and the hardline approach of the sophisticated and high-class 'gentlefolk' against other classes was significantly softened.

Consequently, this curious and continued growth of the Bengali bhadralok class in fragmented pieces amid occasional blips and turmoils turned into a movement: a vastly unostentatious movement but a movement nonetheless! With the gains of social capital, political space, and a virtually unabated economic paramountcy, Bengali

literati soon became a force to be reckoned with! They gradually assumed the role of a new aristocratic class in the modern Bengali cultural framework through their snobbish 'Westernism' and elitist exhibitionism. Further, with the development of two distinct occupational streams, as well as the petrification and the standardisation of professions in cities and villages, labour and labour services began getting distinguished in terms of prestige, respect, and monetary value.

The (Metropolitan/Peripheral) Occupational Divisions

In the nineteenth century a solidified division of labour in both cities and villages came into being through the construction businesses and the creation of petty bourgeoisie. metropolitan spaces, especially Calcutta, had their own streams of occupations such as dealership, banking, finance, teaching and medical professions, bureaucracy, media, etc. On the other hand, peripheries were involved in traditional agriculture and other 'lowly' disciplines. Although the birth of these professions is a natural phenomenon given the solidification of urban and rural spaces, the monopolisation of such urban-centric professions by the Bengali 'babu class' created a division of labours between the 'high ranks' and the 'low ranks'. Such a division gave birth to discrimination on socioeconomic lines through the disparity of capital distribution. This drastic difference in occupations engendered two contrasting economies: the so called 'stagnant' village economy and the robust city economy. Furthermore, these occupational divisions were further ironed out through a graded/positional hierarchy promoted by the Bengali Hindu caste system, which still remains thoroughly functional throughout peripheral Bengal.

The Graded Hierarchy

Although not sui generis to Bengal, the society here predominantly functions in and through a system called the graded hierarchy, where specific jobs are assigned to particular groups of people without the possibility of outside intervention in this established framework of occupational divisions. To be more precise, each occupation has its designated function(s), and according to the Bengali Hindu Society, it must be carried out by a systematic hierarchy of professions. Although ludicrous in a modern democracy, this system is firmly ingrained in and functions through the concept of functional specialisation. The functional specialisation requires each community to be associated with its workforce area and excel in its art and craft. According to the Bengali Hindu Chatur-Varna practice (four-fold division), hierarchical structure and social order are maintained, stability and prosperity are ensured, and people forswear abhorrent practices such as avarice and jealousy by following this system. Through this established hierarchy, restrictions in the choice of professions and employment came into existence and had been indurated in the process due to the lack of occupational mobility, visibility, and fluidity. Certain services have gradually become conjugal acts with no likelihood of moving to other professions and climbing the social ladder. For instance, professions like weaving, pottery, and blacksmithing have traditionally been practised by specific Bengali (Hindu) communities such as Karmakar, Tati, Kumor (Pal), and their artisanship skill and the accumulated know-

how are typically transferred from one generation to another. Despite not being as socially petrified as the professions mentioned above, there are communities in Bengal that can be identified with their specified areas of the workforce. These communities and their professions are Mali (Gardener), Swarnakar/Poddar (goldsmith), Kaibarta (fishermen), Kulu (oil extractors), Nishad (hunters), Methor (cleaners), Dom/Domba (performers of the last rite), etc.

These professional differences are etched in stone predominantly due to unequal opportunities in education in the urban and rural spaces. Education, especially higher education for these communities, is a distant dream. The young population is encouraged to carry the family legacy forward in specified 'low-ranked' services instead of indulging in education. Unlike the cities, educational aspiration, for the most part, is deemed preposterous for not being a conventional choice in the peripheries of Bengal. Excluding the politically and economically progressive and prosperous communities such as the Namasudras and the Rajbanshis, the basic literacy rate of the marginalised population of Bengal is 48 per cent (2011 West Bengal Data Highlights). Compared to them, the upper-caste literacy rate is a staggering 90.9 per cent (Dutta & Bisai, 2020). This graded hierarchy is not specifically a Bengali phenomenon but an innate trait of the Indian caste system. A pan-Indian graded hierarchy was first vehemently advocated by Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, who wanted the caste system to remain unscathed because of its functional specialisation (Golwalkar, 1939, pp. 61-62). Nevertheless, this occupational hierarchy has given birth to numerous professions and communities in Bengal that are generally inconspicuous in other parts of India. Such a solidified occupational division has restricted the communication and transaction of social and cultural capital between the Scheduled Communities and the Bengali Hindu literati. Moreover migration to cities does not help these plebeians in terms of vocational amelioration as migrant labourers are quintessentially involved in unskilled and supposedly ignoble professions and, thereby, can not infiltrate the elite space.

Cultural Dissimilarities

Culture always comes with the baggage of intellectual properties with inherent dichotomies although culture is created, shaped and reinforced by humans and societies in time. It generally follows two different streams of development and enforcement: organic and forced or imposed. Organic cultural developments are willingly consumed and slowly embedded into societal roots in the fundamental unfolding of nature. It is a long and hectic process, and it may take decades or even centuries for a cultural phenomenon to be accepted among people irrespective of class, caste, wealth, or geographical location. Forced cultural developments are introduced or indoctrinated through manipulation and coercion by authoritative machinery and are naturally not received well. However, cultures in a post-modern society are extraordinarily plastic and have become more pliable in a globalised world, especially in India. Through liberalisation of the economy and the privatisation of the space, hybrid cultures of Indian and imported variants of the West are absorbed by moderately wealthy upper castes and, to a meagre extent, the Scheduled Communities (educated creamy-layer and those who frequent the cities for menial labour services). The consumption of

culture in Bengali villages is drastically different from that in the cities. In the spheres of society, economy, education, occupation, multimedia, way of life and mode of thinking, the urban and rural cultures and their subsequent consumption patterns can not be more different. I will provide a very limited example of the electronic and digital aspects of multimedia culture. To cite an example devotional Bhakti is the most popular genre among the villagers in digital media as their ultimate means of solace. The implausible action genre that gained prominence during the early 90s can also monetarily take them away from the challenging reality. On the other hand, the suave occident and the glitz of modern orient in art-house-oriented digital mediums of expression have been dominating the metropolitan spaces for decades. I am not trying to argue that the village and city cultures are not undergoing changes, as it is an onerous task not to get regulated by the fusion of cultures in the midst of an increasingly malleable byproduct of twenty-first-century globalisation. For instance, as a pan-Indian genre, action has a massive urban crowd. Likewise, villages are slowly developing their art-house audience in limited capacities, too. However, villages are, in many cases, unknown and uncharted territories and far more difficult to infiltrate than the cities. The consumption of culture in cities is an amalgamation of Indian and Western conventions where the internal practices are blended with imported foreign traditions in multifaceted fashions. The villagers easily do not soak in the hybrid cultures promoted by liberalisation and globalisation. They in most cases prefer uniformity; hence their culture does not come across as hybrid as the cities. Among the marginalised population across villages in India, digital media is not as popular as commonly perceived since the daily usage of social platforms is severely restricted. There are obvious exceptions, but the majority of the Scheduled Communities prefer radio over television because of financial instability, the absence of electricity, and maintenance issues. These massive cultural gaps and non-identical consumption patterns have severely limited and even downgraded the daily interaction between the 'elite' and the 'non-elite'. As a ripple effect of this exclusion from mainstream society, these scheduled communities have now developed their own literature, including books, magazines, newspapers, and pamphlets that are mostly seen as meaningless propaganda or devoid of scholarship and academic integrity by the literati. Such cultural mismatch and the resultant mutual distrust unknowingly advance discrimination between the 'high-ranked' and the 'low-ranked' communities (specifically Hindu communities) instead of promoting diversity amalgamation and fusion.

The Disparity of the Bengali Communist Movement between Theory and Praxis

Despite the limited success of the land reform movement, 'Operation Barga' (1978), in its initial years to alleviate the collective socio-economic condition of Scheduled Communities, the Left's reactionary and exclusionary policies towards the Dalits in Bengal is a crucial narrative in the 'Left Political' that we often tend to ignore. Touted as the *Shramik Srenir Sarkar* (Government of/by/for the proletariats), the Left's arrival in power in 1977 caused significant disruption and thoroughly altered the Bengali

power dynamics. The Bengal Congress dwindled, and the idea of a separate TMC (from the INC) was not even impregnated by then. Moreover, the presence of the BJP was virtually non-existent. CPI(M) and its allies (CPI, RSP, FB) had a clear path of decade-long political hegemony. With absolute power at the helm and no peer pressure or resistance from the dilapidated oppositions, the undeterred communists, at a point, became megalomaniacs, and their sense of entitlement replaced their sense of responsibility. On January 26, 1979, West Bengal Police patrol boats and BSF streamers enclosed the 'Marichjhapi' island in the Sundarbans and imposed an economic blockade on the locals. The struggling islanders, without access to food, water, and medicine, staged a protest. As soon as they protested, the police opened fire and went on a killing spree for several days. With an estimated death of 5000-10000 people, the then Information Minister of Jyoti Basu, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, remarked that 'the island had been cleared of illegal immigrants' (Mandal, 2019). The Marichjhapi massacre, although mostly unheard of, was the biggest state-sponsored massacre in the history of independent India. Yet, this was not a one-off incident. The Left Government in Bengal, in their three decades of rule, instigated several massacres, encroached upon people's land, and carried out large-scale political persecutions. The grassroots-level CPI(M) leadership was a living-breathing propaganda machine designed to terrify the peripheral masses and conduct extermination programmes for those who refused to budge. The victims of the unregulated communist persecutions in Bengal were primarily the Namasudras. They did not have adequate socioeconomic privileges and political importance due to being early refugees. These Namasudras were chiefly used as trump cards for vote bank politics. However, they were casually but promptly discarded once deemed unnecessary by the state. The other identical incidents that showcase the left intolerance towards the 'marginalised' are the 'Nanoor Massacre' (Communist mercenaries maimed eleven landless agricultural labourers in 2000), the 'Sainbari Killings' (1970, two brothers and alleged Congress supporters, Pranab Sain and Malay Sain were hacked to death by a Communist outfit allegedly influenced by CPI(M) leader Nirupam Sen), the 'Nandigram Massacre' (2007, on a dispute over land acquisition for a Special Economic Zone, the locals of Nandigram fulminated. In response, police and some unidentified men wearing police uniforms killed fourteen people), and the 'Singur Revolt' (2008, 'aboriginals' were dispossessed of their land without 'adequate compensation' in the wake of the construction of a Tata Nano automobile factory at Singur). The movement gained prominence when the main opposition leader, Mamata Banerjee, joined hands with the protestors and embarked on a fast-unto-death programme. The campaign initially became a success when the Tata group had to leave Singur amid an inflammatory political environment. Notwithstanding Tata's departure, the disputes over land are still not resolved even in TMC's regime). These examples are well documented in popular literature and indicate the most important missing element in the Bengali Communist movement: the organic inclusion of the Dalits in the political process that CPI(M) purposefully overlooked for

many decades. The party ruled for thirty-four years in Bengal axiomatically with both widespread support and state oppression. But at what cost?

Conclusion

These Leftist reactionary measures were not received positively by the Dalits. The intelligentsia, surprisingly, remained aloof and inactive. Further, the Left also facilitated the rise of soft Hindutva (Gupta, 2021) with back-handed support from the bhadralok class. When the RSS was working silently to build its base and growing leaps and bounds insidiously, the Left, instead of halting the process of Hindutva or stopping the RSS altogether, adopted a policy of persuasion towards its Bengali Hindu population and tried to attend to their deep psychic wounds owing to partition (Narayan, 2021). Generally speaking Scheduled Communities did not reciprocate this soft Hindutva in Bengal as they openly viewed (and still view) the politics of Hindutva as one of the potent weapons of discrimination that ceaselessly attempts to create a bastion of discordant schemes against the marginalised castes. For Dalits, Hindutva always facilitates coveted upper-caste superiority. Moreover, many Scheduled Communities do not identify themselves as Hindus; instead, they either identify then with other religions such as Buddhism or call themselves animistic people with no traditional religion. Therefore, any religious underpinning for the Dalits is tantamount to manufacturing a ritualistic hegemony they vehemently denounce. Thus, to recapitulate, it can be argued that the transactional, ideological and communication gaps that had long existed since the establishment of British rule in Bengal were further dilated between the literati and their beggarly counterparts in a post-colonial framework. The Bengali bhadralok class surprisingly made no attempts to bridge these apparent lacunae. Instead, they wallowed in their self-created egotism, blithe and inertia and wherefore perpetuated the ‘us and them’ binary in Bengal’s variegated socio-political spectrums.

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Conflict of Interest

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Caste, Christianity, and the Invented Moral Panic of 'Love Jihads'

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Abstract

In this article, I explore how dominant caste Christians in the state of Kerala, India have perpetuated a false narrative of "love jihads" while at the same time have pushed campaigns for dominant caste Christian women to have more children. I focus on the Syro-Malabar Catholics; an Eastern Rite of Catholicism and part of a larger group of Christians called the "Syrian Christians." The Syrian Christians are, and have historically been, dominant caste and are recognized by the Kerala state and other religious groups as such. Since the literal reproduction of religious and caste hierarchies is only possible through endogamous (arranged) marriages, controlling women's bodily autonomy and their sexual agency are a function of brahmanical patriarchy, or the intersections of casteism and patriarchy. I thus trace over a decade of incidents where unsubstantiated claims of "love jihads" have been raised by the Syro-Malabar hierarchy, and how these claims are often accompanied by initiatives aimed at encouraging Syro-Malabar Catholic women to have more children. While South Asia studies and feminist studies have examined the invented moral panic of "love jihads" in a Hindu/Muslim frame, it is important to contextualize how and why dominant caste Syro-Malabar priests, bishops, archbishops, and cardinals have also used the charge of "love jihads" to whip up communal panics that are both casteist and Islamophobic at their base.

Keywords

Love jihad, Christianity, Kerala, endogamy, arranged marriage, brahmanical patriarchy, gender, sexuality

Introduction

In early September 2021, Syro-Malabar Catholic Bishop Joseph Kallarangatt alleged that Muslim men were initiating a "narcotics jihad" in the state of Kerala, India and a

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"love jihad" against Syrian Christian women. The remarks drew protests from Kerala's Muslim community and counter protests from dominant caste Syrian Christian faithful who supported the bishop. The protests and counter protests shut down public life and were widely reported not just in Kerala, but across India. But this is not the first time that the "love jihad" invented moral panic has been invoked by the Syro-Malabar Catholic hierarchy. The bishop's remarks sit within a well-placed pattern of events shaped by brahmanical patriarchy—a casteist patriarchy that Syrian Christians have supported for centuries.

In this article, I trace the recent history of fabricated "love jihad" allegations in dominant caste Christian enclaves in an effort to explain how this invented moral panic is shaped by and works to uphold brahmanical patriarchal norms. Often accompanying the invented moral panic of "love jihads" are calls for Syro-Malabar Catholic women to have more children. Additionally, the allegations of "love jihads" are often embedded in statements urging the central government to protect Syrian Christian socio-economic interests in private schools and/or their dominance in the natural rubber cultivation. I argue that the links between "love jihads," campaigns for more children within the faith, and the protection of dominant caste Christian economic interests are made obvious when we explore how caste and class power is engendered and maintained; through heteronormative and patriarchal controls over women's bodily autonomy and sexual agency. Thus, I argue that a feminist lens is necessary to understand caste and religious communalism embedded in the dominant caste Christian clergy's investment in pushing forth, without evidence, the idea of "love jihads."

I focus specifically on a group of dominant caste Christians known officially as the "Syro-Malabar Catholics." The Syro-Malabar Catholics are part of a larger dominant caste Christian group called the "Syrian Christians." Of all the denominations that fall under the umbrella of "Syrian Christians," (which includes Orthodox Syrian Christians, Marthoma Christians, and Knanyana Christians, amongst other sects), the Syro-Malabar rite of Catholicism is the largest. The Syrian Christians are called "Syrian" not because they are from Syria, but because their sacred language is Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic and the language spoken by Jesus/early Christians. "Syrian" language differentiates them from those who practice in the Latin language—often associated with European missionaries and the Western world. "Latin" Catholicism was brought to India by the Portuguese who largely converted Muslims and Hindus from the fisher castes on the Kerala coasts in the late sixteenth century. Thus, there is a caste difference between Latin Catholics in Kerala and the Syro-Malabar Catholics.

I myself am of Syro-Malabar lineage. Even though I did not grow up in a Malayalee community, nor was I baptized in or attend a Syro-Malabar Church, I am a descendent of Syro-Malabar Catholics. Since casteism is a form of descent-based discrimination, it is important to explain my positionality upfront as my heritage comes from this dominant caste community.

The Syrian Christians believe they were Brahmins converted to Christianity by St. Thomas the Apostle in the year 52 CE. "Believe" is the key word here. In truth,

Kerala did not have a thriving Brahmin community in the first century. Brahmin dominance only started to take hold in Kerala somewhere between the seventh-tenth centuries. Even though the Brahmin origins of the Syrian Christians cannot be proven, the Syrian Christian community *believes* those origins to be true. This belief is then supported by casteist realities embedded in everyday practices. In turn, these everyday casteist practices are institutionalized in schools, places of worship, the government, and in workplaces.

The Syrian Christians became merchants and landowners and their accrued generational wealth led to economic, social, and political power in the caste stratified society. The Syrian Christian Copper Plates of 849 CE document their dominant caste status in Kerala. Through the centuries, the Syrian Christians have strengthened ties to dominant caste Hindus, culturally, politically, and economically. These alliances within castes across religious boundaries often happen at the expense of other minority groups. In other words, dominant caste affinity trumps Christian religious affinity. By the twentieth century, when Dalit Christians attempted to buy/own land, they were met with "stiff opposition" from the Syrian Christians (Mohan, 2015, p. 41). They joined forces with the dominant caste Hindu Nairs to protest land ceilings and land redistribution laws brought by the Communist-led state government in 1956. Today, the Syrian Christians remain the largest landowners in Kerala (Zachariah, 2006, p. 28). They are considered "forward caste" while Latin Catholics qualify as OBCs in Kerala.

There is an assumption that Kerala, being an educated state, has moved beyond casteism. This is buttressed by the phenomenon of "castelessness" where dominant caste peoples who benefit from the caste system invisibilize their own caste and universalize their experiences as the hegemonic norm. As Ajantha Subramanian has argued, dominant castes "are able to inhabit a universal worldview precisely because of a history of accumulated privilege, a history that allows them a unique claim to certain forms of self-fashioning" (2015, p. 296). The castelessness of dominant castes then goes undertheorized as caste is seen only in its effects, not in the workings of its power. In studies on caste and minority religions, we must look at how the castelessness of dominant caste Christians works to exculpate dominant caste peoples from being held accountable to the ways in which they participate in the caste system. For as Satish Deshpande has elaborated, "caste can be understood only if we pay as much attention to it when it is invisible or infra-visible as we do when it is hypervisible or ultra-visible. Whether it is represented as a chosen goal or claimed as an actual achievement, castelessness holds the key to caste" (2013, p. 33).

In addition, the study of caste cannot be conducted in its entirety unless we examine caste through a feminist lens. It is the belief that endogamous unions have occurred from time in memorial that makes it seem, to many, that caste is ancient and immovable and inevitable. Feminist scholars of caste stress the importance of understanding the intersections of casteism and patriarchy (brahmanical patriarchy) (Chakravarti, 1993; Chakravarti, 2013; Omvedt, 2000; Paik, 2014). Heteronormativity and controlling dominant caste women's movements and sexual choices while simultaneously creating a system by which sexual violence against Dalit Bahujan

women is sanctioned and perpetrators of gender-based violence are indemnified is how casteism works. Often, because the caste of dominant castes are invisibilized, caste-based marriage norms are little interrogated by dominant caste community members. Uma Chakravorti's book *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens* begins with a powerful image to illustrate this point. During the anti-Mandal agitation in Delhi, dominant caste women held signs that said, "We don't want unemployed husbands." As Chakravorti explains "What these placards were saying was that these girls would be deprived of upper caste IAS husbands. But what they were also saying was that the OBC and Dalits who would now occupy these positions in the IAS could NEVER be their potential husbands" (2013, p.1).

The arranged marriage system engenders caste boundaries and maintains hierarchies. Endogamous unions literally reproduce these hierarchies. For Syrian Christians, that which is called "tradition" circles around marriage and childbirth (Thomas, 2016). While many Syrian Christian traditions have changed or disappeared—such as traditions in clothing—the traditions that remain are ones that are centered on the marriage ceremony and the birth of a dominant caste child: tying the *minu* at marriage, stepping over the threshold with a lighted lamp, Ayurveda medicines during pregnancy, giving the baby gold and honey to ensure fair skin, and Syriac naming practices. Marriage and childbirth, then, are what remain sacred to upholding the boundaries around what constitutes the group. It is these "traditions" that will never disappear because marriage and childbirth are what literally reproduce caste and religious divisions into the next generation.

As feminist scholars have explained, dominant caste women in Kerala are monitored and vilified for stepping out of the "good woman" norm (Sreekumar, 2009; Devika, 2007). However, while dominant caste Christian women's movements are highly monitored, they do benefit from the caste system when they adhere to the boundaries of the "good woman" norm, often at the expense of "other" women who cannot afford to live such a life structured by surveilled domesticity. Bishop Kallarangatt's statement on "love jihads" and "narcotic jihads" did not come out of thin air. Rather, it is embedded in the way that those who support and benefit from the brahmanical patriarchal system work to control dominant caste Christian women's sexual agency while simultaneously depicting Dalit Bahujan and Muslim sexuality as something to be feared/guarded against.

"Love Jihads" and "Have More Babies"

The current literature on "love jihads" has focused on the Hindu Right and Islamaphobia in postcolonial India. For instance, Charu Gupta has written "Hindu Women, Muslim Men: Love Jihad and Conversions" tracing how the Hindu Right has historically whipped up communal fear over Muslim men "stealing" and "forced converting" Hindu women into Islam (Gupta, 2009). Similarly, Mohan Rao's "Love Jihad and Demographic Fears" focuses on the Hindu Right and the invented panic that the Muslim "other" is numerically overtaking a Hindu majority (2011). David Strohl,

has written about morality and "love jihads" and how "the imagined threat of Muslim men conspiring to marry Hindu women presupposes an idealized form of collective moral order." (2019, p. 32). Jyoti Punwani's article, "Myths and Prejudices about 'Love Jihad'" contains interviews with people in Hindu/Muslim interfaith marriages (2014).

Studies on Indian religions often focus on Hindu/Muslim relations. Indeed, the "other" of the Indian Hindu majority is the Muslim minority. Thus, when we think of religion we tend to think of Hindu/Muslim relations. And when we think of caste, we tend to think about caste only in Hinduism. Christians, as a mere 2 per cent of the population, are an asterisk of minorities in India. Further, there is an assumption that caste is only working in Christianity when Hindu Dalits convert to Christianity. In this assumption, the perpetrators of casteism are always Hindu, not Christian. Those oppressed by caste are assumed to be former Hindus even if the conversion to Christianity happened generations upon generations ago. Caste in Christianity is therefore lesser studied and the nuances of casteism across religions is lesser theorized.

That said, we can see a similar pattern between the Hindu Right and dominant caste Christian's use of "love jihads" to address anxieties around demographic decline. The "other" overtaking "us" is a common trope used by those in power to try and retain that power by stoking communal fears of an imagined looming threat. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Syrian Christians were the most numerous Christians in the state of Kerala. Outmigration and family planning in the Syrian Christian community, however, resulted in declining numbers over the decades. Today, the Syrian Christians represent just under half of Kerala's Christian population and that number continues to drop. Meanwhile, the birthrate amongst Muslims in the state is on the rise. In turn, anxieties over the community's future and tensions between the dominant caste Christian minority and the Muslim minority have increased (Varghese, 2022). Despite being a minority within the minority, though, the Syrian Christians have political and socio-economic power in the state and beyond. In other words, these fears of the Muslim "other" dominating the dominant caste Christian "us" is not the reality. However, it is a successful trope politically because a fear of declining numbers correlates to a fear of declining influence in politics and power (not to mention the potential declining monetary donations to the Church). To guard against declining numbers, two things must happen: first, women within the community need to have more babies, and second, women within the community cannot marry outside the group.

Thus, for well over a decade, the Syro-Malabar Church has initiated a series of campaigns and statements encouraging Syro-Malabar Catholic women to have more children alongside warnings against "love jihads." 2007 was declared the "year of the family" by the Kerala Catholic Bishop's Council (KCBC) and campaigns were initiated to encourage women to have more children. In 2008, the KCBC issued a statement on private education which also included a promise for new incentives for Catholic women having more children ("Catholic Bishops Slam Single-Window," 2008). These two statements coincided with a huge campaign in 2008 to ban a 7th

standard social science SCERT textbook. The Syro-Malabar hierarchy wanted this textbook banned because it depicted a "love jihad" mixed marriage where a Hindu woman married a Muslim man. As a result of these protests, the textbook was reviewed by expert committees and then reinstated with a modified lesson on caste and religion that removed the mixed marriage story (Thomas, 2018, pp. 115–146). By 2011, the Syro-Malabar Church was offering incentives for families having a fifth child including free education, free health care, and bonds that would mature when the fifth child came of age ("Catholic Church to India," 2011). Two years later, Syro-Malabar Cardinal, George Alencherry, penned a pastoral letter warning the faithful against entering into non-sacramental mixed marriages. In this pastoral letter, the Cardinal took the time to additionally encourage Syro-Malabar Catholic women to have more children ("Campaign Against Intercaste Marriage, 2022). In January 2014, the KCBC released a circular letter against inter-caste marriages and against family planning. That same year, the Council issued yet another statement warning the faithful about selfies, WhatsApp, and "love jihads." The statement warned: "extremism and religious fundamentalism are growing in our state. There is an increase in the trend of youths and children being trapped in love affairs and taking them into terrorism and other danger zones. Hence, children should be taught to grow in the Catholic faith." (qtd. in Phillip, 2022). In 2015, Bishop Mathew Anikuzhikkattil warned, without any evidence whatsoever, that Christian girls were growing up without values and without guidance in the faith and were being enticed into relationships by Muslims and Ezhuva (Bahujan) Hindus. Bishop Anikuzhikkattil accused the Ezhuva caste group, the SNDP, and (all) Muslims of abducting Christian girls in "love jihads." While the KCBC backtracked on these statements after SNDP outcry, Bishop Anikuzhikkattil's allegation of "love jihads" was supported by a very prominent Archbishop, Joseph Powathil, and by many faithful ("Kerala Catholic Bishops Divided," 2015). In September 2019, Fr. Antony Thalachelloor, secretary of Syro-Malabar Media Commission, stated in a press release that Christian girls were being targeted by religious terrorists. Also in that month, George Kurian, vice chairman of the National Commission for Minorities wrote to Home Minister Amit Shah asking the central government to investigate "love jihads" by Muslims against Christian girls in Kerala. Also in that year, a pastoral letter from the archdiocese of Changanacheri warned that the Syro-Malabar Catholic community was in decline. A Syro-Malabar Media Commission statement released in January of 2020 claimed that Christian girls were being targeted and killed in "love jihads," again, without any evidence ("Christians Girls Are Being Killed," 2020). In January 2021, Syrian Christian hierarchy met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi to discuss issues of minority rights in education and, of course, "love jihads" ("Christian leaders meet PM," 2021). In July 2021, Bishop Kallarangatt announced in an online meeting the launch of new incentives for Syro-Malabar couples having many children.

They released a poster declaring 2021 the year of the family (again). The poster explained that for parents married after the year 2000 and having 5 or more children, the Church would give financial assistance of Rs. 1500 to the family. The poster also promised that having 4+ children would qualify the family for free education, and after

the birth of the fourth child, the mother would receive free medical maternal care paid for by the Church. Following all this was Syro-Malabar Bishop Joseph Kallarangatt's "love jihad/narcotics jihad" statement.

I cite these Syro-Malabar campaigns and statements in chronological order for 3 reasons. First, to explain how the most recent "love jihad" panic is not new in dominant caste Christian circles, but something that the Syro-Malabar hierarchy has repeatedly and, without any evidence, put forward for years. Second, to explain that "love jihads" is not just an Islamaphobic campaign of the Hindu Right. It is an Islamaphobic campaign supported by dominant caste Christians as well. Third, to point out that for dominant caste Christians, so called "love jihads" seem to always accompany campaigns for Syro-Malabar Catholic women to have more children. It is this third point where we can understand how caste power is functioning here. For embedded in the idea of "more children" is the unstated reality of the endogamous union: the hierarchy wants more *Syro-Malabar Catholic* children. Similar to the placard that Uma Chakrovorti observes dominant women holding during the anti-Mandal commission protests: the sanctioned marriage—the only marriage that can be imagined—is a dominant caste marriage.

The idea that dominant caste "girls" (for they are often infantilized in the "love jihad" rhetoric) are "abducted" implies that dominant caste women lack agency and are in need of protection from dominant caste men and from the state. As feminist scholars of ethnic conflict and nationalisms have discussed, women's bodies act as vessels marking the boundaries between ethnic groups (Mostov, 2004; Copelan,

1994). When one group is threatened—in this case by the self-inflicted demographic decline of the community—protecting "our women" takes on symbolic properties and the patterns that ensue are quite predictable. In this patriarchal frame, "our women" become first and foremost vessels of reproduction. In this, the "abduction" of women is the "abduction" of the property of the community. Women in the community might be revered as mothers, but their bodies are under constant surveillance and are controlled because the "other" is always portrayed as a threat to the entire future of the community.

In the invented "love jihad" panic, a Syro-Malabar Catholic woman cannot be allowed to choose a mixed marriage or to be anything but heterosexual. The whole system demands compulsory heterosexuality and "the traffic in women" where women have no rights to their own body (Rubin, 1975). Any agency is reformulated as an "abduction" where the "other" men are perpetrators of a crime, and women are deemed incapable of making decisions on their own.

Notice that none of the Syro-Malabar hierarchy's discussion of "love jihads" contains panics about Syro-Malabar Catholic men marrying Ezhuva women or Muslim women. In the intersections of casteism and patriarchy, dominant caste men not only claim their "own" women's bodies, but also sexual access to Dalit Bahujan women's bodies. As Isabel Wilkerson writes, "the dominant gender of the dominant caste, in addition to controlling the livelihood and life chances of everyone beneath them, eliminate[s] the competition for its own women and in fact for all women" (2020). Therefore, when men in the community marry outside, they are never seen as "stolen" nor does it factor into anxieties of demographic decline. Rather, dominant caste masculine entitlement to *all* women's bodies is assumed.

There are also caste implications in the charge that (all) Muslims are the "abductors" of Syro-Malabar Catholic women. In Kerala, a history of tenancy, fishing, and agricultural labor links the Muslim community in particular ways to a working class identity associated with Dalit Bahujan caste labor. While there is class and caste stratification amongst Muslim groups in Kerala today, as a group they qualify as OBCs (Mathur, 2011, p. 133). Bishop Anikuzhikkattil's 2015 statement on "love jihads" is specifically against marriages between Syro-Malabar Catholic girls to (only) Bahujan Ezhuva Hindus and to (all) Muslims. Bishop Anihuzhikkattil does not decry a match between a dominant caste Nair Hindu man and a Syro-Malabar Catholic woman because such a hypothetical interfaith marriage would be within the similar dominant caste. Nor does he decry a dominant caste Orthodox Christian man marrying a Syro-Malabar Catholic woman. Both these hypothetical marriages would be dominant caste men claiming sexual ownership over "their" dominant caste women. It is only when dominant caste women are allegedly marrying Bahujan Hindu men or any Muslim man that it becomes a so-called "love jihad." This is why the rhetoric of "love jihads" is both casteist *and* Islamaphobic at its base.

Reform?

After Bishop Kallarangatt's allegation of "love/narcotics jihad," other Syro-Malabar priests defended and repeated the allegations. But at a mass at a Church in Kuravilangad, four nuns who also supported a sister survivor of clerical sexual assault, walked out of a Church where a priest repeated the "love jihad/narcotics jihad" allegations ("Dissident Nuns," 2021). Father Paul Thelakat, former spokesperson for the Syro-Malabar Church, has also spoken out against Bishop Kallarangatt's remarks ("CSI, Muslim Youth Federation," 2021). There were Syrian Christians who protested in solidarity and allyship with the Muslim community in Kerala in September 2021. There are Syro-Malabar Catholics advocating for reform. This shows how some in the community understand how brahmanical patriarchy functions. It also shows how some in the community are willing and want to stand against casteism and Islamaphobia.

At the same time, however, we have seen a rise in "Chrisanghis," or (mostly) dominant caste Syrian Christians bent on furthering the agenda of the Hindu Right. Groups like the Christian Association and Alliance for Social Action (CASA) have been increasingly active throughout Kerala and on social media with "love jihads" as the front and center issue. CASA's mission on its website states:

> The idea of forming an RSS-model organisation for Christians led to its revival during the 'love jihad' campaign in 2018. We have intervened in over 200 'love jihad' cases in the state and were able to save around 90 girls. We also check the details in websites (Registration department used to publish notices containing details of couple under special marriage act) to identify 'love jihad' cases and alert the local priests. With their help, we meet their families and save girls… we launched a 'Mission Recall to Christ Love' to bring back these girls. We brought back around 12 such girls. Of these, we were able to marry off two girls with eligible men from within their communities ("CASA Mission," n.d.).

The *News Minute* reports that many of these right wing Christian (dominant caste) groups have strong ties to the Syro-Malabar Church and are backed by Syro-Malabar priests (John, 2022).

It may feel, then, that we are two steps forward and one step back in the fight against casteism that has historically been perpetuated by the dominant caste Syro-Malabar community. But consider this reform in the context of castelessness. When you benefit from a system and do not experience discrimination in that system, you are less likely to talk about it or to fight against it. Any discussion of caste or casteism in dominant caste communities can be met with strong pushback and argumentation, silencing of Dalit Bahujan voices, deflections and whataboutisms, and/or with violence. This is what scholars are calling "savarna fragility" where even the most minimum amount of caste stress is felt as if it is too much to bear for dominant caste peoples. This doesn't excuse any dominant caste person from doing the work that

needs to be done to smash brahmanical patriarchy. It only provides an explanation of why reform is also accompanied by the rise of "Chrisanghis."

But I do have hope. Education is happening, reform movements are happening, and (some) dominant caste people are recognizing that they have work to do. The first step is to see and name the casteism you/your ancestors participated in and the privilege accrued over the generations—to make visible the castelessness of dominant caste Christians. Questioning the motives behind the invented moral panic of "love jihads" and understanding how the endogamous union is integral to the engendering/continuation of caste and religious divisions can be a way those in the community (including myself) can make visible that privilege and caste power.

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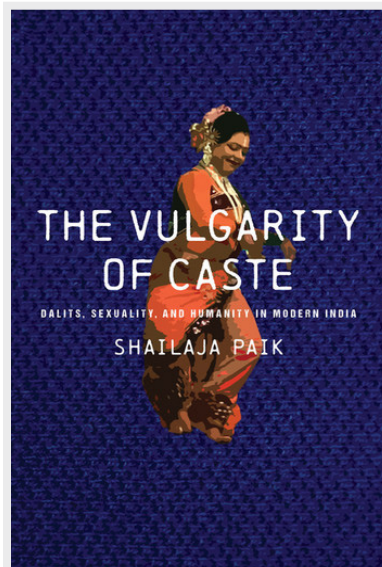
‘The Vulgarity of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality, and Humanity in Modern India’



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“For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of the human personality”.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, All-India Depressed Classes Conference, 1942

In his pursuit of social equality and Dalit liberation, the foremost intellectual of modern India, Dr. Ambedkar rejected endogamy, viewing it as the cornerstone of caste, and converted to Buddhism to affirm a shared humanity (*manuski*) and dignity for the untouchables. Engaging with Ambedkar’s ideas, renowned historian Shailaja Paik provides a deep and nuanced analysis of the intersections between caste, gender, and sexuality in her latest book *The Vulgarity of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality, and Humanity in Modern India*. Through rigorous historical research and a Dalit womanist-humanist lens, Paik critically engages with Ambedkar’s notion of *manuski* and examines how Dalit women are oppressed by the caste system that controls their bodies and stigmatizes their sexuality. Divided into three parts and six chapters, the volume not only critiques traditional Indian feminist discourses but also investigates the entrenched hierarchies that perpetuate the marginalization of Dalit women in Indian society.

The author examines and questions the historical foundations of caste-based sexual oppression faced by Dalit women, deeply rooted in the social fabric of post-colonial India. Focusing on the regional context of Maharashtra state, the author

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offers a critical analysis of the *Marathi* public sphere and the pride associated with the *Marathi* language and masculinity. Paik reinterprets modern Western concepts such as humanity, authenticity, and vulgarity, while introducing their vernacular counterparts: *manuski, asli* and *ashlil*. These terms capture the daily struggles of caste and gender oppression, while asserting the universal right to full human recognition.

Paik opens her analysis by focusing on *Tamasha*, a popular folk performance tradition in Maharashtra that emerged from the local Maharashtrian entertainment traditions: *Lavani* and *Pavada* which are central to the local pride, and the performance entails virile and patriotic *Marathi Manus* identity and creates a common cultural memory and an illusion of unity (p. 232). *Tamasha*, as the author defines it is "a social, political and ideological sexual-caste game born precisely from the interplay of the relationship of power and as such it produced and reproduced the relationship of caste…" (p. 48). *Tamasha* has several colloquial meanings: play, fun, humor, tantrum, nonsense, commotion, a show, spectacle, and a sort of theatrical entertainment. For centuries, Dalit women who performed *Tamasha* were denied basic dignity and humanity, ostracized from both Dalit and caste communities as deviant and vulgar. Since the medieval period, it has been a form of entertainment that elicits pleasure and *masti* (*a gamut of affect unleashing unruly masculine sexual energy*). Despite the ban by the colonial state in the 1940s, *Tamasha* performances continue in rural and urban Maharashtra. Thes performers, predominantly from lower castes, are stripped of their artistic identity and reduced to objects of sexual desire solely because of their caste status. The *Tamasha* stage serves as a site of compounded violence, where Dalit women face ongoing sexual exploitation, and their performances are viewed through a lens of vulgarity, reinforcing their dehumanization. Their performances, often bawdy and overtly sensual, offer them no respect or safety, leaving them vulnerable to sexual assault. Dalit women were coerced to provide sexual service to all men, especially the dominant caste-men. Despite being perceived as sex workers—an identity they neither choose nor inhabit—they are left with no alternative but to continue performing, as the caste system's discrimination locks them out of other opportunities.

The ethnographic volume documents the everyday life of these women and shares various experiences of Dalit performers like Pavalabai Hivargaonkar, whose songs were appropriated by her Brahmin lover, Patthe Bapurao. It illustrates how caste and gender hierarchies pervade even intimate relationships where the privileged Brahmin possess the "power of construction, destruction and reconstruction" (p. 74). Though both are in the same profession, Dalit women face heightened contempt and marginalization and are stigmatized as 'vulgar' and 'promiscuous', labels rarely applied to their upper-caste counterparts. This hypocrisy reveals the selective moralism embedded within caste structures. Brahmin men engaged in the same profession escape such denigration, further underscoring how caste and gender inequalities are intertwined to protect dominant caste privilege and control. The chapter also highlights how economic precarity intensifies the vulnerability of Dalit women.

Intersectionality: The Triple Oppression of Dalit Women

Mainstream feminist discourse in India has largely overlooked the caste-based oppression experienced by Dalit women. As Paik pointed out in her earlier studies, this oversight in feminist historiography has strategically neglected the existence of "caste communities" and masked the way how class, gender, and sexuality intersect with caste-based oppression, thus constructing a monolithic image of the "Indian woman" (2018, p. 2). Paik emphasizes the intersectional oppression Dalit women face, being marginalized by their caste, gender, and class. This triple oppression places them at the periphery of both feminist and Dalit movements. Mainstream feminist movements often neglect caste issues, while Dalit movements overlook gender inequality, leaving Dalit women to battle on multiple fronts. Paik critiques both movements for their failure to address the unique struggles of Dalit women, arguing that their experiences offer a more complete understanding of caste and gender oppression. This intersectionality of sex, gender, and caste forms what Paik terms the "sex-gender-caste" complex, a framework that highlights how caste hierarchies intersect with gender and sexuality to maintain power structures, a social mechanism that degrades dancers, singers, and *Tamasha* performers, branding them as prostitutes and vulgar simply due to their caste. This complex goes beyond social exclusion, incorporating sexual violence and economic control as tools to reinforce caste purity even in twenty-first century India.

The author masterfully captures the intersectionality of experiences of *Tamasha* artists, offering the narrative of Mangalatai Bansode, a renowned *Tamasha* performer. Bansode describes a deeply traumatic experience at the age of 16 when she was coerced by her village to dance in an ox cart as part of a local festival. Crowded alongside other women, she was paraded through the village, surrounded by a raucous mob of men who jeered, danced, and attempted to grope her, pulling at her saree. The terror of this experience, especially for someone so young, is intense, yet refusing to comply would have invited violence. This coercion, in the author's words "rendered her both object of predatory desire and object of vilification as the embodiment of vulgarity" (p. 48). Bansode's career, while marred by public humiliation and sexual violence, also served as a vehicle for economic survival and resistance, as she used her earnings to uplift her family. This interplay of exploitation and resilience lies at the heart of Paik's powerful critique, as she exposes the systemic violence while also honoring the agency that some Dalit women assert in the face of it. *Tamasha* in the garb of nonsense and play became "performative of the paradoxical conditions of Dalit" (p. 13). For *Tamasha* performers, the art form is more than entertainment; it represents employment, social mobility, and caste-based rights. Yet, they are stigmatized for participating in the very performances that provide these opportunities.

Fear of Vulgarity (*ashlil*) and Authenticity (*asli*)

Paik further delves into the idea of 'vulgarity', arguing that dominant castes maintain their power by labeling Dalit women's performances as vulgar. *Tamasha*'s association

with vulgarity traps performers in a cycle where their livelihoods depend on performing for male audiences while being socially ostracized for it. Paik critiques the lack of attention to the disempowerment and caste-based violence these performers endure, arguing that scholars and policymakers have largely ignored their plight.

Paik underscores the limitations of existing scholarship in recognizing how culture, particularly *Tamasha*, became a pivotal arena in shaping Marathi identity within the newly formed state of Maharashtra (p. 234). The author argues that the new *Marathi manus* was created by the caste and cultural vigilantes who petitioned a ban on vulgar writings, art and film, and there was a visceral dislike for kissing on screen (p. 235). Over time, the illusion of *ashlil* and *asli* has evolved into a form of cultural politics, and *Tamasha* is now recognized as (*Loknatya*) people's theater (p. 287). Despite these changes, *Tamasha* still perpetuates patriarchy and the control of women in twenty-first-century globalized India, highlighting the ongoing influence of caste and gender dynamics.

The Vulgarity of Caste is a transformative work that illuminates the intricate and often contradictory lives of Dalit women in India. Paik's methodological brilliance, combining archival research with oral histories, marks a major scholarly contribution to Dalit and gender studies. As the normative politics of gender, caste, and sexuality continue to reshape Dalit identity, agency, and citizenship in modern India, this volume provides a profound critique of these dynamics. It delves into the political economy of caste, deviant sexuality, the pedagogy of *Tamasha*, and its generational capital, inviting scholars across diverse fields such as Ambedkar studies, caste studies, gender and sexuality, colonialism, folk music, performance, and art, to engage with its rich insights. While every state in India boasts its traditional dance and musical forms, such as *Swang* in Haryana, *Ghoomar* in Rajasthan, *Garba* in Gujarat, and *Bhangra* in Punjab, there remains a glaring absence of literature that explores the intersection of caste and gender within these cultural performances. Paik's work calls attention to this gap, urging a re-examination of the structures and violence of caste that have long shaped these performances.

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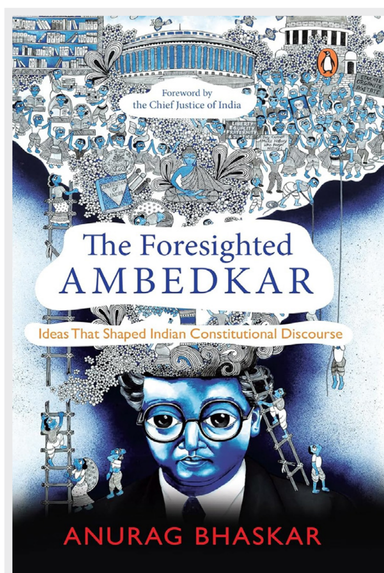
'The Foresighted Ambedkar: Ideas That Shaped Indian Constitutional Discourse'



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Reviewer: *Shubham Kumar*[1]

Introduction

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is popularly celebrated for his role in drafting the Indian Constitution. His commitment to the annihilation of caste, his advocacy for social justice, and his tireless work for the inclusion of the oppressed communities into the social and political fabric of India, laid the foundations for the egalitarian principles of modern India (Thorat & Kumar, 2009).

However, only a handful of scholarly work dealt with exploring Ambedkar's contributions in the framing of the Indian Constitution. These include Raosaheb Kasbe's Marathi book *Dr. Ambedkar Ani Bhartiya Rajyaghatana*, translated in English as Dr. Ambedkar and the Indian Constitution (Kasbe, 2016) and DC Ahir's *Dr. Ambedkar and the Indian Constitution* (Ahir, 1997). These works focus on the Constituent Assembly Debates to highlight Ambedkar's key role in the framing of the Constitution. In *The Foresighted Ambedkar*, Anurag Bhaskar extends this exploration to a broader historical context, highlighting Ambedkar's influence not only during the Constituent Assembly (1946-50) but also in the preceding three decades. Bhaskar argues that understanding the constitution-making process should encompass negotiations dating back to 1919, illustrating how Ambedkar shaped key moments leading up to setting up of the Assembly.

Bhaskar also provides a detailed examination of several critical historical events that previous works have not discussed, such as Ambedkar's role in the framing of the Government of India Act 1935, his constitutional arguments against possible secession from India by the erstwhile princely states, among other topics. The book

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also demolishes several myths spread against Dr. Ambedkar, such as that he wanted to burn the Constitution, or that he wanted *quotas* in jobs and education to end after a period of ten years. In other words, Bhaskar offers an in-depth and meticulously researched exploration of Ambedkar's constitutional philosophy, situating his contributions within a broader, multidimensional framework that intertwines global constitutionalism, the struggles of anti-caste movements, and the ever-evolving discourses on rights, justice, and governance. Bhaskar's work thus provides readers with a comprehensive understanding of Ambedkar's vision for a democratic society rooted in the principles of social justice and substantive equality, a vision that continues to resonate in contemporary debates on democracy and governance.

Constitutional Evolution and Ambedkar's Radical Engagement

At the outset, the book traces Ambedkar's early rise, positioning his socio-political development within the context of colonial India's deeply entrenched caste system. Ambedkar's journey was marked by his education and exposure to liberal democratic ideals, human rights discourses, and social reform movements, which profoundly shaped his perspectives on how to address the deeply discriminatory and hierarchical structures of Indian society (Omvedt, 1994). His formative years were spent grappling with the reality of being born into an 'untouchable' caste, and yet, his academic achievements, notably his education at Columbia University and the London School of Economics, and his wide reading of global history, provided him with the intellectual tools to envisage a radically different future for India. In this initial section, Bhaskar meticulously charts Ambedkar's rise from a personal and symbolic subaltern trajectory, marking him as a representative figure challenging hegemonic social structures through constitutional means.

Following this, the book delves into the constitutional discourse that predated Ambedkar's involvement and its evolution during and after his interventions. Bhaskar carefully situates Ambedkar's work in the context of colonial constitutional reforms, such as the Government of India Acts, which while laying the groundwork for limited self-rule, remained exclusionary, particularly toward oppressed castes (B. Ambedkar, 2014). Ambedkar's engagement with constitutionalism, therefore, represented both a continuation of and a radical departure from prior constitutional discussions. While colonial constitutional reforms sought to preserve the interests of the ruling elites, Ambedkar infused his constitutional philosophy with a strong egalitarian ethos, anchored in social justice and the need to dismantle caste-based oppression (Bhaskar, 2021). Through this analysis, Bhaskar highlights how Ambedkar's vision for India's future was rooted in the recognition that the country's social hierarchies could only be effectively challenged through the creation of a just and inclusive legal and political system.

A significant portion of Bhaskar's work is dedicated to exploring Ambedkar's ideas on popular government and citizenship, which form the crux of his democratic vision. For Ambedkar, democracy was never a matter of mere procedural formalities,

such as elections and majority rule, but was fundamentally concerned with the material realization of social and economic justice. Democracy, in Ambedkar's view, had to be substantive—concerned not only with the protection of individual political rights but also with the redistribution of resources and opportunities in ways that would enable marginalized communities to participate fully and equally in the political process (B.R. Ambedkar, 2010). Bhaskar draws extensively from Ambedkar's speeches, writings, and debates within the Constituent Assembly to critically examine how Ambedkar's insistence on the link between political democracy and economic justice was instrumental to his broader constitutional vision.

Ambedkar firmly rejected the notion that democracy should be limited to the understanding of numerical majorities and electoral outcomes. Instead, his conception of democracy was rooted in the recognition that India's deeply hierarchical social structure necessitated constitutional mechanisms that would protect the rights of minority groups, particularly Dalits and other oppressed castes (Nussbaum, 2016). Bhaskar's analysis of this aspect of Ambedkar's thought is particularly illuminating, as it highlights how Ambedkar sought to create a constitutional framework that would transcend the formal legal equality of citizenship and instead actively protect the rights of marginalized communities through institutional safeguards. This section offers a thorough analysis of Ambedkar's efforts to create a substantive democracy, one that was not only formally democratic but also rooted in the principles of social justice, inclusion, and equality.

One of the most significant contributions that Ambedkar made to modern constitutional thought is his pioneering work in shaping the language and framework of rights within the Indian Constitution. Bhaskar devotes considerable attention to analyzing Ambedkar's role in drafting key provisions that not only guaranteed civil and political rights but also extended the scope of constitutional protections to include socio-economic rights. Ambedkar's vision of rights was far-reaching and transformative, moving beyond the narrow confines of the liberal tradition's focus on individual liberties to include a broader commitment to collective justice, especially for historically marginalized and oppressed communities.

Ambedkar's innovative approach to constitutional rights is vividly illustrated in Bhaskar's discussion of his efforts to intertwine personal freedoms with social justice. For Ambedkar, political democracy could not exist in isolation from social and economic democracy. He believed that the protection of civil liberties had to be accompanied by measures to ensure the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities (Austin, 1999). This section of the book delves deeply into Ambedkar's advocacy for affirmative action provisions—such as reservations in education and employment for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes—as essential tools for dismantling caste-based discrimination. In this regard, a crucial aspect of Ambedkar's constitutional vision, as Bhaskar underscores, is his incisive critique of the historical privileges conferred upon dominant castes. Ambedkar's advocacy for affirmative action policies, aimed at supporting oppressed castes, was grounded in his understanding of justice as both distributive and compensatory (Bhaskar, 2021).

Bhaskar's analysis of Ambedkar's approach to affirmative action is particularly thought-provoking, as he examines how Ambedkar rejected the system of generation privilege and hegemony over institutions, that disproportionately benefited dominant castes, and instead articulated a vision of justice that recognized the need for remedial measures to address historical injustices and systemic inequalities. By juxtaposing the privileges of dominant castes with his advocacy for affirmative action, Bhaskar reveals the sophisticated nature of Ambedkar's constitutional thought, which sought to strike a balance between individual rights and the need for collective social justice.

Through a close reading of Ambedkar's speeches, writings, and debates during the drafting of the Constitution, Bhaskar illustrates how Ambedkar's work on rights extended beyond merely protecting individuals from state interference. Instead, Ambedkar sought to create a constitutional framework that would actively address the socio-economic disparities that had historically disadvantaged marginalized communities (Austin, 1999). Bhaskar's analysis of this aspect of Ambedkar's work reveals how he envisioned the Indian Constitution as a living document, one that would evolve to meet the changing needs of Indian society. Ambedkar's efforts to weave together individual liberties with the imperative of collective justice, Bhaskar argues, remain a "cornerstone"—borrowing the term from Granville Austin—of India's constitutional ethos, establishing a foundation for a more inclusive and equitable society.

The book also explores key episodes in Ambedkar's political career, such as the Mahad Satyagraha, which Bhaskar describes as a crucial moment in Ambedkar's legal and constitutional thought. Ambedkar's struggle for the basic right to access public water sources became symbolic of a broader assertion of equality and human dignity (Jangam, 2017). Bhaskar examines the Mahad Satyagraha as both an act of resistance against oppressive social structures and as a formative moment in Ambedkar's evolving ideas on constitutionalism and social justice. Labelling this episode as the "First Walk to Freedom," Bhaskar situates it within Ambedkar's larger legal and political philosophy, revealing how such acts of civil disobedience informed his later work on the Indian Constitution.

One of Ambedkar's most radical contributions to India's constitutional framework, as Bhaskar highlights, was his advocacy for universal adult franchise. At a time when widespread illiteracy and deeply rooted hierarchical divisions pervaded Indian society, Ambedkar's insistence on equal voting rights for all citizens, regardless of caste or class, was both revolutionary and forward-thinking. Bhaskar provides a nuanced examination of the socio-political milieu in which Ambedkar articulated his arguments for universal suffrage, emphasizing the radical nature of this proposal in a context where political participation had been historically restricted to the privileged classes (Bhaskar, 2021). For Ambedkar, universal suffrage was not merely a procedural mechanism for expanding political participation; it was a fundamental pillar of his vision for a truly democratic India. By championing equal voting rights, Ambedkar sought to empower the disenfranchised and ensure that the voices of the marginalized, especially those from oppressed castes, would be heard in the political arena (Nussbaum, 2016). Bhaskar traces the enduring impact of Ambedkar's advocacy

on democratic participation in India, underscoring how his push for universal adult franchise continues to shape the struggle for equality and representation in contemporary Indian society.

In addition to his focus on constitutional rights and justice, Bhaskar devotes significant attention to Ambedkar's ideas on the structure and functioning of government. Ambedkar's commitment to a system of checks and balances, his emphasis on the need for an independent judiciary, and his insistence on federalism as a means of addressing India's diverse social and linguistic landscape are all carefully examined in the book. Bhaskar draws on Ambedkar's contributions to key debates in the Constituent Assembly to illustrate how his approach to the structure of government was informed by both his deep understanding of constitutional theory and his pragmatic awareness of the unique challenges posed by India's social and political realities.

Bhaskar's examination of Ambedkar's constitutional philosophy also touches on his views regarding the relationship between law and social change. For Ambedkar, the Constitution was not a static document but a living one that should evolve to meet the changing needs of society (B.R. Ambedkar, 2010). Bhaskar highlights Ambedkar's recognition that legal reforms, while necessary, were not sufficient in themselves to achieve social justice. Ambedkar understood that deep-seated social structures, particularly the caste system, required more than just legal solutions; they needed sustained social and political efforts to dismantle. Nonetheless, Ambedkar saw the Constitution as a powerful tool for initiating and supporting social change (Austin, 1999). By establishing legal principles of equality and justice, the Constitution could serve as a foundation for broader social reforms aimed at eradicating caste-based discrimination and ensuring the inclusion of marginalized communities in all aspects of Indian life.

In this context, Bhaskar examines Ambedkar's views on the limits of constitutionalism in effecting social transformation. While Ambedkar was a staunch advocate of using constitutional means to achieve social justice, he was also acutely aware of the potential for laws to be subverted by entrenched interests. Bhaskar draws on Ambedkar's writings and speeches to illustrate his concerns about the possibility that the Constitution's egalitarian principles could be undermined by dominant social groups who sought to preserve their privileges. Ambedkar's insistence on the need for continuous vigilance in protecting the rights of marginalized communities is a recurring theme in Bhaskar's analysis, underscoring his belief that constitutional democracy required active participation and engagement by all citizens to ensure that the principles of justice and equality were upheld.

Relevance of Ambedkar's Vision in Contemporary Debates

The book also delves into Ambedkar's critical reflections on the challenges of implementing constitutional ideals in practice. Bhaskar explores Ambedkar's observations on the gap between the lofty principles of the Constitution and the reality of social and political life in post-independence India. Ambedkar was deeply concerned that without meaningful social and economic reforms, the Constitution's

promises of equality and justice would remain unfulfilled (Austin, 1999). Bhaskar's analysis of this aspect of Ambedkar's thought reveals his pragmatic understanding of the limitations of constitutional law in addressing deeply ingrained social inequalities. Ambedkar's emphasis on the need for continuous social and economic reform as a complement to constitutional change is a central theme of the book, offering readers a comprehensive view of his broader vision for social transformation.

In the final sections of the book, Bhaskar turns to a discussion of Ambedkar's legacy and its relevance to contemporary constitutional debates in India. Ambedkar's foresight in addressing issues such as caste-based discrimination, the protection of minority rights, and the need for social and economic justice continues to resonate in modern constitutional jurisprudence. Bhaskar provides a detailed examination of how Ambedkar's ideas have influenced key judicial decisions in India, particularly those related to affirmative action, the right to education, and the protection of minority rights *(Indra Sawhney vs Union of India and Others, n.d.)*. By tracing the enduring impact of Ambedkar's constitutional philosophy on contemporary legal and political discourses, Bhaskar demonstrates the ongoing relevance of his thought in shaping India's democratic institutions and legal frameworks.

Bhaskar notably argues that while Ambedkar's constitutional vision laid the groundwork for legal protections and affirmative action policies, much work remains to be done in realizing the full promise of social justice. In this context, Bhaskar's discussion of Ambedkar's legacy serves as both a reminder of the transformative potential of constitutionalism and a call to action for those who continue to fight for a more just and inclusive society.

The final chapter of the book critically engages with the ongoing discourse regarding the so-called ten-year limit on reservations, effectively dismantling the notion that such measures should be restricted to a predefined period. Ambedkar argued that the historical and deeply entrenched context of oppression required a more flexible and adaptive approach to affirmative action—one that is responsive to the changing socio-political landscape rather than constrained by arbitrary deadlines (Bhaskar, 2022).

Another positive aspect of the book is that it is written in simple language, devoid of any jargons or verbose content. Such writing style makes it easier for a non-legal reader to engage with the content of the book. The book undisputedly establishes Dr. Ambedkar as a leading figure who shaped India's constitutional trajectory.

As the author himself noted, the book is about Indian constitutional history. In narrating the contributions, Bhaskar builds on the scholarship on various facets of Ambedkar's philosophy. For instance, he quoted Shailaja Paik (2022), whose work on Ambedkar's perspectives on gender and its intersection with caste offers insight into his wider social philosophy. In expanding the scholarship on Ambedkar, Bhaskar reveals how his vision of equality extended beyond the boundaries of caste to encompass a more comprehensive approach to human dignity and equity (Kumar & Preet, 2020). Reading Bhaskar's book along with the previous scholarship on his engagement with Buddhist principles, Western philosophical traditions, or Indian intellectual discourses would expand the reader's understanding of his conceptions

of justice and democracy. Such an examination would not only deepen the reader's grasp of Ambedkar's philosophical lineage but also emphasize the moral and ethical dimensions of his approach to law, governance, and human rights.

Bhaskar ends his book reflecting on the unfinished legacy of Ambedkar. Another interesting project which the author could take is an exploration of Ambedkar's representation in popular culture, literature, and art, showcasing the cultural dimensions of his legacy beyond legal and political frameworks (Jangam, 2017). This would highlight how Ambedkar's ideas resonate across various media, underscoring their impact on Indian society as a whole. Such a perspective would add a richer, multidimensional view of Ambedkar's influence, illustrating how his thought has permeated and shaped not only legal and political landscapes but also cultural and social consciousness in modern India.

The Foresighted Ambedkar by Anurag Bhaskar is a comprehensive and insightful exploration of Ambedkar's constitutional philosophy and its enduring impact on Indian democracy. Bhaskar's work stands as a testament to Ambedkar's foresight in addressing the deep-rooted social and political challenges facing India, and it serves as an important resource for scholars, students, and anyone interested in understanding the foundational principles of India's constitutional democracy.

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