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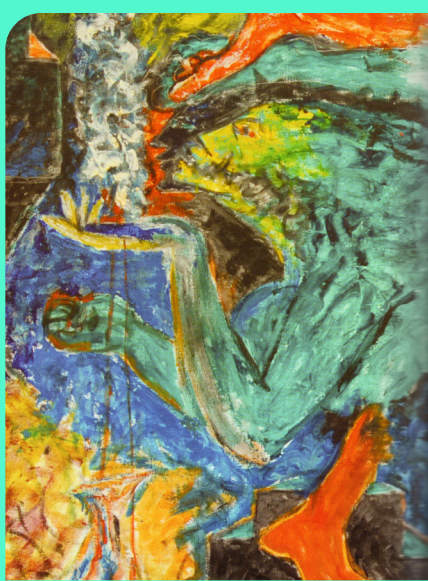
VARIETIES OF CASTE CONSCIOUSNESS
with A Symposium on Caste in Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan Diaspora (Part 1)



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A Symposium on Caste in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Diaspora: An Introductory Note

Kalinga Tudor Silva[1], Mark E. Balmforth[2]

In comparison to the expanding body of literature on caste in the Indian subcontinent, caste in and connected to Sri Lanka has received relatively little attention in contemporary academic research, policy debates and social development interventions. This is perhaps the result of a widely held view on the island that even though caste was important in the past, it no longer exists as a vital social institution. Though there may be an element of truth in this observation, we feel that the actual reality is far more complex. Caste may seem to be dormant in day-to-day public life, but one need only consider its role in the selection of marriage partners or the operation of both national and local electoral processes to see that caste remains a ubiquitous factor of life on the island.

While open discussion about caste is almost completely absent in contemporary Sri Lanka (Uyangoda, 2000; Silva, Sivapragasam, and Thanges, 2009), this cannot be interpreted to mean that caste is dead or dying in Sri Lankan society. On the contrary, there are many caste-instigated frictions in various communities across the island. For instance, reports from the north indicate a certain resurgence of caste practices in former war-affected areas following the end of war and the cessation of the strict censorship of caste imposed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (e.g., Kuganathan, 2022). There is also evidence that suggests that caste continues to play a role in social, economic and political dynamics affecting access to limited resources such as land, drinking water, employment and political power (Lall, 2015). Difficulties encountered by internally displaced people from disadvantaged caste backgrounds to secure their original land or move to alternative sites include a combination of caste discrimination in the land market, a lack of resources, the inability to influence state policies (Thanges, 2015; Silva, 2020) as well as the denial of access to cemeteries (Wickramasinghe, 2023).

Caste may also seem to be dormant in central and southern regions in Sri Lanka. However, caste continues to play a role in marriage partner selection, land

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tenure, temple rituals, politics, economic relations and the performing arts (Silva, Sivapragasam, and Thanges, 2009; Reed, 2010; Simpson and de Silva, current issue). Despite these facts, caste information is not collected in the state's population census or in any other official social surveys in Sri Lanka, including in official assessments of poverty. This makes it difficult to pinpoint the role of caste as a facet of social and economic discrimination, such as in land ownership, unemployment, migration patterns and access to social services. In the meantime, there has been considerable interest in caste in Sinhala, Sri Lankan Tamil and Malaiyaha (Up-Country) Tamil communities in Sri Lanka, and in dissertation research particularly based in overseas universities (e.g., Räsänen, 2015; Douglas, 2017; Thanges, 2018; Esler, 2019; Balmforth, 2020; Kuganathan, 2021). Against this background and spread out over the coming issues of *CASTE: A Global Journal of Social Exclusion*, this symposium will provide a forum for scholars and social activists to initiate an open discussion about caste in Sri Lanka.

JVP, LTTE and the Articulation of Social Unrest in Sri Lanka

Studies indicate that underneath the apparent disappearance of caste from public life, the resentments of disadvantaged or oppressed caste groups may have played an important role in activist and social unrest movements of the twentieth century, including the JVP uprisings against the state in southern Sri Lanka in 1971 and 1987-1989 as well as in the Tamil insurgency against the state from 1983 to 2009. This is not to say that these movements were exclusively caste-based. The JVP uprising was driven by a mix of ethnonationalist, class and caste grievances to establish a mass political movement against the status quo. The caste rumblings within the JVP were reflected in the non-Goyigama leadership of the movement. The founding leader, Rohana Wijeweera, and many of the national level leaders came from Sinhala coastal castes, with Karawas overrepresented among them. Some of the rank and file in particular localities also came from so-called depressed caste groups such as the Bathgama and Wahumpura, who were excluded by dominant castes from access to land and government employment (Obeyesekere, 1974; Jiggins, 1979; Gunaratne, 2008). The JVP clearly deployed caste while recruiting its cadres at the village level (Jiggins, 1979; Chandraprema, 1991; Ivan, 1993). However, caste was not featured at all in its political campaign and the program of social reform as a political party once it entered the democratic process even after it became the ruling party in the country in 2024. This suggests that despite their egalitarian ethos, caste was instrumentalized rather than genuinely and openly critiqued as an instrument of social injustice and discrimination even among the so-called political left.

Comparisons could be drawn between the way the LTTE and the JVP negotiated caste. As was the case with the JVP, the LTTE mobilized a mix of ethnonationalist, class and caste grievances in launching their struggle against what they perceived to be a Sinhala state. The ethnonationalist agenda was clearly more significant in the LTTE, presenting itself as a national liberation struggle seeking to establish a Tamil homeland and an independent state in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. The leadership of the

LTTE also came from outside the dominant Vellalar caste who controlled established electoral politics in the predominantly Tamil regions of northern and eastern Sri Lanka. The charismatic LTTE leader, V. Prabakaran, came from the Karaiyar caste, the structural equivalent of the Karawa of southern Sri Lanka. We do not have accurate information on the overall composition of the membership of the LTTE, though evidence suggests that a disproportionate number of Tiger cadre were from oppressed caste groups (Räsänen, 2015). This is also confirmed by information on internally displaced people, who remained in camps many years after the end of war (Silva, Sivapragasam, and Thanges, 2009; Silva, 2020). Like the JVP, the LTTE did not center the critique of caste in its political campaigns or internal organization of the movement. However, open discussion about caste was banned in order to deliberately prevent caste from becoming a divisive force within the Tamil nationalist struggle (Räsänen, 2015; Silva, 2020). There were also efforts to promote equality through measures such as recognizing all fallen LTTE cadres, regardless of caste, as war heroes in the cemeteries established by the LTTE (Wickramasinghe, 2023). Like the JVP, the LTTE did not seek to comprehensively deal with caste-based discrimination, for instance in matters such as access to land, services and public sector employment. The LTTE efforts to silence caste talk may have worked during the war when the LTTE was effectively running areas under their control, but caste discrimination was restored in numerous areas once the LTTE was overpowered by the state in 2009. Conflict over access to cemeteries is just one example of the resurgence of caste in the post-war era.

The social unrest articulated by the JVP and LTTE obviously reflects the diverse forms of inequality in the form of caste, class, gender and ethnicity and they cannot be reduced to one dominant form of inequality that overdetermines politics in Sri Lanka. Caste may be hidden or silenced by dominant forces in society but it also triggers social unrest and violent struggles against the status quo. Victor Ivan, who was a key player in the JVP uprising in 1971, once explained that "These uprisings are not purely caste or class struggles. It is more meaningful to analyze them as a curious mixture of both caste and class. I do, however, think that those who joined the movement because they were subjected to caste oppression were the most agitated group in the movement. They were not the leaders or the forerunners of the movement, but a key group of fully committed fighters who suffered heavily as the counter insurgency operations targeted such communities" (1993, p. 120). Both the JVP and the LTTE mobilized widespread resentment in these communities that held local gate keepers from privileged backgrounds responsible for the closure of pathways to upward social mobility such as education and white-collar employment.

The Origins of this Collection

This symposium had its start in long-term conversations between the editorial team at *J-CASTE* and Kalinga Tudor Silva about finding creative ways to expand the journal's collection of Sri Lanka-based research, while at the same time building awareness on the island of the journal and its publishing priorities. Following the Sixth Annual

Conference on the Unfinished Legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar held at Brandeis University in October 2023 and hosted by the *J-CASTE* team, Mark Balmforth was solicited to collaborate with Silva to put together a collection of essays on caste in Sri Lanka. This led to a call for papers released in May 2024 that received more than thirty-five submissions, far more than we could ever reasonably include in the collection. Over the next several issues of *J-CASTE*, we will be releasing a select number of these papers.

Caste in Southern Sri Lanka

Three of the papers published in this symposium deal with caste in Sinhala society in southern Sri Lanka. The first, by Kalinga Tudor Silva, argues for a multispecies approach to caste in Sinhala society. According to his view, the specificity of and challenges for caste must be understood not only in terms of challenges from the angle of social justice and human rights but also in terms of environmental justice and sustainability of caste occupations in the context of limited natural resources. Interspecies dynamics between the endemic cinnamon plant in southwestern Sri Lanka and the Salagamas have developed in response to the demand for Sri Lankan cinnamon from local and colonial rulers from the precolonial era onwards. The demand for cinnamon was high throughout the colonial era and the shift from foraging of wild cinnamon to the domestication of cinnamon stabilized the role and position of the Salagama in Sinhala society despite their ostensibly "foreign" roots in Kerala.

As for the mutually supportive interspecies dynamics, the endemic cinnamon plant enabled the "outsider" Salagama to become an indispensable unit of the Sinhala caste system and facilitated a section of the caste to achieve phenomenal social mobility during the nineteenth century. The cinnamon plant itself survived endangerment caused by indiscriminate foraging following its adoption in smallholder agriculture in southwestern Sri Lanka under the stewardship of the Salagamas. A number of recent developments have however posed new challenges for the mutual coexistence between the plant and the caste. They include challenges for Sri Lankan cinnamon in the global market due to a lack of branding, an absence of quality control and challenges to smallholder agriculture from changes in land use practices caused by urbanization, fragmentation of landholdings and class polarization resulting in the formation of a subaltern group of paid cinnamon workers. Caste and the social history of this industry are completely ignored in the ongoing public and private sector efforts to address these issues through technological and market interventions. How this will play out in social and economic terms is unclear.

The second paper in the symposium is by Bob Simpson and Premakumara de Silva and it explores three types of cultural ambivalence towards and among the drummer caste in southwestern Sri Lanka, drawing on long-term ethnographic study at sites in the Benthara valley in the Western Province and the Nilwala valley in the Southern Province. One type of cultural ambivalence is the attitude towards the caste by society at large. Next, they consider ambivalence towards the drummer caste by the

state, and finally, mixed attitudes towards drumming within the caste itself. Building on prior research by Reed (2010), Simpson and de Silva find that while the Beravas became perceived bearers of cultural legacy epitomizing Sinhala Buddhist heritage, they have a more ambiguous position within the neoliberal framework that came to prominence from 1977. The paper highlights how the drummer caste reacted against resulting ambivalences in the context of radical politics by organizations such as the JVP. Some gave up drumming and dancing altogether, while others took advantage of new opportunities opened up by the tourist economy.

The third essay in the symposium, titled "Recasting the Brahmin," is by Praveen Tilakaratne. The essay illustrates how caste has been hidden in plain sight within Sinhala literature by examining two writings of the doyen Martin Wickramasinghe who hailed from Koggala near Galle town. This essay emphasizes that Sinhala literature privileges ethnicity over caste in the selection of themes, reflecting the broad public silence surrounding caste noted earlier. Tilakaratne states that, "in public culture and literature, however, an air of silence continues to envelope caste. Curious it is, then, that the body of work of perhaps the most prolific and influential Sinhala writer and public intellectual of the last century, Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976), is checkered with references to caste". The two selected works of Wickramasinghe, *Bava Tharanaya* (Crossing the Cycle of Existence) and *Bamunu Kulaye Bindavatima* (Fall of the Brahmin Caste) provide both an epistemic critique and an allegorical narrative of caste. In the view of Tilakaratne, however, this is a useful literary device to sensitize the Sinhala reading public about caste at a time when caste became politically salient in southern Sri Lanka due to the JVP uprising and open discussion about caste using caste names and lived experience was considered inappropriate.

Caste in the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora

An important facet of the continuing vitality of caste in Sri Lankan society is its deployment among members of the Sri Lankan diaspora overseas. This includes the Tamil and Sinhala diasporas in Canada, the USA, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and various countries across Europe. There again, caste has come into play in partner selection, and in diasporic involvement in community activities such as temple construction and social development. In marital partner selection, matrimonial web sites have been established, mechanisms have been developed to secure visas for marriage partners from Sri Lanka and customary arrangements such as marriage ceremonies have been established following appropriate caste practices as revealed in some recent studies (e.g., Maunaguru, 2019). Where caste endogamy is violated, honor killings have been reported, for instance in a well-known 2007 case in the Greater Toronto Area.

Mark P. Whitaker's "Caste, Space, and Retail Religiosity in Tamil Toronto" presents two seemingly contradictory views about caste in Toronto's Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, based on a generation gap. Whitaker finds that members of the generation who emigrated to Canada tend to treat caste as part of an important cultural heritage

that must be preserved in order to sustain Tamil culture in a foreign land. The first generation to be born and raised in Canada, in comparison, is reticent about caste and sees it as an inappropriate transplant that makes it more difficult for Tamils to assimilate within Canadian society. Reflective of the older generation's perspectives, Tamil Hindu temples in Toronto that serve as community cultural centers also deploy caste as part of a cultural heritage that includes Tamil language, culture, and music, and believe it must be preserved in order for this heritage to survive in a foreign environment. While there is an emerging anti-caste opinion in the new generation, open discussion about caste remains limited to bourgeoning activist circles. How these apparent contradictions will be resolved may determine the future of caste in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora.

In summary, these papers highlight that caste remains an important social issue in Sri Lanka as well as in the Sri Lankan diaspora. The prevalent view that caste will naturally disappear over time due to the impact of modernization, globalization and non-recognition of caste by the state is challenged by the evidence presented here. This symposium is a wakeup call to researchers, activists and policy makers to recognize that caste is among us and that we should not be deceived by the prevailing silence about and denial of caste in Sri Lanka and among Sri Lankans overseas.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to express our deep gratitude to Larry Simon, Sukhadeo Thorat, and Vinod Mishra at *J-CASTE* for their support for this project. We also want to extend our thanks to the twenty-plus anonymous reviewers who have provided feedback on more than a dozen papers for this symposium, despite what has been a deeply trying time for both the Sri Lankan and USA based academic community. This symposium is dedicated to the memory of three exemplary Sri Lankan scholars lost during the preparation of this collection: Gananath Obeyesekere, Janaki Jayawardena, and Harshana Rambukwella. May their commitments and our memory of them live on in our work.

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Towards a Multispecies Approach to Caste in Sinhala Society: Interspecies Dynamics between Cinnamon and the Salagama People

Kalinga Tudor Silva[1]

Abstract

This article deploys a multispecies perspective to understand the role of human and non-human actors shaping the Sinhala caste system in Sri Lanka. Apart from human interlocutors, certain animal species (e.g. elephants, cattle and fish) and certain plant species (e.g. cinnamon, coconut and a local palm tree called kitul) are implicated in the natural resource base aligned with the Sinhala caste system. These animal and plant species are part of the natural resource base exploited to produce goods and services for the benefit of each other and some overlords inside or outside the system. The caste system is understood here as a human-made extractive mechanism where humans and other species aligned with them are subjected to hereditary extractions imposed from above. Thus, the Sinhala caste system intersects with both culture and nature, interrogating the culture-nature dichotomy altogether. Using historical analysis and the author's own experience in growing up in a cinnamon smallholder household in southern Sri Lanka, this article explores the multispecies foundation of the Sinhala caste system as it evolved through the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial dynamics. The Salagama caste was initially engaged for foraging of cinnamon that grew in the wild and the Dutch colonial regime shifted from foraging to domestication of cinnamon around 1770 providing Salagama caste a vested interest in this process. The multispecies approach, where interactions among humans and also between humans and non-human species are explored in relation to specific forms of inequality, may open new pathways for overcoming human centrism and Eurocentrism in social analysis and the resulting failures in fostering social and environmental justice. While caste may appear as a naturalized and, at the same time, a culturally prescribed social order for some, it is not so for its victims, humans and non-humans alike. This article begins with a multispecies take on Sinhala caste, using Salagama caste to illustrate the potential of this approach for

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expanding the understanding of caste by exploring its human diversification and natural resource base as well. The interpenetration between culture and nature is one of the systemic features of Sinhala caste that accounts for its stability and vulnerability in given contexts.

Keywords

Sinhala Caste System, Multispecies Approach, Companion Species, Culture and Nature, Salagama Caste

Introduction

Both the protagonists and the antagonists of caste typically approach it from a human relations angle, considering it as a barrier or a pathway to desired human relations.[1] This is understandable as caste revolves around a differentiation of human groups on the basis of some existing categories into which human beings are born or assigned at birth. Human relations within and across castes are certainly a core aspect of any caste system.[2] Leach (1960), for instance, configured caste as a system of organic solidarity unifying all humans where each specialized caste invariably depends on the specialized services of other castes. However, a caste system cannot be identified as an exclusively human affair as some non-human entities such as plants, animals and minerals are also mobilized in hereditary caste occupations. Certain plant and animal species are centrally important for the fulfillment of several caste occupations in Sinhala society. Specific castes in Sinhala society have intimate connections with the natural endowments in local settings. Therefore, the rise or fall of these castes cannot be assessed without considering the vicissitudes of these typically ignored companion species as understood in the multispecies framework. It is important to mention here that humans in the relevant castes have had an intimate knowledge about the distinctive natural resources in the area directly relevant to their hereditary caste

[1]I dedicate this work to late Koronchige Babysingho, my maternal uncle who was my mentor in life in the growing up period. I learnt intricacies of cinnamon work mostly from him. Let me also thank several scholars who provided valuable insights about theory, history and cinnamon industry in general during preparation of this paper. They include Professors C.R, de Silva, Premakumara de Silva, Nirmal Dewasiri, H.M.D.R. Herath, Sarath Amarasinghe, Dr. Mark Balmforth, Dr. Eva Ambos, Mr. Nalaka Jayasena among others.

[2]The term 'caste system' has received multiple criticisms from analysts such as Dirk, Guha and Gupta whose thinking has significantly influenced the current study. The term caste system is blamed for its essentialist tendency, disregard for variation and diversity, attribution of too much stability to caste, and the neglect of internal contradictions in the so-called system. I do agree with these criticisms to some extent. However, we do need to acknowledge the systematic nature of caste in that individual castes are not merely an assemblage or hangovers from the past but interconnected entities that shape human to human as well as human to non-human relations. I argue that caste systems prevail at local levels encompassing inter-caste relations rather than at national or global levels. While I do not claim that there is only one caste system encompassing the Hindu world or South Asia in general, following Mosse (2020) and Ryan (1953) I argue that the systemic nature of caste in interaction with each other must be clearly recognized in dealing with caste as a subject of research and an object of social policy.

occupations. Their knowledge and skills in dealing with appropriate natural resources was an inherent aspect of the caste system encompassing both culture and nature. Further, we should not assume a one-way relationship between humans and these natural resources in determining the directions of history. In other words, animals and plants were an inherent component of human interaction with nature in their shared struggle for survival.

There is an emerging literature on the role of non-human agents in caste dynamics in Sri Lanka. In her ethnographic study of two craft villages in central Sri Lanka, Aimee Douglas (2017) found that the chief raw material used in the artistic Dumbara mat weaving industry in one of these villages, the availability of fibrous hana plant (*Agave cantala*) has declined over the years causing livelihood difficulties for the local Kinnara caste involved in the industry. This is at a time of an upsurge in the tourist industry and a resulting increase in the demand for local craft products. Several factors served to aggravate the scarcity of raw material for this industry. They include the over extraction of hana from their natural habitats, the refusal of the upper caste landlords to permit extraction of hana from their landholdings, their new demand for payment for hana freely extracted for the industry in the past, damage caused to hana habitats by changing land use practices including building constructions, and increased exposure to droughts resulting in habitat reduction. Imported substitute raw materials from China are available in the market and some crafts have resorted to these substitutes in order to continue their production. This has increased production costs and adversely impacted the quality of craft products such as wall hangings, affecting sales to tourists in particular. Another complication noted by Douglas is the refusal by the younger generation to take up the caste occupation or identify with it as a heritage of the community because of the perceived stigma attached to the Kinnara caste and the hana industry imposed upon it by the caste system. This is despite the efforts made by the National Craft Council set up by the state to support such crafts and disseminate the idea that these crafts are an inherent aspect of the valued national heritage of Sri Lanka.

Douglas highlights the challenges to the industry posed by the difficulties in accessing the hana plant:

> ….. the intensification of local road and housing construction in the region surrounding Atwaedagama has resulted in a relative scarcity of *hana,* the raw plant material that village residents have long relied upon for the manufacture of the decorative mats, fly whisks, change purses, and other items ultimately sold on the street and in shops throughout the country. As we have seen, this scarcity has driven those who would use the plant's fibers to either venture further away from Atwaedagama to secure it or, as is increasingly the case, turn to alternative and more readily available materials.
>
> In addition to the inconvenience of having to travel often considerable distances to collect *hana*, many in the village report that, while they were once given free access to the plant wherever they happened upon it, since around 2013 they

> increasingly find themselves having to pay those from whose land they harvest it. Generally speaking, *hana'*s sudden acquisition of exchange value was met with discontent. Many of my interlocutors in Atwaedagama complained about being refused outright or being asked to pay (Douglas, 2017, pp. 226–227).

This account indicates that the youth reluctance to undertake hana work because of status reasons is further complicated by the difficulty of securing hana from the natural habitats where it was freely available in the past. The Kinnara caste was obviously attracted to alternative employment available locally, regionally and internationally against a background of an increasingly unreliable foraging access to the hana plant, a companion species of the Kinnara caste. This in turn points to the fact that in understanding the rise or fall of caste we must not only assess the experience and the view of the relevant groups of humans but also what happens to the relevant species of plants and the natural resource base exploited in the specific caste occupations.

A promising direction for such an approach is pursued by a specifically multispecies essay by Tamara Fernando (2021) on caste and ocean life forms in Mannar, Sri Lanka. Her study examined the relationship between the Parava caste and the pearl industry in British Ceylon. As a fisher caste in South India, the Paravas migrated to the northwestern coastal belt in Sri Lanka mostly for pearl fisheries. Since then, they have operated as an intermediary caste connecting the Tamil and Sinhala caste systems. Conversion of the Paravas to Catholicism facilitated their mediating role and the mobility between South Indian and Sri Lankan littoral for pearl fishing, trade and pilgrimage. In many of these operations the Paravas had close ties with the local Muslim communities who were also active in cross border trade and pearl fisheries. Fernando noted that:

> "for centuries, oysters and other marine creatures including sea cucumbers, rock fish and sharks, lying on the bottom of the shallow gulf had long knit these communities with the state, as they hired out their skills to regional powers" (2021, p. 137).

As a seafaring community the Paravas gradually developed an intimate knowledge of oysters, pearl and the local habitat.

Fernando captures this vividly.

> Since the pearl beds in the Gulf of Mannar are relatively shallow, human and natural geographies of work overlapped. Through the work of diving, fishing communities had intimate, embodied and dynamic knowledge of the oyster at sea. Boys began diving at eight years age, training with relatives and other members of their caste and village. The work of diving was in the body, which encountered the sea visually, physically and into the transition from airborne to waterborne sound, optimizing for vision underwater, equalizing with increasing depth until the pressure inside the ears adjusted to that outside and relaxing the spasms of the diaphragm. The body had to be streamlined to bear

> the weight of the ocean, and the mind quieted as the spleen contracted, blood flow to the extremities decreased and the heart rate slowed in tactile ways. Free diving on reefs involved acclimatizing bodies (2021, pp. 137–138).

Fernando's study found that the pearl industry in Mannar collapsed by early 1900 for unknown reasons. The colonial state tried to revive the industry because of the high value of genuine pearl extracted in Sri Lanka. This included efforts at oyster farming and the application of Western scientific knowledge including marine biology for renovating the industry along capitalist lines, but it was one colonial enterprise that failed. Clearly, the Parava caste with first-hand experience and embedded local knowledge about pearl fisheries was central to the sustenance of the pearl industry in the region. Their embedded local knowledge about animal species in marine waters transmitted through caste lines could not be replaced by colonial scientific knowledge production as discovered by Fernando (2021). Following the downfall of the industry, the Paravas possibly diverted to other engagements such as trade. The study was not designed as a multispecies investigation of the impact of the demise of pearl industry on the Paravas. However, it does appear that as in the case of the Hana industry in central Sri Lanka, the end of the pearl industry may have contributed to a corresponding decline of the Paravas' role in the local social system. This, in turn, points to the potential relevance of a multispecies approach towards understanding the rise and fall of individual castes within a caste system. While providing useful insights for understanding caste from a multispecies perspective, neither Fernando nor Douglas tried to explore the implications of their findings beyond the individual castes subjected to their ethnographic enquiries. Inspired by the current symposium on caste in Sri Lanka, the present study takes a broad-brush approach to a multispecies analysis of caste in Sinhala society exploring cross-cutting multispecies ties among different castes as well as different species that interact with each other. Such an approach is likely to call for further research on the rise or fall of individual castes as well as the overall system changes due to the combined effects of changes in individual castes.

The multispecies approach highlights the need to incorporate human and non-human entities such as animals, plants and fungi in social analysis. Its aim is to understand the complex interactions between humans and other living entities in shaping the world around us. For instance, in multispecies ethnography, the interactions between humans and their non-human counterparts are explored recognizing their agency, mutual impact and interdependence in ways that avoid human centrism in social analysis. The concept of companion species has become important in multispecies accounts of human and non-human interactions. Typically companion species are animal or plant species that are non-human companions of human actors who have established an interpersonal bond with one or more non-human companions as sincere and transformative agents. Donna Haraway who introduced this concept in 2010 applied it to understand the intimate relationship between humans and their pet dogs in Western industrial societies. She identified this unique interspecies relationship markedly different from exploitative capitalist relations in the human world entrenched

in the Western industrial societies, mutually dependent and co-constitutive, namely productive of a shared-self of a kind. She excluded a blind person's dependence on a guide dog from the idea of companion species as it may lack mutual choice.

Extending this approach to human relationship with plants, Tsing (2012) in an essay titled 'Unruly Edges: Mushrooms As Companion Species', argues that symbiosis or mutually beneficial interspecies living as the key driver of this human-plant relationship established through human foraging of specific types of mushrooms such as chanterelles. In this article, I use a similar approach to explore the relationship between the Salagama caste in Sinhala society and the cinnamon plant that initially grew in the wild and was domesticated since the eighteenth century. It is important to point out here that both Haraway and Tsing applied the concept of companion species to describe seemingly non-capitalist interspecies bonds within the capitalist society, the companionship between the Salagamas and the cinnamon plant developed as an extension of the Sinhala caste system generative of permanent bonds among humans as well as between humans and non-human entities who are part of a broader pool of human and natural resources serving the caste system.

The multispecies approach has been successfully applied in Sri Lanka in other related spheres. In a recent study of pilgrimage to Adam's Peak, Alexander McKinley (2024) explored pluralism in this precolonial religious center catering to diverse pilgrims from Sri Lanka and elsewhere as well as a range of non-human visitors in what he referred to as "animal pilgrimage". Its application to caste will be a logical extension to exploring how human and non-human species interact with and mutually constitute each other in a constantly changing world. This is also in line with recent efforts at extending the understanding of the mobilization of caste within both the Hindutva and anti-caste movements in India with the sacred cow and the scavenger pig as rival and coting images deployed to characterize and contest caste identities (Narayanan, 2023). While pursuing a similar analytical framework that factors in the role of human and non-human animal and plant species in understanding caste dynamics, this article calls for a more inclusive systemic approach to examine the linkages between castes in Sinhala society and their ecology of animal and plant species operating as drivers of identity and day-to-day economic and social transactions and an embedded local knowledge about exploitation of natural resources anchored in the caste system.[3]

Objectives of the Study, Methodology and Scope

The current study applies a multispecies approach to understand the dynamics of caste in Sinhala society within a historical perspective encompassing both recorded

[3]Narayanan pays attention to the symbolic significance of cows and pigs in the Hindutva and Dalit political struggles. While the idea of sacred cow and unclean pig are essentially slogans propagated by the Hindu right in their campaign against the Muslims, they have also penetrated into Dalit politics complicating their identity dynamics. In the analysis pursued in the current essay, the role of plants and animals aligned with different castes are examined as entities connected with caste occupations and are of economic, cultural and environmental value, apart from their symbolic value extracted in the political process.

history from precolonial period onwards and an oral history in the postcolonial period captured through an auto ethnography. The specific objectives of the study are to identify and delineate the multispecies dimensions of caste in Sinhala society, and assess the specific role of the cinnamon foraging, cultivation and production in the social history of the Salagama caste in southern Sri Lanka from precolonial to postcolonial periods. A detailed history of the Salagama caste is pursued to understand its dynamic interaction with cinnamon over a long period of time.

This study uses a combination of research strategies to arrive at a multispecies analysis of the Sinhala caste system. First, selected historical and ecological writings relating to the cinnamon industry in Portuguese, Dutch and British periods were consulted. Second, an autoethnography of the researcher derived from growing up in a cinnamon smallholder household in southern Sri Lanka is presented. This household was also engaged in leasing in others' cinnamon land for harvesting purposes. The researcher draws on his personal experience in growing up in a cinnamon smallholder household from birth until 18 years of age, assisting one of his uncles in cinnamon cultivation and production. Along with his uncle and other cinnamon workers, I visited several cinnamon smallholdings in the area for contractual assignments that included harvesting and processing of cinnamon. I was privileged to listen to the oral histories of cinnamon workers and traders. Based on this personal experience that predated his professional training in Sociology, the social history of the Salagama caste is presented through a reflective process to illustrate the interspecies dynamics between the Salagamas and the cinnamon plant.

The article begins with a synoptic multispecies characterization of the Sinhala caste system in general. Second, it gives a brief description of cinnamon foraging by the Chalias from precolonial to the eighteenth century when colonial rule in the country shifted from the Portuguese to the Dutch. Third, it provides a detailed analysis of the transition from foraging to cinnamon cultivation and production by the Chalias or Salagamas as they came to be known following this transition. I examine how this domestication of cinnamon production led to a consolidation of the caste system in Sothern Sri Lanka. Contrary to the experience of Kinnara and Parava castes who continued with foraging with the resulting collapse of the respective caste occupations, the cinnamon cultivation introduced by the Dutch in 1770 not only sustained the cinnamon production, but also stabilized the Salagama caste vis-à-vis other Sinhala castes. Finally, the implications of these findings for establishing a more egalitarian social order in an environmentally sustainable manner are explored in the last section of the paper.

Sinhala Caste System through a Multispecies Framework

The Sinhala caste system is not merely a system of social inclusion and exclusion imposed by humans upon other humans. It is a larger system structuring the relationships among humans and various local plant and animal species implicated in a hereditary network of social, economic and cultural transactions that constituted the

rajakariya service tenure system. Certain mineral resources in local areas such as clay used in the pottery industry were also part of the larger system of exchanges.

Table 1 summarizes the components of this wider network

Table 1: Sinhala Castes and their Use of Natural Resources

Caste	Traditional Occupation	Natural Resource Type	Specific Plant, Animal or Entity Involved
Radala	Aristocracy	Plant/Animals	Paddy (*Oryza sativa*)/elephants (*Elephas maximus*)
Govigama	Farmers	Plant/Animals	Paddycattle (*Bos tarurus)*
Patti	Herdsmen	Plant/Animals	Paddycattle
Karawa	Fishermen	Animals	Fish
Durawa	Toddy makers	Plant	Coconut (*Cocos nusifera*)
Salagama	Cinnamon work	Plant	Cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*)
Hunu	Lime makers (construction material and product used in betel chewing)	Mineral	Limestone
Navandanna	Smiths	Mineral/plant	Iron ore/ Plants used in the Laksha industry
Wahumpura	jaggery makers	Plant	Kitul trees (*Caryota urens*)
Kumbal	Potters	Mineral	Clay
Rada	Washers	Natural resources	Streams/wells
Berakara	Drummers (do not use plants or animals directly. Drums are made by another caste using animal skins)	?	?
Bathgama	Manual workers Farm laborers	Plant/ mineral	Paddy/iron ore
Welladura	Guardians of the bodhi tree	Plant	Srimahabodiya (*Ficus religiosa*)
Pannadura	Elephant handlers	Animals/plant	Elephants/ kitul trees for extracting leaves for feeding elephants
Kinnara	Mat weavers	Plant	Hana
Rodi	Garbage handlers, beggars	Animal/Plant	Elephants/ Making of elephant traps (*madu*), raising of pigs (*Sus scrofa domesticus*)

To situate the Sinhala caste system within a multispecies framework, let me begin with some introductory points.

First, the Sinhala caste system has two parallel and mutually reinforcing components, a human resource component and a natural resource component. Human resource component is made up of the division of humans into different hereditary caste groups performing different duties assigned by the precolonial state, custom and tradition. On the other hand, the Sinhala caste system draws from a whole range

of natural resources needed for performing the relevant caste occupations. They include some endemic tropical plants (e.g. palm trees, cinnamon, hana) and tropical animals (e.g. elephants, cattle and fish) locally available for foraging or production. The local caste groups have developed an embedded contextual knowledge about the identification, extraction and processing of the locally available natural resources needed for their caste occupations. This is however not to say that the caste system has automatically evolved as part of nature but constructed in an extractive manner that enabled the dominant layers in society to benefit disproportionately from the subordinate caste groups with intimate knowledge about the natural resources in the area.[4] This dual extraction from the hereditary caste groups and the localized natural resource base must be seen as an important feature of local caste dynamics. The localized and grounded nature of caste partly stems from its anchorage in a resource extraction pattern encompassing both human and natural resources in a given area (see also Winslow, 2024).

Second, land was a key natural resource utilized by this system. In theory all land inclusive of plants, animals and minerals belonged to the king and he distributed them among different groups according to their specific position in society as determined by the caste system. The land grantees were bound to provide the specified services also defined by the caste system to the state and its assigned agents proportional to the volume of land granted. This resource use plus service extraction system was referred to as the service tenure (rajakariya, literally duty to the king) (Pieris, 1956). There were specified departments of the state, extracting services from castes assigned to deliver these services to the state. For instance, kottal badda,, madige badda and badahala badda for extracting services of the Navandanna, Karawe and potter castes respectively. Thus, the state operationalized, legitimized and benefitted from the caste system in Kandyan and Kotte periods. In contrast to the Hindu caste system with a strong religious foundation as understood by Dumont (1970), the Sinhala caste system had a stronger political foundation, articulated by Ralph Pieris as secularization of caste (Pieris, 1956, p. 193).[5] This, however, does not mean that one is easier to dislodge than the other. Nor does it mean that social hierarchy is more sharply drawn in one than in the other.

Third, with the possible exception of the Govigama caste engaged in paddy cultivation as a fulltime livelihood (hence referred to as Govigama, namely resident farmer community), it is likely that all the other castes were and are foragers to varying extents. For instance, Pannadura captured wild elephants, domesticated them and handed them over to the royal or aristocratic power holders as their symbolic capital and wealth. Similarly, the Wahumpuras foraged for palm (kittul) flowers suitable for tapping. Initially the Salagamas foraged for cinnamon that grew in the wild for

[4]Emerging research on the history of caste-based iron industry elsewhere in Sri Lanka must be recognized as another body of knowledge relating to the natural resource use connected with the caste system. See Juleff, Craddock and Malim (2009).

[5]A comprehensive multispecies analysis of Sri Lanka society is certainly needed but it is outside scope of the current study. A useful pioneering work in this regard is available in McKinley (2024).

supplying the processed cinnamon to the royal family and later colonial rulers. They became cinnamon cultivators since the Dutch period as will be described later. The Govigama caste was entitled for the full complement of services from other castes such as production or repair of agricultural tools (Navandanna caste), farm labour and domestic help (Bathgama caste), pots and pans (Kumbal caste), washing of clothes (Rada caste), supply of jaggery (Wahumpura caste) and the removal of solid waste and dead animals (Rodi caste). Those who provided these services were paid in rice as and when the services were delivered. The Goigama caste, therefore, became the cultivator caste even though other castes too were engaged in farming to varied extents for their own sustenance. In any case the transition from foraging to cultivation has been an important aspect of the stabilization of the Sinhala caste system and the accompanying natural resource utilization pattern. The distinction and inequality between forager castes and cultivator castes is an important feature of the Sinhala caste system yet to be explored in research.

Fourth, castes were not static entities formed in a stable manner over a long period of time. Rather they were constantly changing in response to precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial developments as also argued by scholars like Guha (2013). The Sinhala caste system became a mix of foraging and production that partly accounts for its inconsistent outcomes over time, also well captured in the cartwheel model of Sinhala caste presented by Winslow (2024). These researchers highlight the need to consider regional differences, local politics and identity dimensions as articulated by local actors from different castes. In addition, the multispecies approach brings out the need to factor in the ecological dimensions, the natural resource base and the role of endemic animal and plant species in maintaining or undermining the caste order.

Finally, multispecies dynamics are particularly important in respect of four caste groups in the Western coastal belt in Sri Lanka. They are Karawa, Salagama, Durawa and Hunu castes. Of these, the first three identified by Roberts (1982) as KSD castes, have had parallel trajectories of migration from India to Sri Lanka and getting established in Sri Lanka as different caste formations in Sinhala society. The KSD castes are particularly suitable for a multispecies assessment as Karawas are involved in fishing, Salagamas cinnamon peeling and Durawas making a mild alcoholic drink (toddy) extracting the sap of coconut flowers. Of the three castes, Salagamas were more aligned with Buddhism with a caste occupation free of any negative implications for Buddhism. In contrast, Karawas and Durawas were engaged in rather 'sinful' occupations, taking of life of fish as part of Karawa livelihood and promoting alcohol consumption as done by the Durawas, being violations of two of the five precepts (*pancil)* in Buddhism. This resulted in the conversion of many Karawas from Buddhism to Catholicism during the Portuguese period. On the other hand, Salagama occupation of cinnamon peeling had no clash with Buddhist teachings and this led to their active engagement in Buddhism as reflected in the formation of a new Buddhist monastic chapter called Amarapura Nikaya aligned with the caste in 1800. This article does not go into the history of all the coastal Sinhala castes, but this macro profile is useful for our understanding the larger multispecies context in which the Salagama caste is

located. It must be noted here that the Karawa and Durawa castes catered to the local demand for important consumer goods even though they had an ambivalent position in Buddhism. On the other hand, the Salagamas catered to the international demand for cinnamon, used the revenue made from this avenue for advancing Buddhism and the Buddhist revival in the west coast and, therefore, represented Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in identity politics and inter-caste competition in this important region in Sri Lanka, serving as a gateway to westernization and reactions against it (Malalgoda, 1976; Blackburn, 2010).

Formation of the Salagama Caste

This section examines the evolution of the Salagama caste, focusing on the cinnamon industry and its role in identity formation, social mobility and stabilization of the caste.

Cinnamomum Zeylanicum as an Anchorage of the Salagama Caste

As an immigrant group from India who arrived in Ceylon during the twelfth century, the Chalias (named Salagamas subsequently) did not have a firm grounding in local history or local culture. Their absorption into Sri Lankan society and the Sinhala caste system was a gradual process that was perhaps completed after the 1830s, when they became cinnamon smallholders. Initially, the Chalias established a foothold in Sri Lankan society through their engagement in cinnamon foraging at the request of the local rulers. Their association with the cinnamon plant endemic to Sri Lanka appears to have been their main link to Sri Lankan society at first (De Silva, MU 1993). They were hesitant and protesting participants during the foraging phase because of the difficulties encountered in meeting the excessive demands of the colonial rulers in Ceylon.

Over the years they achieved important milestones in the assimilation process. This included learning the Sinhala language, the transition from cinnamon foraging to cultivation, their formation as a separate caste group engaged in cinnamon work, and the formation of a local knowledge base about the plant and the industry within the caste. These achievements enabled them to connect with the rural economy as well as the local environment. It gave them a stake in local culture and the rural economy simultaneously.

As an endemic local plant that grew in the wild, cinnamon has had a much longer natural history in Ceylon compared to the Salagama caste. Cinnamon indeed cemented its link with Ceylon as a newly established immigrant community.

Invention of Caste in Colonial Ceylon

This section examines how the Salagamas became involved in the cinnamon industry in Sri Lanka. Cinnamon that grew in the wild under lush tropical conditions was one of the greatest attractions of Sri Lanka for the colonizers and the Arab traders before them (Dewasiri, Wagenear and Uyangoda, 2020). Colvin R. de Silva referred to “the lure of

cinnamon" in Ceylon (1953, p. 1). Apart from cinnamon, Ceylon was already famous globally for gems, ivory, pearl and spices. The Portuguesa took over these Indian ocean trades from the Arabs by breaking their long-held monopoly. Ceylonese cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*) was already well established as the best quality cinnamon in the world and the western colonizers competed with each other to establish their own monopolistic control over this commodity.[6]

The royal families in the Kotte kingdom had already mobilized the Chalias of Kerala origin to collect cinnamon in the wild and process it for supplying to visiting traders and earned a significant revenue from this transaction. The Portuguese and subsequently the Dutch quickly seized this business, gained control over the existing production process and the supply chain by overpowering or persuading the local ruling families (De Silva, C.R. 1973, De Silva, M.U. 1993). Working through the existing social hierarchy, the Portuguese took charge of the prevailing cinnamon production process and reaped maximum benefit from it. Locally hereditary social divisions were known as jathi (lit. stemming from birth). The Portuguese referred to it as casta, rendered in English as caste. In either case, it was a somewhat ill-defined epistemic category, referring to birth, hereditary occupation, social network of consanguinity and affinity and much more. This is a clear example of what Dirk (2001) described as colonial invention of caste as a new epistemic category. Subsequent researchers elaborated how this new epistemic category was deployed by colonial rulers to improve imperial governance (Guha, 2013) and expand revenue extraction (O'hanlon, 2017). In this process, colonial rulers formalized and rigidified what existed as a loose local category.

Chalia's engagement with cinnamon appears to have been a historical accident. Having been weavers in India, they had no prior working experience with cinnamon or any similar product. This was a newly formed caste in Ceylon catering to the needs of kingship and subsequently colonial rule. The Sinhala kings assigned cinnamon work to Chalias taking advantage of their immigrant status, lack of assigned land rights at the time and their greater manipulability in terms of the work assigned (Abeysinghe, 1966). They were granted land on condition that they collected wild cinnamon and provided processed cinnamon as a kind of tribute to the king in lieu of the land they occupied under the rajakariya system. In the villages between Kalutara and Matara cinnamon workers were settled, and they were assigned to a revenue administration called Mahabadda responsible for extracting tributary payment in the form of processed cinnamon and they were relieved from routine rajakariya duties and taxes to the state (de Silva, C.R. 1973, 1989). They were also relieved from services to any other castes as they were not 'a service caste' as defined in the local caste hierarchy. On the other hand, they were entitled for services from other castes such as blacksmiths. Any extra cinnamon they produced over and above the stipulated tributary payment,

[6]This was one of the 8 endemic species of cinnamon prevalent in Ceylon at the time (Pathirana and Senaratne 2020). This particular species became popular in the European market because of its flavor, aroma and multiple uses in food preparation, cooking and in various home remedies.

could be sold to the king at a below market price. In contrast, people living along Kalani river engaged in cinnamon production were called Sulubadda (minor revenue administration) were required to sell all the cinnamon they produced to the royal family at prices determined by the latter.

Thus, Chalias themselves were internally differentiated and all cinnamon peelers did not necessarily come from Chalias as other local castes too were mobilized in cinnamon extraction whenever the demand exceeded the capacity of Chalias (de Silva, C.R. 1989; de Silva, M.U 1993). Initially Chalias were not particularly attracted to cinnamon peeling because of its mandatory nature and the difficulties in foraging cinnamon that grew in the wild distributed in a vast area held by different ruling families. Further, their official categorization as slaves by the Portuguese regime did not appeal to Chalias (De Silva, M.U. (1993, p. 87). Collective protests against their heavy workload and what they perceived as excessive colonial demands for processed cinnamon were rather common (de Silva, M.U. 1993, Dewasiri, Wagenear and Uyangoda, 2020). Clearly the ruling elite imposed cinnamon foraging upon them. Interestingly the Portuguese expanded the mandate of caste to include slavery and indiscriminately impose a quantity of cinnamon to be supplied annually by each Chalia male 12 years or older (Dewasiri, Wagenear and Uyangoda, 2020). The Chalias resisted this as far more oppressive than their customary obligations within the Sinhala caste system where services were proportional to the land held from the state and one could end the service obligation by returning the land back to the state. This may be seen as another instance of the colonial invention of caste in a more extractive manner (Dewasiri, 2008; O'hanlon, 2017).

The Chalias resorted to certain new strategies to bypass the colonial extractions. According to Serrao (2014), the amount of cinnamon supplied to the state by the cinnamon peelers increased fivefold between 1590 and 1640. In defiance of the hierarchy, the Salagamas opted to change their caste identity by intermarrying with other castes or changing their names (de Silva MU 1993).

In summary cinnamon foraging was an extractive process resisted by the Chalias. The colonial rulers kept on increasing the target set for Chalias disregarding the limits set by the traditional caste system. The colonial reinvention of caste as a form of slavery added to its oppressive character that in turn evoked contestations by the Chalias.

From Foraging to Domestication

It is in this context the Portuguese were ousted by the Dutch who became new colonial rulers in Ceylon in 1658. The Dutch East India Company had the same motives as the Portuguese for taking over colonial territories and followed many of the same strategies. One important difference, however, was that the Dutch had a greater trust in farming compared to foraging as an economic enterprise. The Dutch were instrumental in promoting cinnamon cultivation in Southern Sri Lanka. In order to retain the Dutch monopoly over the cinnamon industry and trade, three schemes were introduced when

cinnamon cultivation was started (de Silva, Colvin R., 1962). The first was to establish East India Company-owned cinnamon plantations on public land. The second was to allow private persons to establish cinnamon plantations on crown land without land ownership being transferred, on the understanding that all produce will be sold to the state. The third was to allow private individuals to establish cinnamon plantations on their private land on the understanding that all their produce will be sold to the state. The strict laws of the state prevented any cinnamon cultivation outside these schemes clearly demonstrating the monopolistic aims of the state. The Salagamas were involved as cinnamon cultivators and workers under all these schemes. The progress of cinnamon cultivation under these three different schemes were variable with state regulation determining their progress in many instances (Kanapathipillai, 1979). The effort to deploy the rajakariya system in cinnamon cultivation and work was another bottleneck in the system (Dewasiri, 2008; Abeysignhe, 1960; de Silva, M.U. 1993). The colonial state wanted to ensure that there was no overproduction of cinnamon that would push down the price of Sri Lankan cinnamon. On the other hand, cinnamon foraging was continued as and when necessary in order to meet any shortfall in production.

The British colonial rulers did not pay as much attention to the cinnamon industry as was the case in preceding colonial rulers. However, their abolition of rajakariya in 1832 and the decision to open up cinnamon cultivation for smallholders as well as any interested planters removed the heavy state control in the industry since the nineteenth century.

The new system provided incentives for the Salagamas and whoever else who opted to cinnamon as a profit-making enterprise. Caste was mobilized in the entire domestication process as a means of building on available local knowledge about the plant and its harvesting. Often cinnamon was a home garden crop whose fluctuating market prices determined the level of wellbeing of the family. Even a half an acre of cinnamon cultivated and harvested using family labor and own tools provided a decent income.[7] Cinnamon was a versatile crop with processed cinnamons, as well as byproducts such as scrapes (cutta), firewood, cinnamon leaves and cinnamon oil all contributing to family income. The Salagamas played a pioneering role in converting cinnamon to an important cash crop in the rural economy in southwestern Sri Lanka. By the mid nineteenth century much of the cinnamon production in the country came from smallholder sector even though a few large cinnamon plantations owned by local entrepreneurs continued (Moore, 1978).

The Salagamas became intimately connected with cinnamon cultivation and work due to the transition from foraging to domestication. As noted earlier, they were unwilling participants in cinnamon work under the foraging system. As of 1965 this pattern had completely changed and the Salagama engagement with cinnamon had

[7]In an important report on the smallholder cinnamon cultivation in Sri Lanka, Mick Moore (1978) noted that it was too heavily subsidized by the state but it did not necessarily strengthen the industry because of growing competition from other countries who have taken up the cinnamon cultivation on commercial lines.

become an intimate personal and family engagement. The cinnamon work and related knowledge and had become a shared heritage of the group. In the next section I present my personal experience as a young boy growing up in a cinnamon smallholding household.

Personal Experiences with the Cinnamon Industry around 1965

As a perennial crop harvested one to two times a year, many Salagamas became cultivators and owner-operators. Cinnamon was grown in separate plots prepared and dedicated for the purpose or as an undergrowth side by side with existing perennial crops like coconuts, jackfruit, arecanut within the home garden. Tsing characterized plantations "as the engine of European expansion …..that allowed Europeans to take over the world" (2012, p. 148). Unlike plantation crops such as tea, rubber and coconuts introduced by the British on large plantations exclusively planted with the specific crops and worked exclusively by wage labour and owned and managed by the planters, cinnamon was established in smallholdings (usually less than five acres in extent) of Salagama owner-farmers cum cinnamon workers. The volume of production depended on the extent of land under the crop and the number of cinnamon peelers available. The production process was unmechanized with the Salagamas possessing much of the inherited local knowledge relating to the cinnamon industry. Salagamas developed an intimate relationship with and knowledge about the cinnamon plant, its seasonal changes like emergence of tender leaves (*dalla*), appearance of seeds and determination of the optimum time (*talena kale*) to begin the peeling process. The boys were encouraged to take up long-handled knife used for cutting mature cinnamon stems and the mamoty used for weeding cinnamon plots (*kaththe-udalle vada*) at an early age. The Salagama knowledge about cinnamon was through intimate daily engagement with the plant rather than through science as indeed was the case with the Paravar knowledge about oysters and pearl as noted by Fernando (2021). One important difference however was that unlike the Paravas who were employed by others, in the post-independence era the Salagamas were mostly self-employed smallholders with their home gardens converted to cinnamon smallholdings.

The first step in the peeling process was scraping the outer skin of the bark (*ganawa*) using a particular metal tool (*gana kokaththa*) and this activity was done by female household members or younger males. The peeling of the main bark was done by experienced males using a set of traditional tools illustrated in Figure 1.[8] The final product of processed cinnamon quills was made by connecting strips of cinnamon barks and filling them with smaller pieces of cinnamon in a process referred to as quill formation (*handikaranawa*). These vernacular terms signified intimate Salagama knowledge derived from cinnamon work.

[8]These tools were made by the blacksmiths of the Navandanna caste using local designs applicable to local cinnamon plants. In this sense Navandanna caste too was implicated in the multispecies engagement involved in cinnamon production. However, their relation to the cinnamon plant was indirect rather than direct. The cinnamon industry did not determine the life chances of the Navandanna caste to the same extent it impacted on the Salagamas.

The entire process of cinnamon harvesting, peeling and processing, the tool kit used for this purpose and the ways of application of these tools became embodied practical knowledge of the Salagamas. Often the entire family was involved in cinnamon work. Their mannerism, dress code, speech and hands were well adapted to using *gana kaththa* (scraping tool)*, kokaththa* (peeling knife) and *talana polla* (rubbing rod) with a minimum of injuries to the workers and those around them including small children. Their practical knowledge about the cinnamon plant covered a range of subjects including plant growth, optimum time for weeding, manuring, harvesting, pruning, storage, and sun drying of processed cinnamon.

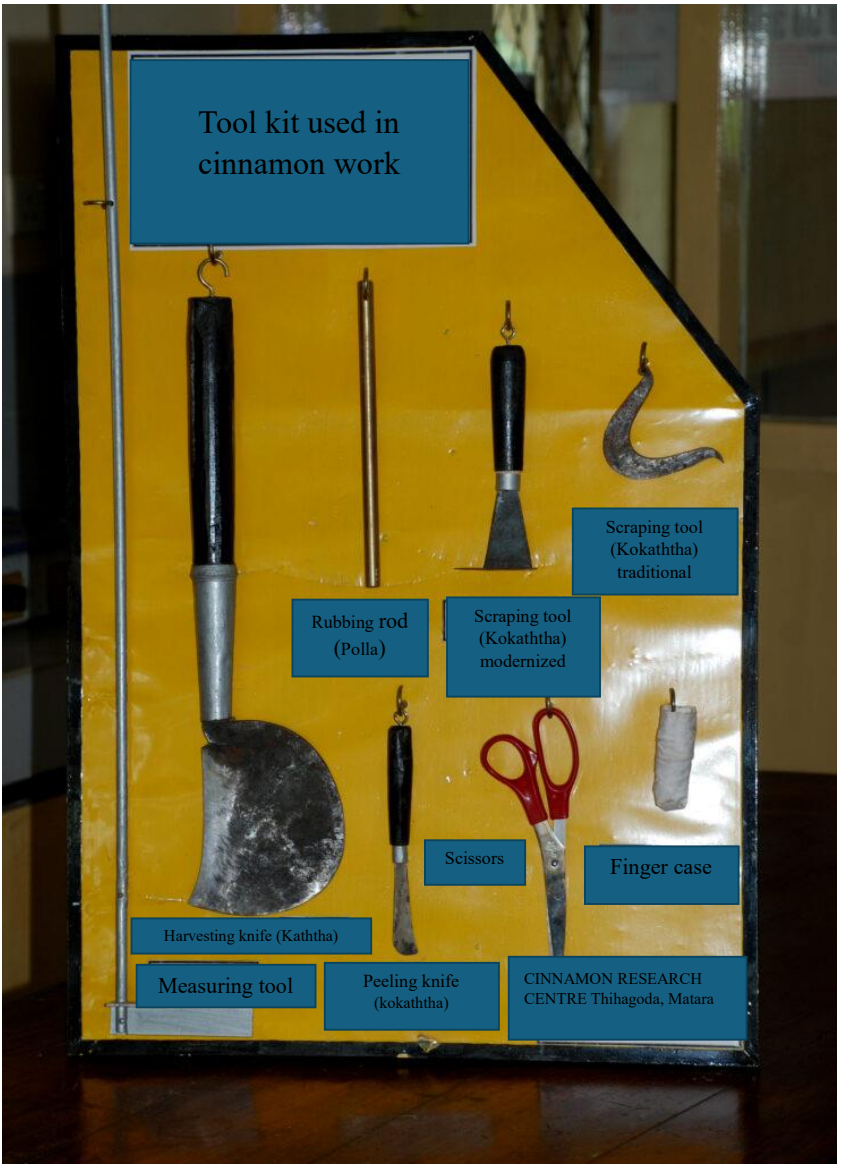

Fig. 1: Tool kit used in cinnamon harvesting and peeling in Sri Lanka

It is important to stress that the Salagama knowledge about cinnamon was not a textbook knowledge about the botany or chemistry of cinnamon. Rather it was an experiential knowledge acquired from their families. It was by no means a secret knowledge but an embedded local knowledge sustained through caste dynamics as also noted by Fernando (2021). Just as much as the tool kit and its application were

Fig. 2: The process of cinnamon peeling

appropriated through kinship and caste lines, the cinnamon industry became a shared vested interest of the caste. For instance, the needs of the cinnamon industry contributed to endogamy within the Salagama caste.[9] In working-class circles male cinnamon workers preferred to marry women with appropriate life skills. Salagama men used to say "what is the use of marrying a woman who cannot even hold a *gana kokaththa* in her palm properly." In any case marriage partners were likely to meet each other within the cinnamon industry because of the way it was organized. In richer circles cinnamon estates were an important element of the dowry for women. For instance, in one famous cinnamon plantation in Kosgoda, the owner had divided into three portions named Lokkige Kalla (eldest daughter's portion), Madduge Kalla (middle daughter's portion) and Poddige Kalla (little one's portion), with the aim of giving them as dowries for his three daughters. Thus, cinnamon cultivation played a significant role in family and kinship dynamics in the Western coastal belt (Gamburd, 2010). While it

[9]In order to prevent cross-caste marriage, the Dutch introduced a law to ban such marriages. This colonial legal intervention, clearly made with a view to keep the number of cinnamon workers intact, had only limited impact. (*Dewasiri, Wagenear and Uyangoda* 2020: 49). This intervention showed that apart from customary laws and kinship norms in place, colonial administration too contributed to the promotion of caste endogamy in some instances purely out of self-interest and the desire to keep the colonial income sources intact.

is true that marriages were not always confined to one's own caste in the congested coastal belt where caste boundaries are porous (De Silva, C.R. and Senewiratne, 2025), we cannot exaggerate this trend because of the pragmatic multispecies considerations that operated (de Silva, M.U., 1993). In the same way the Salagamas safeguarded their cinnamon properties and knowledge about the plant, the industry promoted caste endogamy in an environment otherwise conducive for inter-caste mixing.

Cinnamon as a Companion Species of the Salagamas

From its inception as a Sinhala caste, cinnamon had the potential to become a companion species for the Salagamas.

As a new caste formed by immigrants, Chalias established a foothold in Sinhala society through the endemic cinnamon plant. Their hereditary mission assigned by the Sri Lankan rulers was to look after and harvest this native plant. They became a companion to the Salagamas who held an exclusive right over this plant assigned to them by the precolonial Sri Lankan rulers. However, As Colvin R. de Silva rightly characterized it became 'a privileged servitude' under Portuguese and Dutch rule.

Cinnamon actually became a companion species to the Salagamas as defined by Haraway only after cinnamon was domesticated and the Salagamas took up cinnamon as a smallholder crop in the British period. This cash crop became a primarily home garden crop for the Salagamas who shifted from foraging to cultivation. This was, therefore, an instance of mutual constitution of a plant (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*) and a caste (the Salagamas). The latter saved it from possible extinction if foraging continued uninterrupted. Similarly, the Salagamas were a caste without a clear mandate and a well-defined livelihood as such until they became vanguards of cinnamon domestication.

Another aspect of this companionship is the embedded local knowledge the Salagamas accumulated through cinnamon work year after year. This has contributed to conservation of cinnamon as a tropical plant and indirectly maintaining Salagama caste as part of the Sinhala caste system. Unlike in the case of pearl fisheries in British Ceylon, Western scientific knowledge was not applied displacing the caste-based embedded local knowledge in order to maintain the cinnamon industry and this has contributed to the preservation of the cinnamon industry until now.

Cinnamon as a Pathway for Upward Social Mobility

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the Salagamas relied heavily on cinnamon income in moving up the social ladder. They pursued three related avenues of upward social mobility from the cinnamon smallholder level. The first was the built-up of incomes from the cinnamon industry by expanding one's scale of operations by purchasing or leasing in cinnamon lands from others. Often this served to enhance and stabilize cinnamon incomes. They, however, quickly realized that income from

cinnamon was somewhat unpredictable because of price instability in the market. Many Salagama families invested in the education of their children as a second and more attractive pathway for social mobility. The more successful members of these families entered professions such as medicine, law, engineering, Ceylon administrative service and politics. These positions served to enhance the power, influence and prestige of the relevant families and the overall position of the caste in relation to other local castes. The educational achievements and related gains in professional careers were cumulative, gains made in one generation often superseded in the subsequent generations. Third, a few Salagama families invested in private sector enterprises such as new industries and services. Sir Cyril de Zoysa who set up a private bus company and established Kalutara Bodiya as a philanthropic activity is one such example. In all these instances, income from cinnamon provided the seed money for subsequent investments. In other words, with a lucrative income from cinnamon, the Salagamas had a head start in the social mobility process during colonial and post-colonial periods.

As a combined outcome of these developments the Salagama caste developed an aristocratic layer during the nineteenth century.

From Slavery to Aristocracy

Salagama caste was eager to monopolize cinnamon production within its ranks because of the premium attached to Ceylonese cinnamon in the international market and the cash flow that enabled a process of upward social mobility. Many rich Salagama lineages along the west coast who made money from the cinnamon industry and gained power through education and positions reein colonial administration, gradually acquired an aristocratic lifestyle modelled after the landed Radala aristocracy in Kandyan areas. As many as 10 aristocratic mansions (walawwas) had been established in the Balapitiya region alone. For instance, the famous Mahakappina Walawwa in Balapitiya. Even though Chalias resisted the slavery-like cinnamon foraging imposed upon them by the colonial powers in the early period, the pattern was completely changed after domestication of cinnamon and a free market for cinnamon was gradually established

The so-called aristocratic layer of the Salagama caste gradually became an exclusive group within the caste along the lines of Pelanthiya formation described by Obeyesekere (1967) in a different context. Distinguishing themselves from Kurundukara cinnamon workers, the aristocratic layer presented themselves as a category of cinnamon planters detached from cinnamon work. They were also instrumental in setting up some rich Buddhist temples in the area and the formation of the Amarapura Nikaya. They presented themselves as an exclusive group not eager to mix with the ordinary members of the caste. Their decline started in the 1940s or so due to a combination of factors including the economic downturn in the cinnamon industry, unsustainable expenditure patterns and the migration of the better off sections of this group to Colombo and other cities.

Emerging Challenges for the Cinnamon Industry and Remedies Pursued

Upward mobility through cinnamon cultivation, however, was only part of the story. By the post-independence period, the local cinnamon industry faced a variety of problems stemming from the global market, production processes in Sri Lanka and the socio-economic issues among cinnamon workers.

At the global market level, falling cinnamon prices, demand for improved quality, use of cheaper substitutes and new suppliers in the market were challenges faced by the Sri Lankan cinnamon industry. This may be attributed to the system of smallholder agriculture connected with the cinnamon industry. Similarly, quality control of produce may not be feasible with the caste-based system of production that operates within the framework of the family and the household.

As for the system of cinnamon production, shortage of cinnamon workers as well as shortage of land under cinnamon cultivation had become serious problems by the 1970s. The shortage of cinnamon workers may be due to issues such as poor income and low dignity connected with caste occupations in general (Douglas, 2017, Reed, 2010). Shortage of land under cinnamon cultivation may be due to changing land use practices, urbanization, building constructions and subdivision of cinnamon landholdings due to inheritance. While smallholder agriculture received a new lease of life after independence, public sector investments concentrated on irrigated rice cultivation to the relative neglect of other crops like cinnamon (Moore, 1985; Farmer, 1957). Some of the local cinnamon species are identified as endangered or seriously endangered species due to due to indiscriminate harvesting of cinnamon and deforestation over a long period of time (Pathirana and Senaratne, 2020).

A number of social issues also cropped up among the impoverished cinnamon workers by the 1970s. They included indebtedness, widespread gambling, alcoholism, drugs, crime, gang activity and violence. These problems were entrenched in certain Salagama communities. Many cinnamon workers were dependent entirely on wage labor moving from one cinnamon plantation to another in search of work, living and working as families in temporary cinnamon sheds (*kurundu vaḍi*). Arrangements like weekly advance wages (*sumana kasi*) provided by the employers as well as securing daily necessities from local stores on credit were aspects of the peripatetic existence of these cinnamon workers. Entering radical politics, some joined the JVP uprising in 1971 and 1987. Problems associated with the cinnamon industry may have contributed to these processes in so far as cinnamon did not guarantee a secure livelihood to a significant number of cinnamon workers who were trapped in a downward spiral of social mobility. In the same way cinnamon contributed to the formation of an aristocratic layer in Salagama caste during the nineteenth century, the same cinnamon industry also produced an impoverished layer who lived a hand to mouth existence dependent on better off segments of society.

The remedies for these problems came from the Department of Export Agriculture (DEA), private sector agencies representing cinnamon growers, traders and exporters

like the Cinnamon Association (CA) and the Spice Council (TSC) and newly established public-private partnerships like the Cinnamon Training Academy (CTA). The DEA introduced measures such as replanting of cinnamon and the introduction of cinnamon cultivation to marginal tea and rubber lands. CA and TSC took steps to improve quality control of cinnamon and branding of cinnamon exports as pure Ceylon cinnamon in line with pure Ceylon tea. CTA initiated by some entrepreneurs with a family history in cinnamon cultivation with their base in Kosgoda at the heart of the cinnamon belt introduced some certified training courses for cinnamon workers with a view to improve the quality of their output and also attract youth to the cinnamon industry. None of these interventions sought to address the caste background of cinnamon workers with the possible exception of CTA which tried to promote the dignity of labour among its trainees. The whole issue of the traditional knowledge base of the Salagama caste had been completely ignored in the effort to improve quality and replace it with scientific knowledge.

Conclusions

In this essay initially, we approached the Salagama caste from a historical viewpoint to identify how it was established in Ceylon from precolonial era onwards as an addendum to the Sinhala caste system. The founders of the Salagama caste were Chalias who migrated from India way back in the twelfth century. Their adaptation to Sri Lanka society was facilitated by their assigned role in foraging cinnamon that grew in the wild. Cinnamon had already become an important commodity in international trade and it was indeed this much sought-after product of the tropics that attracted the colonial rulers to Ceylon already reputed as the source of the best quality cinnamon in the world. The nexus between cinnamon and colonialism was an important reason for the companionship between the Salagama caste and cinnamon established over roughly a millennium. Over this long period, this companionship survived despite challenges it faced from time to time. The partnerships between the Salagamas and cinnamon became closer in the aftermath of the domestication of cinnamon as the Salagamas became growers and workers of cinnamon. As we have seen this led to a stabilization of the Salagama caste as well as the cinnamon industry which depended on each other.

In the second part of this essay we examined the living reality of the Salagama cinnamon workers in southern Sri Lanka employing an auto-ethnographic perspective. The Chalias who did not have a strong foothold in Sri Lanka as a new immigrant group from India secured a firm position as they became connected with the endemic cinnamon plant long established as a valuable natural resource and an important revenue generator in Ceylon. Cinnamon was important for the Salagamas in their identity formation, family and kinship dynamics as well as patterns of social mobility. On their part, the Salagamas contributed to sustaining the endemic cinnamon species endangered due to over harvesting and changing land use practices in a variety of ways.

First, the Salagamas established an embedded local knowledge about the plant that facilitated the transition from foraging to domestication. Second, an important aspect of this local knowledge has been the development of an effective tool kit for cinnamon peeling. Third, the Salagamas played a significant role in the development of cinnamon smallholder agriculture along the western coastal belt well adapted to the local ecosystems. Finally, these processes jointly contributed to the sustenance of *Cinnamomum zeylanicum* as a tropical plant species despite numerous challenges it faced due to colonial extractions, indiscriminate foraging and changing land use practices.

This is however not to say that all is well with the cinnamon industry and the Sinhala caste system within which it is located. We found multiple issues relating to the quality of its output, which also affects the market prices and income from the industry. The survival of the plant itself has become problematic due to urbanization and related changes in land use practices. The rapid impoverishment of cinnamon peelers and their engagement in crime, alcoholism, drugs and violence is another serious challenge faced by the local cinnamon industry and the Salagama caste historically connected with the industry.

A range of remedies have been identified and pursued by the public sector and public-private partnerships responding to these issues. These remedies draw heavily from commercialization, training of cinnamon workers, replanting of cinnamon and value addition to raw cinnamon. They may or may not be effective in addressing the serious challenges faced by the industry. Two shortcomings evident is the lack of a solid understanding of the history of the industry and its strong connections with the caste system as discussed in this essay. We do agree that caste may not provide the way forward from the angle of upgrading the industry or developing a suitable policy for its future. Nevertheless we think that a realistic assessment of its current status and challenges and opportunities must situate it within its colonial history, tropical context and the caste system and must seek ways and means of taking advantage of its historical legacies and liberating it from the constraints imposed by the very same setting inclusive of the caste system.

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Cultural Ambivalence: A Socio-Historical Account of the Berava Caste of Southern Sri Lanka

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Abstract

One of the essential features of the caste systems of South Asia is its link with occupational activity. In the Sri Lankan caste system, which evolved out a system of feudal service tenures linked to royal courts and Buddhist temples, the link with occupation is particularly strong. In this chapter we focus on the Berava or drummer caste with particular reference to southern Sri Lanka. Within the traditional social order, the Berava, on account of their occupational identity, have been given a lowly position and have suffered much discrimination and opprobrium. Yet, members of this caste have played a key role in the performance of rituals in which drumming is required. Based on historical and ethnographic evidence we offer an account of the ambivalent relationship between caste, ritual knowledge, performance and nationalism as it has changed over time.

Keywords

Caste, Caste Discrimination, Traditions, Social and Cultural Change, Ethnicity, Nationalism

Introduction

This article is based on the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in southern Sri Lanka by the authors among members of the Berava or drummer caste. Carried out between the late 1970's and the mid-1990's, De Silva's fieldwork took place in and around Bentara during the mid-1990s among Berava communities in the Bantara River valley and focused on their ritual practices (de Silva, 2000). Simpson's doctoral fieldwork was done between 1979-80 among Berava communities in villages and hamlets in the Nilwala valley north of Galle. His completed thesis described how ritual knowledge and skills were passed back and forth between Berava families. In short, both researchers

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immersed themselves in the traditions of ritual knowledge and skill that were, at that time, the rich inheritance of these communities. The label 'Berava' associates the caste with the hereditary occupation of drumming but the families that we came to know were adept at a wide range of skilled and creative cultural activities including dancing, astrology, mask-making, creating ritual structures out of plant materials [*gok kalāva*], and making images of deities [*deva*] and demons [*yakā* or *yakku*] out of mud [*rūpa*] for various rituals as well as statues for Buddhist temples. They were also in command of a significant oral tradition of poems and incantations that enabled men from the caste to perform rituals and ceremonies to bring relief and protection to those facing the inexorable facts of death, decay and disorder. Yet, despite their extraordinary talents and skills, there seemed to be something of a contradiction in place. Whilst their daily work placed them at the heart of ritual and artistic production across the island, members of the caste occupied a lowly place in the caste hierarchy of Sinhalese society and, accordingly, were subject to the oppression and opprobrium that comes with this status.[1] Indeed, the drum, the essential symbol of their oppression, figures in almost all ritual that takes place in Sri Lankan society. Without the drum there can be no ritual or ceremony. Our main objective in this article is to explore the social, political and economic drivers that underpin the contradictory juxtaposition of valorization and opprobrium experienced by the caste. In the final section of the article, we bring this contradiction up to date, so to speak, with a brief reflection on the more recent situation of members of the Berava caste.

Our way into the contradiction is via the concept of ambivalence. The term refers to a state in which strong but conflicting reactions, feelings, beliefs and attitudes are held simultaneously.[2] Ambivalence is clearly an attitude that is experienced but it is also one that is felt towards someone or something. It is this relational aspect of ambivalence that we are keen to explore in our account—ambivalence towards what, felt by whom and for what reason? We focus on ambivalence in three sets of relations: society towards the Berava; the state towards the Berava and the Berava towards their own traditional inheritance. A further concept we would like to weave into the account is that of temporality. Ambivalence is not a static state but one that is finely tuned to the kaleidoscope of historical circumstance. The sources and constituents of ambivalence shift as different social and political realities have to be negotiated. In our account, we have tried to keep attuned to the wider landscapes in which day-to-day social and cultural life play out.

The period covered by our research was approximately 1978-1995. This was a tumultuous period in Sri Lankan history but, arguably, no less tumultuous than the periods that immediately preceded or followed it. In 1977, J.R Jayawardene was elected President following a landslide victory for the United National Party (UNP). With a strong mandate and little by way of opposition he embarked on a neoliberal transformation of the nation. Beneath a thin veneer of Buddhist morality and an

[1]This contradiction has been highlighted by numerous commentators, for example Kapferer, 1983, p. 54; Reed, 2010, p. 169; and Esler, 2024, p. 386.

[2]Word derives from Latin ambi- 'on both sides' and valentia 'strength'.

attempt to create a righteous, that is, a 'Dharmista' society, lay a solid core of self-interested entrepreneurship and wealth creation based on open and unregulated markets. By the early 1980s, portents of trouble ahead were beginning to appear for the Jayawardene regime. The economic miracles promised did not materialize for the rural masses of the country. Disquiet was also fomenting among the Tamil community. The government's response to both expressions of discontent was one of growing authoritarianism. In 1983, a period of serious instability began following the alleged rape of three Tamil schoolgirls in Jaffna by Sri Lankan soldiers. This was followed by the killing of thirteen Sri Lankan soldiers by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which triggered a pogrom in July 1983, which left up to 3000 Tamils dead and 150,000 displaced (Piyadasa, 1984). Growing instability in one of its closest neighbors led the Indian government to coerce the Sri Lankan government into accepting an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in 1987. The intervention proved to be disastrous, and the region descended into all-out war. After heavy losses, the IPKF withdrew in 1990. The imposition of the IPKF and the violation of Sri Lankan sovereignty that this was seen to represent proved to be a powerful recruiting tool for the socialist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The JVP, routed during their 1971 uprising, had re-emerged as a nationalist movement appealing to rural and disenfranchised youth and championing Buddhism and Sinhala patriotism. Many young people joined the JVP in their campaign of strikes, disruption and guerilla warfare. The JVP took on the mantle of protectors and liberators of the 'motherland' and the saviors of Sinhala culture. However, as their campaign to overthrow the state gathered momentum, their methods became more violent and indiscriminate. This aspect of their strategy played an important role in the downfall of the second JVP insurrection (1987-89). The response of the state was swift and brutal and amidst a catastrophic loss of life the insurrection was brought to an end.

The liberalization of the economy under the right wing United National Party, the opening up of the economy to global capitalist forces, and other factors exacerbated crises of social and political control for the government. The escalation of civil war between the government of Sri Lanka and separatist Tamil Tigers paved the way to a deepening of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist sentiment. Furthermore, the post-liberalization period removed many of the barriers that kept the country in a situation of relative isolation from global social, cultural, political, and economic processes. Elections in 1994 saw the Peoples' Alliance (led by the SLFP) come to power, pledging an end to the war and a negotiated peace with the separatist LTTE, a commitment to clean, transparent and democratic governance, and advocacy of pro-poor economic policies. In the political sphere, it may even have outdone its predecessor in election-rigging and political corruption. It soon became clear that the pro-war lobby was powerful enough to ensure no concessions were made that could have led to negotiations for peace. By the end of the period that we cover in this article there was a seemingly irresistible downward slide into chronic and protracted political, economic and social crises.

The bigger historical picture is important for the account we develop below. On the one hand, these events had a significant impact on the ritual practices of the Berava.

For example, de Silva points out that there has been a strong current of opinion which argues that the breakdown of kinship and village-based social organization, including caste, entails a concomitant decline in ritual performance (for example, see Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988). De Silva (2000), on the contrary, argues that rituals have not declined but instead have changed their goals and orientations. Indeed, he found that, among the Berava, a remarkable resilience was evident, notwithstanding the intrusion of neoliberal forces into Sri Lankan society following the opening up of the economy in 1978. Although these forces have undermined some aspects of communal and caste-based healing rituals, an active sense of cultural nationalism has worked to preserve 'traditions' and has even acted as a counter to the local impacts of global forces. So, on the one hand, healing rituals [*tovil*], have been drastically scaled down and privatized, on the other, they have emerged as self-conscious, cultural markers of national heritage and are regularly incorporated into cultural shows for mass audiences (de Silva, 2000). Simpson describes a similar transformation because of the banning of large gatherings during the 1980s insurrection. During this time, public healing rituals came under this ban and consequently were replaced by smaller scale ones carried out indoors and with fewer personnel (Simpson, 1997). Like de Silva, he also notes that the ritual practices of the Berava and other similar groups such as the Navandanno [blacksmiths], because of the caste's connection with the past, have played a significant role in cultural politics nationally. In short, in the period in the run-up to independence and thereafter, the cultural capital of the Berava acquired a strategic significance. At various points, performance and performers deemed 'traditional' have been valorized as representing a link with an authentic, pre-colonial past and as such used as a reference point for contemporary Sinhala national identity.[3] As we show in the section dealing with the ambivalence of members of the Berava caste towards their own heritage, the tension has been resolved for recent generations by a growing detachment from their own traditions. For them, the detachment provides a route to caste anonymity and the social mobility that this allows.

Ambivalence I: Society towards the Berava

The Sinhalese caste system has proved something of a puzzle for scholars of South Asia society and culture.[4] Unlike its Indian counterpart, there are no Brahmin or Kshatriya castes and it does not carry the same rigidity around ideas of purity and pollution. It also differs in that the most elevated caste, the Goyigama, or farmer caste is also the largest in numerical terms. Below the Goyigama are a cluster of smaller, service castes who are ranked below the Goyigamas in the Sinhala caste hierarchy. The social and economic marginality of the service castes was often reinforced by numerous social proscriptions and markers. For example: they were frequently without hereditary

[3]In his account of cultural intimacy, Herzfeld (1997) makes a similar point: Marginals are often subject to a profound ambivalence. On the one hand they are celebrated as a pure expression of an authentic identity but on the other they are denigrated because they fail to satisfy modern expectations regarding values and behaviour.

[4]For an interesting discussion and overview on caste research in Sri Lanka see Esler, 2024.

land title, had to follow a system of caste-specific family and personal names, had unavoidable service obligations towards higher status groups, faced restrictions on dress and appearance and were subject to subtle patterns of deference and demeanor in their day-to-day inter-caste social interaction. Estimates of the numbers who identify as members of the various service castes are notoriously difficult to arrive at. Caste as a category has not been identified in censuses since 1911 and anti-discrimination legislation over the decades has rendered caste even more demographically opaque (Silva et al., 2009). Based on the limited data available to them, Silva, Sivapragasam & Thanges estimated that about 20 to 30 per cent people in Sri Lanka are victims of caste-based discrimination which may serve as a rough proxy for the overall proportion of service castes present in Sri Lanka. Among these castes, the Berava are considered one of the lowest ranked and are one of the most numerous. In the southern part of the island, however, they constitute a small fraction of the total caste-identified population (Ryan, 1953, p. 291). More recently, Kapferer notes that in both urban and rural Sri Lanka, the Berava are viewed by other castes as close to the bottom of the caste order (1983, pp. 38-48). Their low rank is generally related to the nature of their ritual duties. A reason often cited by non-Berava people as a justification for the caste being positioned in the lower orders of society was that Berava men's hereditary occupation of drumming at rituals and ceremonies brought them into routine contact with the skins of dead animals on their drums. Killing animals is abhorred within mainstream Buddhism and by extension, handling the products of this act are linked by some Buddhists with impurity on the one hand and impiety on the other. Their status is also linked to their role as providing ritual services to most of the other castes. These duties typically bring Berava ritualists and their families into contact with lower beings in the cosmic order such as demons and spirits [*yaksha* and *bhuta*] which further reinforces the low status of the caste.[5] The logic underpinning this association is to be found in the hierarchical ordering of the Buddhist pantheon. The system operates according to jurisdictions (*varama*) held by gods over cosmic territories. These gods then bestow power on lesser deities and demons. As Obeyesekere has argued, this vision of the cosmic order serves as a model of, and a model for, the social organization of Lankan kingdoms (Obeyesekere, 1984). Throughout history, distinct caste groups were formed in accordance with the sort of ritual and other services they provided in royal and religious ceremonials as well as domestic rites. In addition to the Berava, the main service castes still found in the south of Sri Lanka today are as follows: metalworkers (Navandanno), lime burners (Hunu), palanquin bearers (Batgama), potters (Badahalla), washermen (Hena or Rada) and jaggery makers (Vahumpura).

Today, some of the ancient structures of feudal social organization are still evident. Historically, Sinhala Buddhist-dominated Sri Lanka fell into three culturally distinct regions: The 'upcountry' or Uda Rata, embraces the traditions of the central province; the 'low-country' or Pahata Rata, includes the traditions of the districts of Galle, Matara and Hambantota in the southern province, and the Sabaragamuwa tradition refers to the

[5]The use of the term 'low' here is in keeping with the terminology in common usage in Sinhala Buddhist society, that is, they are referred to as an *adu kulaya*.

arts developed in the central western region of Sri Lanka. In the history of Sri Lanka these regions emerged as ancient kingdoms and later provided the boundaries of the district authorities of the colonial administrations. The Berava caste communities in these regions have also developed distinct drumming and dancing traditions which are recognized through their ritual costumes as well as their technique, style and rhythm when performing (also see Sykes, 2018). These different traditions continue to provide important vehicles for regional identities in the present day. Indeed, the role of Berava men as performers in these areas continues to be important. Ancient patron/client structures of duties and loyalties have more recently been replaced by ones with local political elites and their strategic appeals to cultural heritage and its preservation.

Broadly speaking, Berava in their role as drummers fall into two categories: ritual drummers and funeral drummers. Ritual drummers could inherit land and sometimes be engaged in paddy cultivation as well as ritual service. From father to son, this traditional legacy has been passed down across the generations [*paramparāva*]. These drummers gave their services to temples, deity shrines and at communal rituals. Stylized bodily movements of the dancers are rhythmically controlled by the beat of the drum. The rhythmic harmony of the act is essential to the performance (Sykes, 2018). On certain ritual occasions, for example in Buddhist temples, the drums are beat without the accompaniment of dance. However, dance cannot be performed without the beating of the drums. The Berava provide the offerings of sound [*sabda pujā*] and dance in temple rituals and village rites. An important duty for Berava drummers and dancers is to participate in the large ceremonial processions in which sacred regalia are paraded [*perahera*]. As Seneviratne points out, even in the midst of this duty their status vis-a-vis other castes is made public:

> The very act of dancing in front of someone in certain contexts, of which the Perahera is one, places the dancers in a low position and the recipient of dance in a high position. This inequality is enhanced by the dancers worshipping the radala authorities every now and then in the moving Perahera, throughout its entire course. Further, during most of this course, the dancers also perform the remarkable feat of walking backwards from time to time, as much as they could while doing their dance too, another sign of honor accorded to a high-status person to whom one does not turn one's back. (1978, p. 151).

Unlike ritual drummers, the section of the Berava community involved with funeral drumming [*mala bera*] did not inherit land. Their association with the polluting effects of death and disposal marked them out as inferior, even within the caste. Whilst this hierarchical distinction was upheld inside the caste and ritual drummers would never undertake funeral drumming, it was of no consequence to outsiders. All Berava were seen as inferior by outsiders. The occupational identity of the Berava as the part of society where drummers are to be found is strong. By the time we carried out our fieldwork, many Berava men had never touched a drum. Nonetheless, the stigma attached to their profession, for both men and women, has persisted.

For several older Berava people that we worked with, the memories of caste oppression were still strong. Stories of exclusion, abuse and intimidation were common. By the time Simpson carried out his fieldwork in 1979, the most visible manifestations of caste prejudice had been greatly ameliorated through social and political activism. Berava men could now go about in public with their upper bodies covered and educational exclusion was mostly a thing of the past.[6] However, humiliating traces of caste prejudice were still in evidence. Rules that set the community apart such as prohibitions on marriage outside a person's caste or rules about who could sit together at a table to eat were still strongly observed. There was also the use of the 'half chair' [*putuva bāgaya*], a chair produced, as if from nowhere, on occasions when a Berava man visited the house of a Goyigama family. When all were seated, the Berava man would be head and shoulders below everyone else—but at least they had progressed from merely having to stand when in company. There were numerous occasions when out in public with his Berava associates Simpson also attracted opprobrium. Did he not realize that these people were low and 'dirty' [*kilutuyi*] and he shouldn't be fraternizing with them? What might appear to an outsider as a flat and featureless social landscape was in fact filled with clues about status that often translated into appalling acts of prejudice.

De Silva also witnessed caste-based discrimination against Berava people in the Bentara area. For example, members of the caste were often in dispute with the politically and numerically dominant Goyigama caste. One contentious issue was that of schooling. A major grievance was that antagonism from other castes caused Berava children to leave school earlier than they otherwise would have done. In response, members of the caste started their own primary school with the help of a Berava man with good connections to national political parties. Similarly, members of the caste were forced to have their own temple because of high caste control of the existing village temple.

Yet, despite evidence of sustained caste prejudice, the role of the Berava in the areas in which they lived was one that was valued when it came to the services that men of the caste provided. For example, in the event of illness or misfortune for which supernatural forces are believed to be responsible, family members would approach a local ritual specialist, typically of the Berava caste. They would visit their houses, drink their tea and eat their biscuits and be polite and solicitous. Where a healing ceremony [*tovil*] was the resulting prescription, a troupe of dancers and drummers [*kandāyama*] would later attend the house where the patient [*āturaya*] lived and the performers would be treated to food, drink and generally welcomed into the home. Social etiquette would be observed on these occasions, but the hosts would go to some

[6]The 'Battle of the Banian' is a now famous incident in which there was a violent confrontation between Goyigamas and Berava men over their children's right to wear vests in public. Ryan reports events taking place near Tangalle in 1949 (Ryan, 1953, pp. 292–293). Simpson's informants described similar events taking place in the 1960s, again sparked when a Berava child was assaulted in the street for going to school wearing a vest. S.A. Wickremasinghe, then Communist Party MP for Akuressa, was reported to have physically intervened in the confrontation and persuaded the Goyigama groups that their prejudices were unfair and unfounded.

lengths to ensure that their guests, although beneath them in the caste hierarchy, were not offended or slighted in any way. One reason for this apparent putting aside of caste concerns was the fact that those who had come to repel misfortune and its agents were also capable of doing the opposite. Their knowledge of sorcery and other nefarious techniques made them feared for the harm they might do if offended.

Ambivalence II: The State towards the Berava

In her book *Dance and the Nation: Performance Ritual and Politics in Sri Lanka* [2010] Susan Reed documents how the Kohomba Kankariya ritual was transformed from a small-scale village celebration of local deities into an ubiquitous and essential expression of Sinhalese national identity. Over the centuries the Kohomba Kankariya has served a range of functions: healing ritual, a way to fulfil a vow, an agricultural rite or simply fostering forgiveness and community solidarity. Crucially, the Kohomba Kankariya is associated with the up-country or Kandyan dance tradition. In the early twentieth century, Kohomba Kankariya dancers and drummers began to feature in the rituals that center on the Temple of the Tooth and as a part of the Esala Perahera procession (Reed, 2010, p. 99). Reed demonstrates how in the post-colonial period Kandyan dance became entwined with the political project of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. A critical moment in this development was SWRD Bandaranike's election in 1956. His success lay in his appeal to the Sinhala majority and the promise of a revitalization of the religion, culture and values that had atrophied under centuries of colonial rule. From this point onward there emerged a sense that Sinhala culture was unique and in need of protection. One of the first moves in this direction was the establishment of a Ministry of Cultural Affairs in 1956. According to Mantillake (2022), the dances drawn from the different dance traditions of the island became part of the national curriculum in schools in the 1950s. He identifies the Berava dancer and drummer Pani Bharata as playing a significant role in creating an entire repertoire of dances that reinforced an emerging sense of Sinhala national identity. Although presented as authentic and pre-colonial, Mantilleke argues that these dances, which celebrated everyday village activities, are largely invented and were formulated in the ferment of cultural revival that followed independence. These shifts in cultural policy had wide-ranging consequences for performers and their modes of performance. Put simply, healing rituals performed by hereditary Berava specialists became increasingly oriented toward heritage and exhibition delivered by middle-class, non-Berava elites. Reed also documents other critical transformations. The dynamic variability of dance traditions became increasingly standardized and prescribed as a result of textbooks, manuals and exams. Performers from the Berava caste were gradually squeezed out of their ritual inheritance in favor of high-caste exponents (Reed, 2010, p. 136). The inclusion of dance at Ordinary Level, Advanced Level in schools and later at degree level added further impetus to the dislocation of performance from its roots. Woven into this story is an account of the impact of these changes upon up-country Berava ritualists and their communities.

Whilst the fate of the up-country Berava has been documented in some detail, little has been written about the situation in the low-country. Although sharing common caste status, up-country and low-country Berava have significantly different traditions. Low-country Berava have not enjoyed the same levels of recognition and state patronage as their up-country counterparts. Berava from the southern provinces, carry the tradition of low country dance (*pahata rata naetum*) and an associated complex of rituals intended to deal with the malign effects of demons (*tovil*). Some artists from this tradition did achieve national and international recognition but not nearly to the extent of their up-country compatriots. For example, Polwatte Gomez was recognized as a celebrity within the communities around the Galle and Matara on account of the fact that he had performed in Europe as part of a cultural tour. In 1980, when Simpson met him, he was quite elderly and cut a very elegant figure. He was well known in his community, almost everybody claimed to be related to him and, on family occasions, he was treated with nothing short of divine reverence. Similarly, Edin Gurunanse was one of the most respected and reputed teachers (*adura*) in Southern Sri Lanka. With his excellent reputation, Edin was in considerable demand from various groups of ritual performers and clients from all over the island. He even performed his dance routines in several European countries and his reputation was further enhanced after winning a number of awards. He was an acknowledged teacher and attracted numerous students. He also served as a visiting lecturer at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies which was later to become the University of Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA) in the capital city of Colombo.

Among Simpson's Berava associates back in 1978, it was also a source of great pride that a male relative had appeared at, or perhaps taught at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies (*saundarya āyatanaya*). This was not only because of their caste background but also because low-country dance and drumming was often overlooked in favor of the more established and celebrated Kandyan dance traditions in State-sponsored institutions. Another source of pride for those involved in traditional arts and crafts was to be recognized with a Kala Bhushana. This entailed the award of a medal, a certificate and a small cash prize. Personal details and a photograph of those receiving the award also then appeared in a souvenir publication. The cover of the 1986 brochure shows a collage of drums, masks and ritual paraphernalia. Included among the items on the cover is an ola leaf book (*pus kola pot*) and stylus (*panhinda*). These books contain the poems (*kav*i) in which ritual instructions and their justification are to be found; these verses are jealously guarded and passed down in families. In 1988, the Kala Bushana, was awarded to Edin Gurunanse.

The Kala Bhushana was instigated in the mid-1980s as a way of recognizing local artists for their long service and significant contribution to the passing on of traditional knowledge and skills. The first Kala Bhushana event took place on 22 May 1984 at President J.R. Jaywardene's residence. At the inaugural event 53 temple artists, drummers, dancers and astrologers were feted. The date was significant as it coincided with National Heroes Day. In the 1980s the scheme was targeted explicitly at the grassroots carriers of traditional knowledge and skill. From the pictures in

the early brochures, many of the men were elderly and wearing the national dress. Perusal of the hereditary family names (*vāsagama*), which often contain clues as to caste identity, would suggest that several recipients were of the Berava and other low castes. When, on a subsequent field trip in the mid-90s, Simpson spent time with his Berava associates, they would proudly point to relatives who had been recognized by this prestigious national award. That those being recognized with the award were rather distant kin was not an issue. There were always rumblings about political bias in the selection of candidates, but the important point was that they were Berava and it was their traditional occupations that were being celebrated. In the foreword to the 1986 Kala Bhushana award brochure, President J.R Jayawardene joins three points crucial to the political ideology of his government. First, is an invocation of a link to the ancient kingdoms of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa and the twelfth century King, Parakramabahu. Second, the assertion that economic success is the foundation of national greatness. Third, that traditional Sinhala arts and crafts are crucial to this vision. At various points in the opening comments other ministers identify traditional knowledge and skills as integral to J.R. Jayawardene's vision of the Dharmista society, that is, one based upon an essentially Sinhala Buddhist conception of righteousness. Indeed, the patrons of the event repeatedly return to a link between the current impoverished morality of society and the way in which traditional art and artists have been neglected. The Kala Bhushana was thus a powerful way to reinforce the idea of a Dharmista society by enlisting and celebrating the purveyors of Sinhala cultural traditions as essential to it.

The award of the Kala Bhushana as state recognition of individual contribution to the arts continues but in more recent times its form is rather different. In 2017, the award was given to 200 people deemed to have made a significant contribution to contemporary culture. The difference between the early days of the award and the present day is threefold. There is recognition that the arts scene is ethnically diverse (although still dominated by Sinhalese), there is greater recognition of women's roles and there has been a shift towards literature, music and drama. This was no doubt a sign that the lifeblood of Sri Lankan public culture was now drawn from a rather different source than back in the 1970s.

During our periods of research, the cultural contribution of the Berava caste began to have greater economic significance with the growth of tourism as a foreign exchange earner. In response to the demand for souvenirs and local cultural performances, our networks of Berava ritualists began to provide their services to tourists. The influences of the tourist industry on Berava activity are particularly significant on the south-western coastal belt which is highly popular with tourists. Men of the caste would perform short versions of ritual episodes billed as 'authentic' and 'traditional' for visiting tourists. The remuneration from such activities was often considerably greater than that from their usual duties. Whereas once caste members carried out mask making, dancing, drumming, weaving and so forth as a matter of obligation under the system known as *rājakāriya* (duty to the king), their activities had taken on new significance as marketable commodities. For example, masks are no longer only

carved and painted for ceremonial use but also produced in direct response to the high tourist demand for these colorful items. When it comes to dancing, non-Berava and even non-Sri Lankans perform ritual episodes in tourist, diplomatic, and entertainment venues nationally and internationally (Reed, 2010; see also Simpson 1993 and 1997). Several local cultural shows that de Silva viewed during 1996–1997, were sponsored by 'idealists' who wished to preserve 'traditional arts' for coming generations (de Silva, 2000). The troupes performing in these events were invariably presented as 'authentic' traditional ritualists. Today, performers in the South experience both a State-governed renaissance of their ritual traditions and a gradual adoption of a market for their services as a result of tourism and migration. Together these form the drivers of much contemporary practice.

A further impact of State-level policy on local ritual practice is to be found in the field of education. Since the 1960s traditional ritual knowledge and skills have become progressively incorporated into formal educational curricula across all stages of education. The effect has been to standardize what were previously dynamic traditions. In 1978, the first problem that the government had to deal with when institutionalizing traditional ritual performance was that none of those who could teach dance had any higher educational background themselves. Most of them had not even finished O-level exams. The Ministry of Education solved the 'lack of qualification problem' among the teaching staff by honoring them with a university degree at the master's level and then employing them as university lecturers. The first generation of teachers were men of the Berava caste who had been initiated as dancers and drummers. Teachers also tended to be drawn from a small number of recognized masters who were mostly of the 'up-country' or Kandyan tradition (Reed, 2002). It was only much later that opportunities for low-country performers arose. With their new titles and positions came higher salaries and also an elevated social status. As Susan Reed notes, the trouble faced by traditional Berava ritualists in this situation led to tensions. In one group were the performers whose work was grounded in the community and closer to traditional service provision. In the other group were performers who were becoming cut off from their roots and whose performance was driven by a different aesthetic and economic rationality. The emphasis on theory and a more academic approach to music and dance meant that performers from higher castes were able to dominate the field (Reed, 1998, p. 261). Nevertheless, Reed reports that some Berava men, despite their lack of qualifications were able to make progress in the formal education sector. Consequently, the social status and public recognition of the Berava caste overall was improved. Furthermore, Berava men found success in a variety of new roles: as teachers at the university, dancers of nationally acclaimed traditional dances, members of national and provincial dance troupes, members of the Sri Lankan Army dance troupe, as judges at competitions held at the growing number of dance schools (*kalā yatana*) as members of the Arts Council, as well as the many opportunities created as teachers in public schools, dance schools and cultural centers established throughout the country under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

With the introduction of formal education criteria, the hereditary link between the Berava and their traditions of knowledge and skill were weakened, and it no longer gave them privileged access to state-level opportunities. The landscape of qualification and recognition had changed substantially. Protests were forthcoming from those in the Berava community who felt that they were being dispossessed of the intellectual property of their birthright. Many of those recruited to teach the traditional arts on the basis of their A-level exams in traditional arts alone had not come through an apprentice-type of education as dancers and what they were able to teach was thought to be distinctly second rate by those engaged in village ritual activity. With the aim of meeting these criticisms, the Institute of Aesthetic Studies established an exclusive entry based on a practical test on 1 May 1974 for ten talented students from the Berava community. The arrangement was highly contentious and, after one year, it was decided that everyone should be recruited on the basis of formal qualifications alone (Nurnberger, 1998). As a result, despite their claims to an authentic heritage, men of the Berava caste lost their demand for a more open access to the formalized education system. An important consequence of these developments was what Susan Reed has described as the 'classicization' and 'rationalization' of practices which 'once regarded solely as the province of low-caste Berava males became respectable within the context of Sinhala nationalism' (Reed, 2002, p. 247). In theory if not in actuality, this transformation of dancing and drumming signaled a sanitization of the 'traditional arts.' Many of the negative associations of Berava activity became recast as valuable and much lauded expressions of a national heritage to be shared by all Sri Lankans.

Ambivalence III: The Berava towards their Own Traditions

In the previous sections we have given some indication of the ambivalence which is expressed towards the Berava caste by society and state: a complex mixing of cultural valorization and social opprobrium. In this section we turn to the implications that this has had for the Berava in relation to their own traditions and heritage. Even though others might be slow to recognize the considerable contribution members of the caste made to Sri Lankan culture, they themselves would nonetheless take great pride in their own community and the preservation of its traditions. Key to the reproduction of tradition has been inter-marriage between families of performers. Intra-caste marriages enabled apprenticeships to take place, not only in ritual performance but also in a wide range of other artistic and craft skills. This system of exchange and co-operation between families was often cemented by marital alliances. Women invariably played a key role in these alliances and although they were not ritual practitioners themselves, it was clear to us that they were in regular contact with, and often had good knowledge of ritual practice. In short, for the highly visible work of Berava men to occur, the much less visible work of women was absolutely crucial. If men were the warp of tradition then women were its weft. The typical pattern was for women to move to the village of a husband known as a *dīga* marriage, and for her children to move back to her natal village to study with her kinsmen, and more often than not, one of her brothers,

that is, their maternal uncle (*mama*). Simpson argued that this close interweaving of marriage, apprenticeship and performance ensured the continued dynamism of the ritual tradition and its recognition in the wider community (Simpson 1984, 1993 and 1997). The practice of endogamy within groups of performance elites within the caste has contributed significantly to the emergence of distinct ritual traditions across the south of the island. For example, de Silva documents the distinctive features of the Bentara tradition. Berava ritualists from this area developed rites connected with the cult of the god Devol Deviyo. Propitiating this god is associated with relief of illness and meting out retribution for wrong doing. Yet, even within the region, the traditions relating to this deity are not homogenous. There are many families of ritual specialists involved in Devol Deviyo cults and each one exhibits minor variations in ritual procedures, style and repertoire. So, the closer one looks at tradition, the more its overall coherence dissolves, rather like a pointillist painting, into distinct and partial fragments.

In an attempt to understand this dynamic in practice, Simpson argued that the knowledge and skills of the Berava should be seen as cultural capital or, indeed, a kind of intellectual property. Like other kinds of intellectual property, knowledge and skills are owned with people claiming their legitimacy as its owners; here based on apprenticeship with named teachers (*gurunānse*) and a pedigree extending back in time (*paramparāva*). Value and prestige are maintained through mechanisms that limit access to the caste's patrimony. Paramount among these is the passing on of knowledge between kin and typically between an uncle and a nephew (*māma-baena*). Another mechanism in play is that of secrecy and avoidance of sharing knowledge indiscriminately. In this regard, one Berava associate described two classes of knowledge: an inner class (*aetul pantiya*) and an outer one (*pita pantiya*). The outer class is one that everyone has access to. For example, at the time of fieldwork much oral tradition had been collected and made into book form by a publishing house specializing in vernacular traditions—the Modern *Pot Sappuva* based in Nugegoda. Whilst this material was viewed as legitimate by many of our Berava associates, it was not considered to be workable in any practical setting. For that, 'inner' knowledge passed down by a teacher to his pupil was the only way ritual practice could have any efficacy. Such distinctions open up further sources of ambivalence. In claiming to be the carriers of a tradition which purports to be timeless and unchanging, male Berava ritualists are believed to reproduce ancient rituals as they were performed in the time of the ancients or in *illo tempore* as Mircea Eliade once referred to it (Eliade, 1954). Yet, in practice, each ritual performance is an occasion for innovation and dynamic creativity in which different strands of tradition are brought into play. Indeed, one could say in the passing on of knowledge and skills across the generations, tradition is better understood as the history of creativity rather than as a static and faithfully reproduced corpus. Given this tension, the market for ritual services that Berava men provide fosters competition within the caste. Jealousy is common as are allegations of others' inauthenticity and lack of proper knowledge or technique. It is not unknown for performers to steal items of performance from one another (*horamera*). The resulting

dynamism of the performance tradition in the south carries significant *kudos* for the caste within the wider society. However, the same claims also generate a tendency towards fission and tension between different groups within the caste.

The connections that members of the caste believe themselves to have with authentic sources of knowledge whilst providing the grounds for distinction is also a source of great pride. This pride was demonstrated in a poem recited to Simpson in 1979. The poem was shared with him by Arlis Gurunnanse of Walawe. He proudly claimed that it had been in his family for generations and he offered it as an account of the importance of the caste in terms of its origins and the role that its activities play in society.[7] For example, rather than using the term Berava, which associates them with the drum, they would often refer to themselves as the Nekati Kulaya, a designation which associates them with the more elevated profession of astrology.

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There are more parts to describe, duly divided according to their tasks,
Knowing the science of numbers and astrology, the effects of the planets
For the people with the *yaga* and to the accompaniment of the sound of drums
A kind of the artists maintained with gifts, descending from the Brahmin caste

And later …

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Since the time of ancestors continuously, they had known the science of astrology,
Remembering the science of numbers, two or three times, placing white shells
As they prescribed auspicious moments for marriages of women, offering *bali*
The great men of the Govi caste call them Nakatiya.

Throughout the poem links are made with ancient Brahmin castes or *bamunu* who were responsible for bringing ritual knowledge and novel forms of religiosity into Sri Lanka during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (K.M. De Silva, 2005, p. 123).

අමන සමහරු සිතති අඩුකෙට පනා නොගසනවට	ඉසේ
ගමන පමණකි උතුරු සළුවත් බමුණු සුදුවත් ඇඳ	යසේ
අමන පැලඳුන් නොරිටු දුටු දුටු අඳින කුලයට	නිසිලෙසේ
පමණ තේරෙයි හො දට මියතත් බමුණුවට උන් සැක	කෙසේ

[7]We are extremely grateful to Emeritus Prof. Udaya Meddegama, Department of Sinhala, University of Peradeniya who translated the poem into English. The full version of the poem is reproduced in Appendix One.

Some persons look down on them as they do not wear combs on their heads
They walk clad in white scarves like Brahmins
Wearing weird ornaments according to diverse castes
Even if they die, they will know their status as Brahmins, there's no doubt

The fact that there were waves of migration from South India in earlier centuries is well established. Indeed, there are strong similarities between the Tamil drummer caste known as the Paraiyar and the Berava. The Sinhala word for drum is *bera* which has strong etymological connections with the Tamil word *parai*. It is believed that some of these early migrants would have been Brahmins bringing with them ritual knowledge relating to a new panoply of deities and demons. Yet, there are no Brahmin castes in Sinhalese society today. Obeyesekere makes the case for the transition of these early immigrants into the Goyigama caste as elites (Obeyesekere, 2015). At the time of our fieldwork, some Berava people held the view that they were the present-day heirs of the knowledge that these long-ago migrant Brahmins brought to Sri Lanka and perhaps even their direct descendants. Rather tantalizingly, Obeyesekere makes the point in his concluding remarks that Brahmins 'might have descended the caste ladder' and have links with drummers (Obeyesekere, 2015, p. 30). In defense of their claim to an earlier elevated status, some pointed out that rules about commensality and caste endogamy were not about them defiling the purity of others but, rather, preventing others defiling the purity that came with their Brahminic origins.

Given the backdrop of ongoing caste discrimination alongside internal conflicts and schisms it is hardly surprising that across the generations ambivalence towards their ritual inheritance has grown for many Berava youth. Some parents actively discouraged their sons from taking up hereditary professions. Sometimes it was the other way around with sons rejecting their parents' desire that they carry on the tradition. Leaving behind the occupational markers of caste might also be accompanied by name changes which removed any possible caste identification. Historically, Berava were not allowed to use names associated with the higher castes. Similarly, the family names (*vāsagama*) when spelt out in full might reveal an association with drumming or astrology. Such changes enabled a degree of caste anonymity which could facilitate upward social mobility through employment and/or education.

Berava Today

In this article we have drawn on our combined ethnographic experience of Berava families in the South of Sri Lanka to understand the emergence and consequences of the ambivalence expressed towards the caste. Our account documents a particular period in the island's history in which efforts to construct a post-independence, national identity took some distinctive turns. Berava as a caste group in Sinhala society have gradually managed to uplift their status and living conditions using opportunities offered by the Sri Lankan welfare state, including free education and opportunities arising from patronage politics and market mechanisms. These opportunities, however, have not benefited all members within the caste evenly and there are pockets where

poverty, landlessness, low human dignity, unemployment and poor living conditions in general exist side by side with continued discrimination, for example, in access to education. However, some members of the Berava caste have clearly benefited from the neo-liberalization of the economy post-1977 and the deployment of Sinhala cultural traditions as part of an ethno-nationalist rhetoric of renewal. The Berava caste, as the established and active carriers of the knowledge and skills that underpinned these traditions were inevitably drawn into this project. The ambivalence stems from the fact that their traditional role [community ritualists providing dancing, drumming and other ritual duties] and status [socially marginalized and discriminated against] was at odds with what they were now expected to provide. Over the decades that our account covers, a gradual bifurcation is evident. One direction of pull is for Berava performers to be drawn into aspects of performance that are formalized, elite and disconnected from their roots. The promotion of dance and drumming as mainstream subjects in education at all levels has played a major role in this process. It has provided significant career opportunities for some Berava ritualists. Whilst these opportunities are lucrative and carry status, they are inevitably selective and have the effect of distancing performers from their own communities. Similarly, tourism has provided markets for commoditized elements of ritual tradition in the form of cultural performances and the mass sale of 'devil dance' masks. Whereas ritual service as carried out by Berava, men were traditionally paid for with crops, goods and services, and sometimes also land, today ritualists are firmly part of the cash economy. A third area of demand for these commoditized aspects of culture is in the burgeoning media industry where ritual music and dance is often used to evoke nostalgic representation of village life and times.

There is however a pull in a very different direction, and one that takes later generations completely away from traditional activities. Separation from the traditions of the caste, whether by intent or necessity, is the experience of the majority of Berava young men. Essentially, Berava boys were trapped in a dilemma in that for many of them to reproduce the work of their fathers meant also to reproduce a problematic caste identity. Simpson, for example, makes a connection between a lingering social opprobrium and the desire to leave traditional professions in the 1970s and 80s; a strategy fraught with ambivalence. A clear effect of this move is that in the 1990s the younger generation experienced fewer stigmas than their forefathers. Some of the occupations that were moved into by recent generations involve skills developed as part of their caste inheritance. For example, occupations such as carpentry, masonry, bakery, art production, printing and tailoring may have benefited from the general skill sets that exist in the communities that they grew up in. Other destinations for employment have been the armed forces and particularly during the 30-year war fought against the Tamil Tigers. Garment factories, domestic service in gulf countries and menial security duties have also been important destinations for those choosing or compelled to move away from hereditary occupations.[8] From more recent anecdotal

[8]Similar arguments can be found in Seneviratne (1978), Silva (1992), Gunasekere (1994), Simpson (1996) Sorensen (1996) and Reed (2010).

evidence collected by the authors from the communities in which they worked, these latter occupations are the ones that the majority of Berava men and women have ended up in. Commenting on this shift in occupational focus, Jabbar notes that in the 'practice of hereditary caste occupations…it appears that the type of work and status available under the modern occupational hierarchy continues to reflect a caste dimension' (Jabbar, 2005, p. 16). However, on a visit in 2003 to the village where he had worked in the early 1980s, Simpson met the son of an important family of ritualists who had qualified as a doctor and recently married a woman of the same caste who was also a qualified doctor. Even a generation ago, such an achievement would have been unheard of.

What is apparent from this brief overview of recent trends in occupational activity is that changing socio-economic circumstances have resulted in intra-caste differentiation among Berava families. Whilst a small minority of Berava families have continued as carriers of their rich heritage, there has been a 'progressive backing away from hereditary, stigmatized occupations among the [Sinhala] lower castes… such that the vestiges of caste-based identity are rapidly being expunged' (Simpson, 1997, p. 44). In recent decades larger structural forces have also been in play. As Silva has argued, the abandonment of inherited caste occupation is part of a broader shift 'from caste to a high order of ethnicity' in the reckoning of identities (Silva, 1999, p. 202). The over-shadowing of caste-based identities by a more unified Sinhala and, indeed, Buddhist identity, has been accelerated during the thirty-five-year civil war that pitted the Sri Lankan state against the separatist aspirations of the Tamil Tigers. However, whilst caste identities may have been eclipsed by the rise of a powerful ethno-nationalism, the traces are not easily expunged and particularly for the service castes. As it was for previous generations of the Berava community, caste identity continues to be a source of ambivalence. It is one in which pride and the celebration of achievement often sit uncomfortably beside concealment and the negation of caste associations.

Appendix One

සීරු වෙස්නා දනන්ගේ කුල වනන කලක් වෙයි. ඒ බැවින් නෙක් ගුනෙන් යුත්
අපගෙ ගඳඹ කුලයන් නම් වනාලා දමන්ටත් අවසර දුනහොත් මේ උතුම් වූ ගොවින්ගෙන්

There will be a time for praising the caste of Seeruvesna people. Therefore to have praised the names of our Gandharva (musician castes), if we are permitted by these great Farmers.

ඔත් ගුණ පැවසුව තතු ඇති මෙම	පොත
සත්තලි දෙකකට විකුණම් අඩු	නැත
වත්කම් ඇති අය අරගෙන	බැලුවොත
සත්තලි දෙක වටිනාකම	හැඟි යත

This book in which I state the true qualities
I will sell for seven sattali, no less
If those who can afford, bought it and read it
They will understand it is really worth seven sattali

මෙදිය තුළ පෙර පැවසූ මිනිසුන් එකම මිනිසුන් සැබවිනා
මෙදිය සම්මත නිරිදු කළ ලක් කිරිය හේතුව විලසිනා
යෙදිය කොටසක් වෙදහ දැනගත් බමුණු යයි නම් ගරුවනා
හදිය පව්කළ වැඩිය කොටසක් අදම කුලවල් වෙන් වුණා

It is really true; men in this world are the same
As the reason, the actions of the ancient kings of this Lanka
Some of them know of the Veda and were named respectable Brahmins,
Those who committed much sin, were segregated as low castes

යාග බමුණුය ගදඹ බමුනුය ඔවුන් නිසි නිසි නම් ලබා
යාග කෙරුමට ඇදුරු කොටසක් වෙනස්වුණු බව බලි අඹා
යාග පොත් පත් වෙදහ පොත් පත් රැගෙන බැලුවෝ ලහ තබා
යාග පිළිවෙල මෛලස පෙනුණිය පළමු පැවසිය මහ බඹා

Receiving appropriate names such as 'Brahmins of rituals, Brahmins of song and dance'
A special group of artists to perform *yaga* (rituals) by making *bali* images
They kept with them books on *yaga* and Vedanga
This is how the tradition of *yaga* evolved, first taught by Mahabrahma

මෙසිරිලක රජ පැමිණි නිරිඳෝ යාග බමුණන් ගෙන්නවා
අසිරි සලසන යාග කරුවා නැවත සතහට දන්නවා
විසිරි උන්ගෙන් බෝව පැවතෙන දැනුත් බමුනන් ඉන්නවා
අසිරිමත් උන් කවුද සොයමුය අඩහු සිත් තන්නවා

Kings of this Sri Lanka, having invited Brahmins for *yaga*
Having performed *yaga* and letting the people know
Some Brahmins still exist scattered, descending from them,
Let us trace, who they are, focusing our minds

ගොතන කිවියර තාල පද දැන නටන අයහට මිතුරුවා
කොතන ෙපළ හර උනත් පෙර කිව රැගෙන ගොස් බෙර රුසිලවා
තතන තනියන කියන නටනට ගැසී බෙරපද පතුරුවා
එතන සිට ලක තුමන් උන් හට නමක් බෙරවා පැවරුවා

The poet, skilled in the tunes and words making friends with the dancers,
Wherever there is a procession, going there carrying the drum happily
Beating the drum resounding '*tatana, tana, tana',* accompanying dance
Since then the kings of Lanka, awarded them the title of Berava

සුවන් මුනිවර පුදට ගොවිකුල දනන් හට උන් බෙර ගසා
අරන් ගැලවිය බෙරය පෙර සිට ඉසෙන් බුහුමන් කර යසා
නරන් හට සෙසු ගැසුවත් බෙර නොකා උන්ගෙන් කිසිලෙසා
අරන් ගැලවිය බෙරය දෙපයින් පටන් පෙර සිරිතක් ලෙසා

After playing the drum for the people of *govi* caste, as offering to the omniscient Buddha
They took off the drum over the head paying high respects
Even if they play the drum for other people, they would not eat anything from them
Following ancient traditions, took off the drum from the feet

අමන සමහරු සිතති අඹුකෙට පනා නොගසනවට ඉසේ
ගමන පමණකි උතුරු සළුවත් බමුණු සුදුවත් ඇඳ යසේ
අමන පැලඳුන් නොරිටු දුටු දුටු අඳින කුලයට නිසිලෙසේ
පමණ නේරෙයි හො දට මියතත් බමුණුවට උන් සැක කෙසේ

Some persons look down on them as they do not wear combs on their heads
They walk clad in white cloth like Brahmins
Wearing weird ornaments according to diverse castes
Even if they die, they will know their status as Brahmins, there's no doubt

පැත්ත කට නොව ඇත්ත පවසමි තරහ නොගනිව් නයිදෙලා
ගත්තු රජකම මෙරට නිරිඳෝ ආදිකළ කටයුතු බලා
සත්තමයි ඔය වංස අටවන අයට වැඩි අප ලොක්කලා
උත්ත මයි ගොවිකුලය සිරිලක අපෙන් උන්හට ගරුකළා

Without getting to a side I will tell the truth, people, do not be offended
Kings of this Lanka, ascended the throne, having seen the work of ancients
I swear! Our leaders are greater than those who boast of their caste
The Govi caste is the highest in Sri Lanka and we too paid respects to them

විජය රජකල පටන් ගොවිකුල මුනිඳු තනතුරු ලබමිනා
ගැටිය ලෙස කිත් පතල විය ලක උතුම් අයමැයි සැබවිනා
එජය දුම් දුට වතර ලැබූ අප අනගි ගම්පෙත් පෙර දිනා
රජය බමුණුය දෙකුල සෙසු නැත අපිත් නිරිඳුන් සිත්ගෙනා

People of the Govi caste, obtaining positions since the time of King Vijaya
Their glory spread in the world like a 'gotiya,' they are truly great
We provided water to the Holy Bodhi tree, rewarded with fields and lands
The two castes 'Royal' and 'Brahmin,' no other castes—we won the hearts of kings

සිටිය විලසට කුලය උසම්ටි ලෙසට බෙදුනිය පෙර කලා
හරිය පිළිවෙල බමුණු කුල ලෙස දැන් අපේ මේ පිළිවෙළා
ගිරිය සිඳිනට ගැසුවත් මොර අපට සමයයි නයිදෙලා
බැරිය සමවෙනු බිලිය අවුලා ලබ්බ ඉණ බැඳ අලිබලා

The castes is divided into low and high, according to their positions
Our present position is correct, as the Brahmin caste
Even if the goldsmiths and silversmiths (*nayide*) people scream until their throats crack
They cannot be made equal to us by wearing a gourd on the waist and guarding elephants

දැලෙන් බිලියෙන් මසුන් මැරුකල ඇසුත් නොපෙනෙයි සමහරු
තෙලින් කුරුරජ තුමන් ආවත් අපේ පිළිවෙළමයි ගරු
අලින් ගස්බැඳ කපන පොල් අතු මදින අයටත් සිත් යුරු
කලින් තිබූ පිළිවෙළක් නැත වෙන අපට වැඩි උන්ගෙන් ගරු

When some men catch fish with the net and hook, they go blind
Even if king Kuru* came from far, still our customs are the best
For those who polish coconut fronds they cut by tethering elephants on trees
No other greater way for them than what we had in the past
(*Kuru- name an ancient king found in Buddhist literature)

වනන් තව ඇත කොටස් වෙන වෙන බෙදුනු කටයුතු නිසි ලෙසා
ගනන් සත සහ නැකැත් සත දැන ගහ න් ගෙන් වන දෑ යසා
දනන් හට සෙත් යාග සමගින් වයන කර බෙර නද ගෙනා
පනම් ගෙන රැකි ඇදුරු කොටසක් බමුනු කුලයෙන් වේ යසා

There are more parts to describe, duly divided according tasks
Knowing the science of numbers and astrology, the effects of the planets
For the people with the *yaga* and to the accompaniment of the sound of drums
A kind of the artists maintained with gifts, descending from the Brahmin caste

සතර වෙද දැන ගඳඹ බමුණන් උතුම් ගොවිකුලයෙන් කකා
අතර තුරුවන් දනන්ගෙන් අඩු බතක් දුන්නොත් උන් නොකා
එතර කරමින් සියළු පිරිපත යාග කර මිනිසුන් රැකා
අතර දඹදිව බෝව පැවතුනි බෝග සම්පත් ලැබ නෙකා

Knowing four *Vedas*, Gandharva Brahmins, eating from the great Govi caste
If some food is given now and then for a low caste, not eating it
Putting an end to all disasters, performing *yaga* for protecting people
Existed in the Dambadiva mostly, receiving much wealth and crops

දැනට සිරිලක සුදුසු විලසට අඹා බලි ගහ රු ව යොදා
දිනට සුදු පිලි පැලඳ ගනිමින් සුරත ගගනය ගෙන නදා
කනට සුමුහිරි මගුල් වූ වවනෙන් යාග කර සත රෝ මුදා
බසට හැසිරෙන ඔවුන් බෙරවා නිමන් පැවතෙයි සිරිවිදා

At this time, making Bali images portraying the planets
Clad in pure white cloth, making the tinkling bells sound held in the hand
Doing the *yaga* uttering sweet words to the ear, relieving people from their diseases
with the words, they are known as Berava

මුතුන් මිත්තන් පටන්නොකඩව නැකැත් සත දැන සිටි නිසා
දෙතුන් විට දැන ගනිති සිහිකර සුදු ලෙසට බොල්ලන් තියා
කතුන් ගනුදෙනු සෑම නැකතුත් පැවසු හන්දා බලි තියා
උතුම් ගොවිකුල මැනිඳු පවසයි ඒයින් උන්හට නැක තියා

Since the time of ancestors continuously, they had known the science of astrology,
Remembering the science of numbers, two or three times, placing white shells
As they prescribed auspicious moments for marriages of women, offering *bali*
The great men of the Govi caste call them Nakatiya.

පතල ගොවිකුල දනන්ගෙන් බත් කන්නෙ පිරිසිදු පත්කොළේ
කොතල කෙටියෙන් කටට වත්කර බොන්නෙ පිරිසිදු වූ ජලේ
වතල තඹලෙරු පිහන් දුන්නත් අපිරිසිදුයයි පහකළේ
සිතල බැලුවොත් බමුණු පිලිවෙල තාම නැත උන් පහකලේ

From the famous people of the Govi caste, they consume rice from a leaf (*patkole)*
They drink water by pouring from clay-jug a (*kotale*) into the mouth
Fine copper plates are given; they put them away saying unclean
If you think about this, the ways of Brahmins they have not yet given up

ගසන එක බෙර නරක වැඩකැයි සිතති අඩුකුල දන රැසා
නසන ලද අපෙ මුනිදු කෙලෙසුන් අරාවුන් සඳ විදුරැසා
වසන සුරලොව ගදඹ දෙව්පුත් සමග නොයෙකුත් දෙවි රැසා
අසන හට ලෙස ෙගාසය පැතිරෙන ගැසුවෙ නැතිවද බෙරරැසා

The people of the low castes think playing drums as a bad thing
When our Buddha after destroying bad deeds (*keles*) occupying the crystal seat
Various kinds of deities in heaven living with the Gandharva Gods
Did they not play many drums making a loud noise for hearing?

පුවත නොදැනම උපත බෙරවා කෙරෙති අපහස සමහරු
පැවත ඒනපෙර සිටන් සිරිතල බමුණුමයි අප සත දැරූ
නැවත නැවතත් සොයා බැලුවෙමි ලොකු අයද අපහැර නැති යුරු
වසතහොත් අප මිසක් නොවලත උතුම් ගොවිකුල නොම සරු

Without knowing the history of the origin of Berava, some people ridicule
According to ancient traditions, we are Brahmins bearing the science
I have examined again and again, except us, there are no other 'big shots'
If we live with no regrets, the great Govi caste will not be thriving

කැමති රටකින් පැමිණ උතුමෙක් කලත් රජකම් ලකේ ගරු සරු
ඇමති යුවරජ ගනිති තනතුරු ලබති ගොවිකුල උතුම් වූ ගරු
නැමති ගරුතර උතුම් මැතිදුන් දැනුත් ඇත ලක තුලේ අතිගරු
ඒමැතිවරු හට උසස්වන්නට වේය නොවත් වේය නපුරු

If a powerful person came from another country and became king of Lanka
The respectable Govi caste receives the positions of minister and viceroy
There are even today such great persons highly respected in Lanka
Those gentlemen must be promoted, if not that will be wicked

මුනිදු හට පෙර කරපුසේවය උතුම් අයවල් මයි කළේ
පනිදු මුවලිදු දරන ගැබ වැඩ උන්න සඳ ඌමයි කළේ
දිනිදු කුලයුත් අනඳ තෙරිදුන් මුනිදු හට සේවය කලේ
ගනිදු සිව් අත් සුරිදු සේවය සකස් පුර දොර දි කලේ

In the past only the noble persons served the Buddha
While Buddha sat in the coils of the Mucalinda cobra, he himself served Buddha
Venerable Ananda, born in the Solar clan, himself attended upon Buddha
Gods Ganesh, Sakra and Brahma served Buddha at the gate of the city of Sankassa

කෙරෙන පිළිවෙල මෙ අපි දැන් බලි රජුන් බමුණන් කල ලෙ සා
පොරණ සිරිලක විසුව පඬුවස් රජුට පැමිණුනි දිවි දොසා
හරන ලෙස සෙත් යාග කල එම මලලරජු දිවි දොස නසා
උරන නොව මෙම කරුණු පහදා දෙමැයි දැනගනු නොවලසා

The system of our Bali performances, in the same way as ancient kings and Brahmins
In the past, King Panduvas of Lanka was afflicted with the evil effects of perjury (*divi dos)*
The King of Malala country, performed the *yaga*; to remove these effects
I will explain these matters, kindly listen, do not take offence.

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Recasting the Brahmin: Martin Wickramasinghe and the Epistemic Critique of Caste

Praveen Tilakaratne[1]

Abstract

The dominant public perception is that caste is a matter of minor and diminishing significance in Sri Lanka, especially for the Sinhalese, who form the island's ethnic majority. Although sociological and anthropological studies have pushed back against this perception, its pervasiveness and importance for modern Sinhala identity formation have resulted in questions of caste seldom being raised in the field of modern Sinhala literature. It is surprising, therefore, that the oeuvre of perhaps the most prolific Sinhala writer and public intellectual of the twentieth century, Martin Wickramasinghe, is checkered with references to caste; particularly, polemics against a "brahmin caste" that he claims is responsible for the maintenance of epistemic hierarchy in Sri Lanka and beyond. This essay distills Wickramasinghe's caste-text through two illustrative moments, the Buddha-biographical novel *Bava Taraṇaya* (1973) and the essay "Bamuṇukulaya Biṁda Væṭīma" (1956), suggesting that it advances a critique of epistemic stratification and the coloniality of knowledge *through* the idea of caste, while also contesting the givenness of caste as a category. Wickramasinghe's work is a productive starting point through which an archive of anti-caste thought situated in the Sinhala literary sphere yet addressed to a wider humanity might be imagined, since his caste-text illustrates how thinking about caste in and from Sri Lanka is of value not only for its inhabitants, but also for transnational forms of politics that use caste as a nodal point for the articulation of structural inequalities and injustices that are not vestiges of antiquity but features of colonial modernity.

Keywords

Sri Lanka, Sinhala Literature, Martin Wickramasinghe, Caste; Buddhism, Coloniality, Epistemology

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Introduction: Conditions and Possibilities

Questions of caste are seldom raised in the field of modern Sinhala literature. Provisionally assuming that there is sufficient reason to raise such questions, we might think of this silence as resulting from at least two interlinked epistemic conditions that delimit what is sensible and sayable within the field. The first is the unstated yet normative assumption that Sinhala literature is an ethnic—and, therefore, *particular*—expression of the Sinhalese people, who form Sri Lanka's ethnic majority. A couple of factors contribute to the continued reproduction of this condition. On the one hand, there is a historically entrenched and not easily overcome incongruity between *human* universality, which is the basis for theory and philosophy proper and the purview of Western man, and *anthropic* difference that cannot transcend non-Western ethno-racial peculiarity and specificity (Sakai, 2010). Anthropic difference often becomes the basis for the global legibility of non-European peripheral literatures. As a peripheral literature—even within South Asia—Sinhala literature is ethnically marked. Its universalistic impute has to contend with a host of apparently non-universalizable ethnic particularities. On the other hand, Sinhala literary expression is frequently forced into a "homolingual structure of address" (Sakai, 1997), that circumscribes it within a linguistically and culturally bound unitary community, often in complicity with the Sinhala-centric imaginary of the Sri Lankan nation. This furthers its insularity, inhibiting its cross-cultural and trans-regional comparability, and ultimately, its ability to address itself to the universal. To put it reductively, Sinhala literature becomes confined to a limited form of expression *from* the Sinhalese, *for* the Sinhalese, and in the last instance—even if in a roundabout way—*about* the Sinhalese. Following from this, it is often the case that the reader of Sinhala literature is either ethnically Sinhalese, thus falling within this presumed structure of address, or is a "specialist" who is after knowledge about the Sinhalese and Sri Lanka, in which case the structure of address is left undisrupted through the reader's façade of scholarly neutrality and objectivity.

The second condition that inhibits questions of caste is one that qualifies Sinhala society itself, predicating it with what, in the words of Silva, Sivapragasam and Thanges (2009), might be called a "comparative castelessness." That is, there is a persistent popular notion that Sinhala society, which is imagined in ideality as a Buddhist cultural whole, is impacted far less by caste ideology and hierarchy than two privileged and somewhat necessarily posited points of comparison, Hindu India and Sri Lankan Tamil society, which act as foils against which the uniqueness and specificity of Sinhala identity are articulated. Caste is hereby rendered temporally and spatially external. Its presence is registered as a vestige that continues to haunt the quotidian lives of the contemporary Sinhalese, as something that can be disavowed and dismissed as anachronistic and incidental to modern sociality, and as an "Indian" or "Brahminical" influence that is *foreign* to Sinhalese cultural essence. Caste studies scholarship on Sri Lanka, coming mainly from disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, has contested these tropes by showing how caste continues to stratify persons in domains such as education, politics, economics, and marriage. However, owing

to the comparative norms and empiricist tendencies surrounding the deployment of caste as an analytic category, the academic literature too often repeats the diminished visibility and significance—or at least relative flexibility and porousness—of caste in Sri Lanka in comparison to India (Yalman, 1967, pp. 60-61; Stirrat, 1982, pp. 8-9; Silva, Sivapragasam & Thanges, 2009, p. 1).

In public culture and literature, however, an air of silence continues to envelope caste. It is curious then, that the body of work of perhaps the most prolific and influential Sinhala writer and public intellectual of the last century, Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976), is checkered with references to caste, including, most strikingly, polemics against a "brahmin caste" (*bamuṇu kulaya*) that he claims is responsible for the maintenance of rigid epistemic hierarchies both in Sri Lanka and beyond. Yet one looks through his writings in vain for familiar, disciplinary legible, Lanka-specific caste categories and names—for example, *govigama*, *karāva*, *durāva*, *salāgama*—that have been established and elaborated empirically, mainly through sociology, anthropology, and history. The dynamic caste-specific sub-text (hereafter, "caste-text") that runs through Wickramasinghe's oeuvre runs the risk of appearing shallow and "*artha*-less"—that is, devoid of meaning and value—from this largely empiricist academic vantage point. At best, his evocation of caste would appear metaphorical, and therefore, bereft of a positive yield that can result in "real" knowledge or actionable politics. My attempt in this essay is to signal ways in which Wickramasinghe's caste-text might be read not as metaphor but as epistemic critique. I argue that this caste-text offers a critique not only of caste hierarchy but also of the epistemic conditions that determine how caste is *given* as an object of study and category of analysis in relation to Sinhalese and broader Sri Lankan society. Wickramasinghe's caste-text warrants further study, for in addition to seeping into a multitude of other Wickramasinghean texts (such as the political economic, the historical, and the religious), it also dynamically evolves over six decades, across a plethora of genres and styles, ranging from novels and short stories to works of criticism and philosophy. For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen two illustrative moments: the Buddha-biographical novel *Bava Taraṇaya* (1973)[1] and a polemical essay titled "Bamuṇukulaya Biňda Væṭīma" (1956; "The Fall of the Brahmin Caste"), both from what might be thought of as Wickramasinghe's late period (roughly, 1956 to 1976). Characteristic of this late period is Wickramasinghe's turn towards a distinctly iconoclastic style of thought that neither represses nor shies away from ambiguity, fragmentariness, and skepticism: features conducive for epistemic critique and contestation.[2] In the following sections, I will first discuss *Bava Taraṇaya*,

[1]The phrase "*bava taraṇaya*" is not easily translatable into English. *Bava*, in the Buddhist philosophical context, might be thought of as the process of becoming, or, as a countable noun, a birth within the cycle of *saṃsāra*; a contingent and non-transcendent form of being. The novel, however, writes *bava* not as a religio-philosophical process, but as a socio-political and historical one. *Taraṇaya* can be translated as crossing or overcoming, so the book's title references the overcoming of *bava*, that is, the overcoming of socio-politically and historically determined being.

[2]The "late Wickramasinghe" can be distinguished from and contrasted with the "early Wickramasinghe," author of the famous *Gamperaḷiya* trilogy, which is primarily "realist" in style. Questions of aesthetic continuity and rupture in Wickramasinghe's oeuvre are beyond

earmarking a few illustrative episodes, in order to lay out Wickramasinghe's ideas on the sociality of caste in relation to his vision of history, repetition, and revolution, after which, I will turn briefly to "Bamuṇukulaya Biñda Væṭīma" to signal possibilities for a broader critique of caste—and the *concept* of caste—as it pertains to epistemic hierarchies at a global scale. In order to do Wickramasinghe's caste-text justice, it has been necessary to bracket or actively forget the sociological, anthropological, and historiographical discourse on caste in Sri Lanka, even as this very discourse surreptitiously re-enters and punctuates our reading.[3]

Why Wickramasinghe, though? Wickramasinghe's impact on the "Sinhalasphere" —that is, the sphere of Sinhala linguistic and cultural influence beyond the imagined community of "native" Sinhala speakers and the bounds of the nation is hard to overstate. Most if not all ideological formations in the Sinhalasphere of the second half of the twentieth century were influenced by his work, and divergent political positions sprung from seemingly contradictory strands—or conflicting readings—of his thought (Jayanetti, 1977, p. 31; Wijesiriwardena, 2021, p. 274). Though widely controversial during his lifetime—garnering accusations ranging from anti-nationalism, anti-Buddhism, and covert Christianity to charlatanry and perversion—Wickramasinghe was subsequently co-opted into the nation's narrative and canonized as "*heḷayē mahā gatkaru*," or "the great writer of the Hela (Sinhala) nation." A necessary condition for the maintenance of this nationally-congruent image is perhaps the proliferation of superficial, prejudiced, and ahistorical readings of his work. Complexity, ambiguity, and indeed, perversion, are often cast away and kept out of sight. In terms of national co-optation, the legacy of Wickramasinghe bears parallels to that of his saffronized Indian contemporary, B.R. Ambedkar, and it may be useful to think about the relationship between Wickramasinghe's work and Ambedkarite Dalit thought in the form of a missed encounter (see: Teltumbde, 2018, pp. 216-235). Some marginal references to this will be made in the following sections, although a sustained comparison is beyond the scope of this essay. In relation to questions of caste, however, Wickramasinghe's work is a productive starting point through which an archive of anti-caste thought situated in the Sinhalasphere yet addressed to the *human* might be imagined. His caste-text clearly illustrates why thinking about caste in and from Sri Lanka is of value not

the scope of this paper but have been addressed, in various ways, by previous scholarship (see: Suraweera, 1979; Dharmadasa, 1980; Tilakaratne, 2019).

[3]Here, I am partially influenced by Aniket Jaaware's (2019) operations of "deliberately forgetting" or "oublierring" the vast body of scholarly literature that writes caste into the paradigm of "Indian difference." By bracketing the sociological, anthropological, and historical discourse on caste in Sri Lanka, I am not signaling the need for an epistemic rupture that would reconceptualize caste as a category of analysis. My move, rather, is best thought of as a provisional and strategic one, which offers more interpretive freedom when dealing with Wickramasinghe's texts. If one has fewer preconceptions about what caste *denotes* in the Sri Lankan context, one is less likely to dismiss Wickramasinghe's ideas as having no empirical—and therefore, political—relevance. Such a move also helps us see beyond the "givenness" of caste, to appreciate how Wickramasinghe himself deploys the concept in order to think about structural inequality, oppression, and human liberation within and beyond Sri Lanka.

only for the island and its inhabitants, but also for transnational forms of politics that use caste as a nodal point for the articulation of structural inequalities and injustices that are not vestiges of antiquity but features of colonial modernity.

Locating the Buddha: *Bava Taraṇaya* and the Sinhala Writing of Caste

The culmination of decades of research and experiments in literary and philosophical style,[4] *Bava Taraṇaya* was an intervention in the field of knowledge known as Buddhism. Buddhism as an *ism*—that is, as a cohesive and ideal system of thought grounded in empirical and secular history, offering philosophical, literary, and political possibilities within modernity—was born of the complex (and unequal) epistemic encounter between orientalism, Indology, and philology on the one hand, and the collaborations, interventions, and reappropriations of Asian Buddhist monastics, scholars, and reformers on the other. The possibilities offered by Buddhism were not abstract, but depended on the concrete contexts—the demographics, forms of self-consciousness, and configurations of political power—of its highly varied geographic areas of operation. That Buddhists form a numerical majority in Sri Lanka is established as "fact" by the same scripts that write Sri Lanka as a nation; and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Buddhism was re-written and restructured as a modern system of thought, its relationship with the Ceylonese colonial state was dynamic, multifaceted, and complicated. On the one hand, it experienced generalized discrimination and epistemic devaluing, for it was not only a "non-Western" and thus implicitly "inferior" mode of knowledge, but also a vehicle through which colonial power and knowledge were contested and anticolonial sentiments publicly articulated. On the other hand, it also received forms of state patronage, especially under more liberal forms of colonial governmentality, as well as "positive" revaluations from Western reformists and scholars of religion (Blackburn, 2010; Sivasundaram, 2013). Given this ambivalent relationship to colonial governmentality and knowledge as well as the island's demographics, Buddhism in Sri Lanka could not have the same kind of oppositional and iconoclastic edge that it did in India, from where it had apparently "disappeared." For instance, the year 1956 saw Ambedkar's formal conversion to Buddhism, months before his death, marking a crucial moment in his rejection of caste-based Hindu sociality, and paving way for a mass of Dalit conversions into a new Buddhist "moral community" (Blackburn, 1993). However, in Ceylon, the same year marked the electoral victory of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and the implementation of

[4]In his preface to *Bava Taraṇaya*, Wickramasinghe writes that the novel was fashioned out of three volumes of notes, each of around 300 foolscap pages, on ancient India and Buddhism. Sections of *Bava Taraṇaya*, which feature dense philosophical debate, as well as several other texts on Buddhist philosophy written in 1960s, attest to the existence of such an archive. Being Wickramasinghe's last novel, written when he was eighty-three and three years before his death, the text is also somewhat "rough." Though not entirely unedited, Wickramasinghe's weakening eyesight did not allow him to significantly revise, revisit, and "clean" the text (Wickramasinghe, 1973, pp. 8-9).

the infamous "Sinhala Only" act, as well as a political turn towards Buddhism, to the detriment of the country's non-Sinhala and non-Buddhist minorities. It is problematic, therefore, to frame modern Buddhist literature and thought in the Sinhalasphere through ideal notions of Buddhism that associate it with an inherent and essential sense of egalitarianism, non-sectarianism, rationality, and progressivism.

Yet neither Buddhism nor Sinhala culture were monoliths complicit with the postcolonial state and mainstream Sinhala nationalism. The mid-twentieth-century nationalist anxiety over certain intellectual strands in Sinhala society—most notably, the so-called Peradeniya School,[5] that was accused of perverting the Sinhala youth and insulting Buddhism, and of which Wickramasinghe was deemed to be a member and abettor (House of Representatives, 1963, pp. 3449-3478; Kumara, 2013)—throws light on the proliferation and popular appeal of alternative readings of Sinhala culture and Buddhism that contested the official, state sponsored, and nationally mandated discourses. Within months of its publication, *Bava Taraṇaya* became a bestseller, resulting in a national-level controversy, with powerful Buddhist monks—most prominently, Yakkaduwe Pragnarama of the Vidyalankara Pirivena—as well as lay Buddhist leaders campaigning against the book, demanding its ban and the arrest of its author (Wijewardena, 2023). This strong and almost kneejerk reaction against the novel prompts us to situate it within an alternative and counter-nationalist discursive space when interpreting its caste-text; to not read the invocation of caste as a move to buttress Sri Lanka's national self-image, but rather, as a means of questioning and even shattering it. It is perhaps due to this shattering that critics like Yakkaduwe Pragnarama railed against the doctrine represented in the novel as being Hindu-leaning and Vedantist (Pragnarama, 1978, p. 30), although even a cursory reading of the novel would invalidate such a claim.

What the *Bava Taraṇaya* controversy fundamentally centered on was Wickramasinghe's alleged misrepresentation of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha. The novel portrayed the Buddha not only in a secular and mundane light, as a subject who continues to experience the thrust of human desire even after enlightenment, but also as a political and revolutionary figure, who openly revolts against the status quo. More implicitly, however, the unease surrounding the novel may have resulted from the sentiment that it was at least partially allegorical; that it was not simply about

[5]The "Peradeniya School" (*pērādeṇi gurukulaya*) was a name coined primarily by opponents of the modernist (and, in some instances, psychologistic) turn in Sinhala literature, in order to collectively identify the works (primarily novels, but also, at times, poetry and theatre) of, most prominently, Ediriweera Sarachchandra, Siri Gunasinghe, Gunadasa Amarasekara, and, more controversially, Martin Wickramasinghe. Out of these four writers, the first three had formal ties to the University of Peradeniya, an institution viewed by the school's opponents as complicit in the maintenance of colonial regimes of knowledge and epistemic power even after Ceylon's formal independence in 1948. Although the four writers most commonly identified with the Peradeniya School quite clearly contested colonial norms of knowledge, sensibility, and moral action through their works, their affiliation with the university—coupled with their non-conformity to more mainstream strands of cultural nationalism—enabled detractors to see them as culturally inauthentic, perverse handmaidens of Western imperialism (see Tennakoon, 1958; Deshabandhu, 1961).

the Buddha, situated neatly within the sixth century B.C.E., but about contemporary Sinhala society. That such a sentiment would hold sway is unsurprising in light of the revolutionary politics of the Southern youth, who had, under the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (J.V.P), launched their first unsuccessful armed revolt against the state in 1971. In as much as caste was a driving factor of the 1971 insurrection (Uyangoda, 2000, p. 17), it is also central to the social allegory that *Bava Taraṇaya* weaves. The novel starts with an intricate portrayal of the Sākkiya (Śākya) society in which Siduhat (Siddhārtha) grows up, detailing the education he receives under traditional and formal caste-bound tutelage. This education reflects the aristocratic and militaristic ideology of the "*kæt-kula*" (the kshatriya or warrior/princely caste). Subverting this education, however, Siduhat engages in more independent and dissident forms of learning, which expose him to the life-worlds and epistemologies of "lower" castes and classes, prompting him to eventually relinquish his own community and his prescribed social position and function. It is important to note that *Bava Taraṇaya* steers clear of presenting Siduhat as simply anti-Brahminical, for anti-Brahminism is already part of his caste inheritance. It is not inherently revolutionary, for it is a *given*. In fact, an alleged freedom from Brahminical tyranny—a claim Siduhat will gradually contest—serves as a condition for Sākkiya identity formation, and proof of the superiority of the Sākkiya republic's caste-free—but inevitably and naturally *classed*—social order. The Sākkiyan representation of their own social order along these lines is clearly articulated by Siduhat's half-brother, Nanda, who insists that, "what exists here is not caste division but class division" (Wickramasinghe, 1973, p. 66).[6]

Yet, when this social order is questioned, or its representation challenged, those around Siduhat resort to the invocation of caste-based norms, which are presented in the form of cultural mandates. Disarticulated from the public realm of politics, caste is rearticulated through culture, which results in its disavowal; that is, its simultaneous affirmation and denial. Culture enables caste to function and exert influence on society even while its signifiers are symbolically effaced. The novel shows, moreover, that what legitimizes and authorizes culture is a naturalized civilizational scheme. The Sākkiyans, as an urban people with claims to sovereign power, maintain that they are civilizationally "advanced," especially in opposition to the "uncivilized" and politically excluded Veddas (*væddō*), a name referring in general to any kind of forest-dwelling community, connoting savagery and primitivism, but denoting specifically, to the modern Sinhala reader, the so-called "tribal" communities of Sri Lanka. For the Sākkiyans, the transgression of civilizational norms is accompanied by an acute sense of shame, since it brings to the fore the usually submerged issue of caste. To be a Sākkiyan—even one who, by all odds, claims to be free of caste ideology—one must think, feel, and act according to prescribed, caste-bound scripts. For instance, in the hunting scene featured at the start of the novel, where Siduhat chastises his brother-in-law and adversary Dēvadatta for taking pleasure at the sight of his kill, Dēvadatta

[6]All translations from Sinhala are my own.

undermines Siduhat's judgment by shaming him for experiencing the "childish emotions" (*boḷaňda hæňgīm*) of "uneducated peasants" (*nūgat gæmiyan*). In turn, Siduhat deploys Sākkiyan civilizational rhetoric and caste supremacy, camouflaged by seemingly ethical and humanitarian ends, by asserting that his adversary is behaving like a Vedda (ibid., pp. 17-21). As the novel progresses and Siduhat embarks on the path to enlightenment, he would, of course, abandon this language. The "politically enlightened" Buddha does not articulate his vision of the liberated human over and against a sub-human, outcast, civilizational Other, but rather, *embodies* the human by disarticulating himself from the de-humanizing structures of caste.

The Sākkiyans' disavowal of caste and the functioning of a highly specific and distinctly *modern* civilizational scheme strongly suggest that *Bava Taraṇaya* was intended to work allegorically. After all, not only is the disavowal of caste a common *element* in Sinhala cultural discourse; it is also, as we have indicated above, an a priori *condition* for the consolidation of Sinhala as a modern ethno-national identity. Further indicative is the Sākkiyan princes' discourse on the Veddas and civilization, which hinges upon the distinction between "*sabhya*" (civilized or cultured) and "*asabhya*" (uncivilized, uncultured, or obscene). Interestingly, this very distinction was the subject of a prominent debate on obscenity, perversion, and the role of literature—the "*sabhya-asabhya-vādaya*"—that unfolded in the Sinhalasphere in the 1960s, drawing in a vast number of public intellectuals, Wickramasinghe included. The Sākkiyan princes' invocations of *sabhya-asabhya* distinctions most specifically echo Ananda Guruge's (1961) ideas during the debate, which maintained that *sabhya-asabhya-vādaya* was of central importance to Sinhala society well before the modern period due to the absence of Brahminical mandates against miscegenation, the caste-bound partitioning of cultural spheres, and the artificial inertness of the Sanskrit language, which was confined to a priestly/princely elite. In other words, for Guruge, cultural and civilizational norms *become* a matter of debate and theme of discourse for Sinhala society precisely because it lacks the rigid caste-based and linguistic partitions that Brahminical India maintains. *Sabhya-asabhya-vādaya* indexes for him Sinhala society's supposed openness to democratic change and flux.

Wickramasinghe's (1961) interventions in this debate covertly pushed back against Guruge's chronology to emphasize the modern, colonial basis of *sabhya-asabhya-vādaya*; and indeed, as we will further discuss in the following section, Wickramasinghe's conceptualization of caste also foregrounds the concept's colonial construction. Moreover, in his account, caste does not appear as a foil against which Sinhala society's core values can be written. Rather, it is re-written into colonial modern society, based not upon the traditional prestige of Sanskrit or a comparable "classical" language, but upon the social, political, and epistemic power of English. Indeed, among certain Sinhala speakers—especially among university students of the post-independence, pre-globalization generation—the English language was dubbed "*kaḍuva*" (the sword), for those who wielded it, those to whom it had been passed down as a familial inheritance, had access to colonially-derived social power, while those

who could not command it were cut off (Kandiah, 1984). In an essay published two years before *Bava Taraṇaya*, the same year that witnessed the first J.V.P. insurrection against the state, Wickramasinghe wrote:

> The social environment in the towns of Ceylon still remains a part of the legacy of colonial rule. Its linguistic class basis, a form of Westernised Brahminism, encourages even our angry young men to treat workers and peasants as the lowest classes. Far from trying to identify themselves with the latter, they aspire to imitate the middle and upper classes even in revolutionary attitudes… English colonial rule created an environment and atmosphere in Ceylon which easily converted the educated community into an elite of society who succumbed to the English language and to Western behaviour patterns. They discarded their own language, literature and culture, and persons of the urban lower middle-class and even some urbanized workers in towns began to imitate the elite. All these people formed a segregated minority community. Workers, peasants, the merchant class and even wealthy native capitalists, who did not adopt the English language and the behaviour patterns of the Westernised Sinhalese, have been and still are treated as a vulgar vernacular under class, lower even than the lowest rungs of the English-speaking under class, who imitate the Westernised elite in dress and behaviour patterns (1971/2006, p. 34).

The allegorical form enables *Bava Taraṇaya* to unpack the sociopolitical dynamics of this so-called "Westernized Brahminism" that Wickramasinghe diagnoses in Ceylonese society by retroactively mapping it onto the "original" Sanskritic context. If the English language—as *kaḍuva* or sword—signals the suturing of linguistic/epistemic power with political/societal power, *Bava Taraṇaya* shows how the brahmin and the kshatriya can be thought of as *functions*—functions pertaining to knowledge and power respectively—that work in conjunction. If in certain republics the brahmin caste legitimizes kshatriya power through religion and ritual in exchange for patronage and protection, even in anti-Brahminical polities like the Sākkiya republic, the kshatriyas are seen to mimic and replicate Brahminical worldviews and cultural practices. The novel also indicates how this system of knowledge and power is extended into the economic sphere by the wealthy mercantile castes, under whom the lower classes' labor is exploited and knowledge appropriated.

Siduhat is born into a republic where kshatriya power professes anti-Brahminism, yet where Brahminically derived forms of linguistic partitioning are deployed on a day-to-day basis. For instance, when the still naïve Siduhat visits a burial ground with his friend Kapila at the start of his dissident education, he talks about the subaltern castes that live off the burial grounds in Sanskrit so that only Kapila can understand him. The use of Sanskrit creates a partition between the studied object (the community that lives on the burial ground) and the studying subject (the two kshatriya princes). Those who are objectified and studied are barred from accessing knowledge about themselves, even as their speech and forms of self-representation are appropriated for

the production of such knowledge. However, this epistemic partitioning is contested by the grave-keeper, who understands what the two researcher-princes are saying, much to their surprise and embarrassment. The grave-keeper explains that his father was a brahmin and his mother a slave (*dāsa*); that he learnt Sanskrit and some aspects of the Vedas; and that, being an illicit product of miscegenation, he was banished from brahmin society during his childhood (Wickramasinghe, 1973, p. 32). The ideal authority of Sanskrit is challenged here through the *fact* of miscegenation, the fact against which the ideal of caste-purity is anxiously articulated.[7] The parallels between this scene and the Sri Lankan situation—that of "Westernized Brahminism" and English linguistic/epistemic superiority—are clear. If the Brahminic partitioning of linguistic and epistemic power in the novel is doomed to fail, so too does it in Sri Lankan society, where colonial modernity itself produces hybrid forms that contest the ideal partitions and hierarchies of colonial ideology (Bhabha, 1994). Indeed, without the functioning of hybridity and ambivalence, it is impossible to understand how individuals like Wickramasinghe, raised in rural society with little formal education, had access to colonial modern fields of knowledge, to the point of actively intervening in them and contesting their basis. It is this kind of complex social order—a system where repressive and rigid partitions and hierarchies co-exist with truant forms of mobility and access—that *Bava Taraṇaya* allegorizes; and it is against such a social order, and not a reified Brahminism, that the Buddha's intervention is articulated.

"What you seek is not a path of liberation (*vimukti*) but of revolution (*viplava*)," exclaims one of Siduhat's teachers, Uddaka, upon hearing his ideas for a psychosocially and politically liberated society (Wickramasinghe, 1973, p. 129). Uddaka's claim is justifiable, for Siduhat's quest in *Bava Taraṇaya* is explicitly political. Even its most "spiritual" elements are ultimately psychologized and subsumed within a broader political project that aims to transform humanity as such. *Bava Taraṇaya* pushes back against the dominant trope that Siddhartha relinquishes his princely life of pleasure out of a sense of "*kalakirīma*" (a feeling of dissatisfaction or disillusionment) and seeks a spiritual/ascetic path (*āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*) aimed at the cessation of desire and suffering (*dukkha*). Unlike the Siddhartha of canonical Buddhism, Wickramasinghe's revolutionary Siduhat feels not only dissatisfaction, but also rage (*kōpaya*); a politicized rage directed towards the brahmin-kshatriya confluence and mercantile complicity that partition knowledge and power such that human suffering becomes non-universalizable and incommensurable between castes (ibid., p. 53). A path that

[7]It is also important to note that *Bava Taraṇaya* stages a critique of Sanskritic-Vedic authority at the level of form and language. Wickramasinghe dismisses previous "classical" Buddha biographies on the grounds that they give way to the Brahminical/puranic mysticism and ornamentalism that the Buddha himself rejected. He also takes effort to expunge from the text Sanskritic words and letters—such as aspirated consonants (*mahāprāṇa*)—which he claims are "intellectualized signs constructed by brahmins and urban intellectuals to show that they are a separate race/clan with no relationship to common people" (Wickramasinghe, 1973, pp. 5-8). Even Sanskritic *tatsama* words that are commonly used in Sinhala are either rendered through *tadbhava* forms or heavily vernacularized; for example, "*kṣatriya*" appears in the novel as either "*kæt*" or "*kʾsattiriya*."

seeks liberation from suffering must, therefore, first seek the annihilation of the system that makes suffering itself a caste-bound and hierarchized condition. Human suffering can only become a cognizable object when humanity is equally granted to all, and not contingent on birth and lineage. Siduhat thus declares that "it is necessary to find a path to annihilate these divisions of caste (*kula*), race (*varga*), and family (*pavul*). I renounced domestic life not to liberate my soul" (ibid., p. 101). But why is renunciation necessary at all? As Siduhat's foster-mother Gōtamī argues, one liberates "the suffering masses not by running away from society," by renunciation, but instead, by initiating "social change." The novel provides a significant rebuttal to this through Yasōdarā, Siduhat's wife: *renunciation is not a form of escapism, but a form of divestment.* If Siduhat were to pursue social change without renunciation, his project would amount to a state-bound reformism, of whose results only the Sākkiyans could reap. If he were to depend purely on the resources given to him by his caste-bound education, he would only be able to propose a path for brahmins and kshatriyas. To address a common humanity, Siduhat must cast himself out of his familiar web of social relations, divest himself from brahmin-kshatriya forms of epistemic and political power, and refuse social recognition. Only through such a process can a radical humanism aimed at the annihilation of caste truly emerge (ibid., p. 108).

The standard account of Siddhartha's *saṃvega* (feelings of alienation and dismay coupled with a sense of spiritual urgency) upon seeing the "four sights"—an old man, a sick person, a corpse, and an ascetic—becomes vastly insufficient to account for the more revolutionary path taken by *Bava Taraṇaya*'s Siduhat. Indeed, in questioning the mystical and idealized accounts of the four sights as the basis for Siddhartha's spiritual disillusionment and eventual quest, Wickramasinghe's formulations closely resemble those of Ambedkar in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957/2011), although there is no known evidence that Wickramasinghe was directly influenced by Ambedkar's treatise. What informs Siduhat's choice of social divestment is not a naval-gazing which results in him realizing the futility of kshatriya erotic life in face of an abstract and metaphysical truth on impermanence and suffering, but rather, a long-drawn and dissident education that witnesses the suffering of common people (Wickramasinghe, 1973, p. 46). Importantly, Siduhat's sights appear doubled in the novel. On the one hand, he sees within his own historical context, producing concepts and names—*dāsa*, *sæḍol*, *gopalu*, etc.—that sound archaic to the us "modern" readers. On the other hand, he sees *for* us our own social fabric, transforming archaisms into signs of present-day destitution and historical injustice. In place of the classical four sights, then, Siduhat witnesses the extreme exploitation and dehumanization of slaves or indentured laborers in his father's agricultural lands—a system reminiscent of the plantation economy central to Sri Lanka's modern history—whom he hurriedly and somewhat impressionably sets free (ibid., pp. 24-26). Similarly, he is deeply struck by the destitution of the urban poor, whose extreme poverty appears to him as the ironic yet bitter price that must be paid for their recognition and incorporation within the social order legitimized by the brahmins, governed by the kshatriyas, and

economically driven by the merchants (*veḷeňdun*). Siduhat contrasts this poverty and recognition—this recognition-in-poverty—with the non-poverty and non-recognition of the Veddas. The Veddas, in other words, are not "poor" since their social being is embedded within a different and incommensurable system of values, an epistemic-aesthetic system deprivileged by the Brahminic, yet *external* to it and opaque. Rather than refusing to encounter the Veddas' ways of knowing, or refusing to touch their bodies, Siduhat enjoys close and prolonged communion with them, which leads him to realize the caste-bound nature of his education and cultural inheritance, which portrayed the Veddas as savage and uncivilized (ibid., p. 52). He thus overcomes his prior moralism—his "*sabhya-asabhya-vādaya*"—that attempted to ground ethical value in a teleological vision of civilizational progress. Indeed, it is through Vedda society that Siduhat first encounters the possibility of an "outside," the possibility of a new form of sociality divested from caste- and class-based forms of stratification and oppression.[8]

Most strikingly, however, it is not the sight of an ascetic that prompts Siduhat to relinquish domestic life and princely comforts, but the words of Vajirā, a concubine of Sudovun (Śuddhodana), Siduhat's father. Vajirā, comparing herself to a caged bird, complains that she is sick of her repetitive life, expressing a desire to free herself from socially-produced repetitiveness by becoming a wandering ascetic or a prostitute (ibid., p. 36). What lay the foundation for Siduhat's political path, therefore, is an exposure to the life-worlds, epistemologies, desires, and sufferings of underprivileged castes, slaves, concubines, and tribals: women and men for whom the unequal and unjust stratification and distribution of "being" bars access to universal, spiritual, and metaphysical truths about liberation. These are subjects for whom liberation is inseparable from revolution. Readers of the novel, who, as we mentioned above, are either ethnically Sinhalese or (more rarely) Sri Lanka "specialists," *know* through experience that this kind of liberation is far from being realized; and, indeed, the first wave of the novel's readers had just seen the state crush the revolutionary dissent of the 1970s. *Bava Taraṇaya*'s Buddha, in this dynamically evolving social fabric, is as much a figure of futurity as one of historicity: a figure that abides by a casteless and classless humanity to come; a figure somewhat indigestible for the mainstream Sinhala Buddhism patronized by the Sri Lankan state.

[8]Wickramasinghe's portrayal of how the Veddas provide Siduhat with the possibility of an outside (and of divestment), while simultaneously proving false the *kæt-kula*'s image of Veddas as uncivilized hunters, calls to mind Obeyesekere's (2022) recent writings on the Veddas. If the *kæt-kula*'s image of the uncivilized Vedda is a fabrication intended to buttress its own claims to caste superiority, Obeyesekere shows how the idea that the Veddas are an aboriginal, and even "indigenous" tribe of hunters beyond the pale of civilization is a colonial construct aimed at producing a primitive Other. His study goes on to reveal how the Veddas have not always been wholly "outside" Sinhala society, nor necessarily hunters, and how "outsiderness" itself is produced through complex and historically contingent forces. Indeed, although Wickramasinghe is neither situated within the same epistemic field or problem-space as Obeyesekere, nor particularly interested in giving voice to the historical Veddas of Lanka, his portrayal of Siduhat's intimacy with the Veddas offers interpretive possibilities that resonate with Obeyesekere's ideas.

The antinomies of the Buddha's path continue to unfold to this day within the Sinhalasphere. The spiritual and philosophical reading of the path, which is legitimized not only by state narratives but also by scholarship, cannot be easily reconciled with the political reading of the path, which, though inflected by complex historical differences, cuts across dissident movements across India and Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka's postwar political landscape, not only the so-called ethnonationalist rightwing, primarily represented by the Rajapakse clan, but also politicians with more "liberal" façades—such as Ranil Wickremesinghe, who rose to presidency through the power vacuum left by the ousted Gotabaya Rajapakse in 2022—resort to forms of discourse that center Buddhist authenticity and cultural essence. Indeed, even Ranil Wickremesinghe's 2024 election campaign paraded the slogan of a "Theravada trade economy" (Gunasena, 2024). In November 2022, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, then an opposition M.P. representing the J.V.P., remarked that despite President Wickremesinghe's constant invocations of Buddhism, he seems to have failed to acknowledge the Buddha's central message of equality (*samānātvatāva*) and social justice (*samāja sādhāranatva*). Wickremesinghe dismissively replied that what the Buddha preached was not equality, but the "four noble truths" centered on *dukkha* or suffering, and the *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga* as a spiritual path for overcoming it (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2022, pp. 1205-1206). In this brief parliamentary exchange, Wickremesinghe and Dissanayake articulate the antinomic readings of the Buddha's path. One sees, of course, in Dissanayake's remarks the specter of *Bava Taraṇaya*'s Siduhat, whose revolutionary path implies not only Buddhist reform, but an entire rethinking of Buddhism's relationship to the modern Sri Lankan state; a Buddhism that can be leveraged by *all* that experience inequality and injustice against the state that professes to "guard" it. It is significant for us, of course, that the primary category through which *Bava Taraṇaya* articulates such political possibilities is through caste; and yet caste is not simply an allegory for class, but a concept that opens up the possibility of addressing Buddhism, as a historical tradition of revolutionary thought, to the deep-seated sociopolitical inequalities reproduced within colonial and postcolonial modernity.

The Fall of the Brahmins: Questions on Caste and Knowledge

It is perhaps due to its allegorical dimension that *Bava Taraṇaya* appears as one of the most accessible points in Wickramasinghe's corpus through which a critical and conceptual discourse on caste from the Sinhalasphere can be inaugurated. The allegorical dimension, as we discussed above, allows for the complex present of caste to be narrated and unpacked through a more familiar historical narrative: one set in India, involving hierarchical social relations between legible caste groups that fall within the well-known if not overstated fourfold *varṇa* system. Wickramasinghe's caste-text, nonetheless, extends well beyond the domain of literature, and his writings on the brahmin caste are not simply allegorical or metaphorical, as we briefly saw in his references to the Westernized Brahminism that forms the linguistic class basis of urban Ceylon (1971/2006, p. 34). It is worth asking, however, if there is not a way of

historicizing and mobilizing Wickramasinghe's ideas of the brahmin caste (*bamuṇu kulaya*) without circling back to his fictional writings, such as the Buddha biography discussed above. In other words, beyond the allegorical text of *Bava Taraṇaya*, how might we interpret Wickramasinghe's claim that a brahmin caste asserts epistemic superiority and furthers the coloniality of knowledge, when, as per the dominant narrative, Sinhala society has been shaped by an allegedly anti-Brahminical religious and intellectual tradition—Buddhism—and has no identifiable brahmins?[9] In order to answer this question, it may be useful to defamiliarize the term "*bamuṇu kulaya*" itself; that is, to not treat it as something whose meaning we can easily gauge, but to appreciate its *strangeness*, especially in terms of its function within the historical and political field that Wickramasinghe is situated in.

Let us start with the second word in the term in question: *kulaya*. It is often said that a direct equivalent for the word "caste" cannot be found in South Asian languages. A key assumption here, of course, is that English or Portuguese, or even their so-called creolized forms are not truly South Asian, at least not in the way that Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages are. The consensus among scholars is that the word caste, derived from the Portuguese *casta*, came to be used to systematically understand the *varṇa* categories (*brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra*, in hierarchical order) and the more complex and localized *jāti* configurations (comprising regionally-specific endogamous groups), that were perceived to be the basis for the political, economic, and cultural functioning of greater India. Given this linguistic gap, it has become standard practice for scholars to qualify their use of the term caste when studying communities that use different terms and concepts to describe their own lived experiences of social stratification, hierarchy, and endogamy. Despite acknowledging linguistic gaps and the impossibility of direct translation, endonyms such as *jāti*, *vaṁsa*, *kula*, *variga*, and *minissu* used in Sri Lanka are frequently subsumed into the signifier "caste." This signifier, in turn, defines and delimits the significatory field within which the vernacular terms are indexed. We might recall here, the scene of linguistic and epistemic partitioning involving the Sākkiyan researcher-princes and the gravekeeper in *Bava Taraṇaya*. We are accustomed to thinking about how local terms and knowledges are extracted and appropriated within standardized conceptual categories that bear the mark of theoreticality, abstractness, and academic legitimacy. That is, the flow of knowledge is often thought through the one-way passage from Prakrit to Sanskrit; from non-European vernaculars to metropolitan, colonial European languages; from ethnic particularity to human universality. The *Bava Taraṇaya* episode, however, points towards the *failure* of this one-way process, by showing how subjects who are officially barred from the latter, epistemically privileged signifiers,

[9]Obeyesekere (2015) has contested this assumption by writing about the movement of brahmins into Sri Lanka and their assimilation into Sinhala society, where they were demoted in terms of the varna system yet promoted through Lankan values. Wickramasinghe's assertion on the existence of brahmins, of course, operates entirely differently to Obeyesekere's more historicist account, for it takes the form of an intervention in the *concept* of the brahmin, in light of the widespread idea of their non-existence in Sri Lanka.

cognize and retranslate them, ensnaring and subverting them within the sphere of vernacularity. Being "low caste" in the eyes of brahmins—whether "Sanskritic" or "Westernized"—does not imply ignorance or the lack of knowledge, but rather, a state of disenfranchisement within the field of knowledge, in which the brahmin is structurally privileged.

A similar process might be imagined with the word caste. In Sinhala, although *kulaya* is certainly a word whose use predates colonial rule, it has come to subsume and contain the term caste as well the genealogies of colonial encounter and epistemic exchange that are appended to it.[10] In other words, *kulaya* is not simply a native word for caste. It is also one that cognizes and indexes the colonial construction of caste. It is this term specifically, and never quite the others, that Wickramasinghe deploys. Wickramasinghe's views on colonial construction are complex. On the one hand, he notes that the idea that local concepts and ways of being must be independent, sovereign, and traditionally "Eastern" is a result ("*phala*") of the waning of colonial empire and the power of the white man ("*sudu minisun*") (1969/2006, p. 74). On the other hand, colonial construction is by no means for him the genesis of all things sensible, for a major part of his intellectual labor is devoted to understanding the unconscious yet irrepressible historical transmissions that shape popular culture and quotidian life across the historical ruptures ensuing from colonialism. Wickramasinghe's usage of *kulaya*, therefore, might be thought of as straddling these two somewhat disparate positions: a straddling constitutive of the postcolonial condition.

The colonial construction of caste in Sri Lanka is a complicated affair, no less than because caste was one of the key terrains upon which Ceylonese difference was articulated with respect to the Indian mainland. In the early nineteenth century, when caste was becoming a well-defined category central to colonial governance in India, it was gradually losing legitimacy with the colonial state in Ceylon (Rogers, 2004). If one were to construct a colonial genealogy of caste on the island,[11] it is possible to see how caste goes from being a relatively general, geographically and racially hazy idea during the Portuguese period, to a more racially loaded yet conceptually vague category during the Dutch and even early British periods, and finally, to the most recent systematic and "disciplinary" concept that marks Indian difference; or, given the long-drawn process of partitioning and differentiation of the island of Ceylon from the Indian mainland,[12] *a different kind of Indian difference*. India is doubly implicated

[10]That "*kulaya*" is the closest approximation of the Portuguese-derived English term "caste" is also noted in recent anthropological studies (Douglas, 2017, p. 11).

[11]The quick and barebones genealogy I am working with is based on a reading of Queyroz's *Conquista* (1992, pp. 19-22) and Knox's account of the interior of Ceylon (1911, pp. 105-107), both from the seventeenth century, Valentijn's description (1978, pp. 161, 190-191) from the eighteenth century, and a several nineteenth-century British accounts, foremost among which is Cordiner's (1807, pp. 90-95).

[12]I am influenced here by Sujit Sivasundaram's (2013) discussion of Ceylon's *islanding* in the context of the British Empire in South Asia. A longer and, perhaps, conceptually different kind of islanding might be imagined if one were to consider the Portuguese and Dutch periods of colonial rule, as well as precolonial understandings of space through land, sea, and sky.

in the idea of "caste in Ceylon / Sri Lanka": first, India becomes the privileged site for the description of caste as an abstract and potentially universal system. That is, even the broadest, emptiest, and most universalistic invocations of caste as a category frequently use the case of India to empirically furnish the category's bare form; and thus, the use of the category for Sri Lanka somewhat inevitably casts the shadow of India upon the island. Second, if one were to take caste as an anthropological and historical "given" pertaining to the *real* of Indian society, then it seems reasonable to assume that it must be a significant—even if secret—factor in the story of Sri Lanka's population and ethnic formation, especially since most communities on the island trace their ancestry and some of their cultural traditions back to various parts—and *times*—of India. This complex relationship to India as well as to the "world"—the world proper to the signifier caste—undergirds *kulaya* as Wickramasinghe uses it, especially when directed towards epistemic critique and a decolonial politics of knowledge.

That *kulaya*/caste appears as a departicularized term that cannot be circumscribed within the Sri Lankan nation or Sinhala ethnic identity does not diminish the term's heuristic value. Indeed, the term's ambiguity and porousness have been mobilized by anti-caste politics globally. One thinks here of the Dalit Panthers' attempts at transcending the narrow framework of caste and religion in India through solidarity with "Dalits of the world," people suffering under the "hideous plot of American imperialism," "the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion" (*Dalit Panther Manifesto*, 1973, pp. viii-ix). One also may call to mind invocations of caste beyond South Asia; for instance, Isabel Wilkerson's (2020) recent efforts to think about racial hierarchy in the United States through the prism of caste. The colonial ambivalence of caste is transformed into a discursive advantage in the political field. If caste points towards something archaic and unassimilable within ideally conceived modernity, this archaism itself is mobilized for the revelation of modernity's "dark" underbelly, which is coloniality (Mignolo, 2011).

If *kulaya* functions as a term that reveals caste's colonial construction as well as political potentiality, then *bamuṇu kulaya* signals an attempt at thinking about a departicularized, de-Indianized Brahminism that operates within the colonial modern economy of knowledge. Wickramasinghe's best-known criticism of this *bamuṇu kulaya* appeared in a polemical essay "Bamuṇukulaya Biñda Væṭīma" ("The Fall of the Brahmin Caste") published in the wake of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's 1956 electoral victory over the United National Party, which was briefly mentioned above. Although 1956 paved way for the Sinhalization and Buddhistization of the state, it also bore witness to more "anticolonial" forms of expression, especially in the cultural sphere, that were relatively independent of nationalist and ethno-chauvinistic elements. Wickramasinghe's intervention is best located within this anticolonial space, for he is concerned neither about party politics nor about ethnic hegemony, but about the transformations in the post-colony's cultural and epistemic landscape. That is, amid the nationalist clamor, Wickramasinghe chooses to focus on how the cultural

consciousness of the people has come to challenge the epistemic authority of the colonial university, announcing the imminent fall of the brahmin caste.

Wickramasinghe asserts that since Ceylon's independence from the British in 1948—an independence won not through bloodshed but through peaceful piety—the country has been ruled by a Sinhala brahmin caste, a Westernized elite who exercise epistemic supremacy over the masses and maintain colonial relations in the absence of white rulers. As the counsellor (*purōhitayā*) of this caste, he names none other than Sir Ivor Jennings (1958/2016, pp. 84-86), an Englishman and Cambridge-educated scholar of constitutional law, who became the first Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ceylon in 1942. A liberal proponent of the colonial civilizational and educational mission, Jennings insisted on Ceylon's cultural and civilizational lack, highlighting the need for the colonial university to operate beyond its usual limits, subsuming broader cultural and civic functions: "The colonial university is not merely a university," he wrote. "[I]t is also National Gallery, British Museum, Burlington House, Bloomsbury, Chelsea, Royal Society, London Library, Chatham House, Drury Lane, and much more besides" (1946, p. 231). The history of education in Ceylon is filled with examples of how colonialism not only reinforced caste but actively produced it. The colonial state's first formal higher educational initiatives in the nineteenth century were directed at the sons of Mudliyars, an elite caste formed not through "traditional" links to pre-colonial Lankan kingdoms, but through loyal service to the Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial powers (Jayawardena, 2000). Ceylon's first university was established only in 1942—nearly a century after its neighboring India—as a result of native advocacy, particularly from bodies like the Ceylon University Association and the Jaffna Association, which represented the island's emerging bourgeoisie (Warnapala, 2011; Alwis, 2013). While a relatively decolonial model—at least in a limited sense—could have been envisioned through this native advocacy (Schubert, 2020), the University of Ceylon was ultimately realized as a Jenningsian colonial university and an instrument of Western epistemic power.[13] Up until the 1970s, a decade that opened with youth insurgency, the university privileged not only the upper and upper-middle classes, but also something that might be thought of as a Westernized brahmin caste. That is, a conservative and regressive force that could rightly be called *caste* maintained—mainly through cultural hegemony—the linguistic and epistemic superiority of the English language and Western knowledge, despite the dynamic class mobilities that

[13]Prior to the founding of the University of Ceylon under the Jenningsian model, other kinds of colonially-delimited forms of higher education were operative in Ceylon. The immediate predecessor of the University of Ceylon, the University College, which was established in 1921, for example, functioned as an affiliated institute tied to the University of London, administered, however, in the form of a Government Department (Warnapala, 2011). If the Jenningsian university adapted the rhetoric of liberal humanism, the ideology that drove the University College was more explicitly utilitarian. The colonial authorities in Ceylon seem to have been cautious, furthermore, to regulate affiliation in such a way that directly benefited the governance of the island as a crown colony. Thus, for instance, affiliations with the University of Calcutta which had been formed by the Colombo Academy in 1859, were later severed, particularly in light of the burgeoning anticolonial movement in India.

had been enabled through the introduction of Free Education and the Swabhasha scheme, whereby students could receive education free of charge and through the local languages, Sinhala and Tamil. Caste/*kulaya* in the Wickramasinghean sense, therefore, is an intrinsic limit within modernity and its ideal aspirations of class mobility; a limit that demands the addressing of the colonial structures that undergird modernity.

The brahmin caste, says Wickramasinghe, mystifies the field of knowledge in order to assert epistemic superiority and exclusivity: academic language often terrorizes students, confounding their minds, and crushing their spirits. The effects are doubled when academia delegitimizes students' "mother-tongues" and operates in an esoteric register of another language which itself is experienced as a colonial imposition. The Indic parallel to this, which is used allegorically in *Bava Taraṇaya* and also featured in Wickramasinghe's writings on the history of Sinhala literature, is the ornamentalism, conservatism, and enforced stylistic and syntactic complexity of Sanskrit, the "original" language of the brahmins (see: Wickramasinghe, 1963). Despite the absence of brahmins in Sri Lanka—in the sense of a traditionally maintained social and political elite—the colonial university and its architect, Sir Jennings, ensure that Brahminical forms of epistemic mystification continue to operate. The discipline of anthropology at the University of Ceylon, Wickramasinghe notes, purposefully excludes the study of "comparative anthropology," thus barring the possibility of an anthropology of the West, a provincialization of universalized colonial culture, and even the demystification of academic language. Such a mode of study, writes Wickramasinghe, would "peel away the rotting skin of the filaria-ridden foot (*baravā kakula*) known as Western culture." The filaria-ridden foot, he continues, given its swollen and formidable appearance, is what the university's archons—the Western brahmins—use to intimidate the rulers of the country, raising epistemic power to the plane of political power (1958/2016, p. 89). Nonetheless, the filaria-ridden foot might be imagined as numb, lacking in sensation, and slow: as inhibiting movement. Thus, while a range of sociopolitical and cultural dynamics were transforming the sphere of knowledge-production in the country post-independence, resulting in truant forms of epistemic access and mobility, the dull and conservative university-apparatus fails to cognize these. It simply cannot keep up. This, for Wickramasinghe, is the historic fall of the brahmin caste, a rupture signaling the possibility of a more ethical and decolonized epistemic field.

The Wickramasinghean brahmin caste, nonetheless, did not completely fall in the 1950s. Perhaps, what the 50s witnessed was a historical *hope* of its eventual dissolution. Indeed, if we were to abide by our own departicularization and politicization of *kulaya*/caste, such a process cannot be imagined within the confines of a single ethnic community or nation. Reading Wickramasinghe's caste-text today, within our current historical conjuncture where Brahminism and the coloniality of knowledge have been reproduced within the corporate university at a global scale, is refreshing and even helpful. The epistemic forces he narrativizes—whether regressive or progressive, colonial or anticolonial, caste-bound or radically human—are very much alive today, signaling both the constraints and possibilities for knowledge in an era where questions

of colonial oppression and dehumanization have returned in full force. It is in light of these present-day problems that I have attempted a reading of Wickramasinghe's caste-text above, especially in a way that breaks the ethnically bound structure of address to which Sinhala literary and intellectual expression is confined. The lessons Wickramasinghe's text teaches us about caste (or *through* caste) are not addressed to the Sinhalese despite being written in Sinhala, but addressed to the *human*: a life-form that can only emerge through a global political process of decolonization and the annihilation of caste, for which no blueprint or script exists.

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Caste, Space, and Retail Religiosity in Tamil Toronto[1]

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Abstract

This paper is focused on ritually organized caste practices in the Canadian Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. It describes how Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto, Canada, who in some ways have tried to turn their backs on caste (especially in the second and third generations), nonetheless use caste as a sort of marketing "brand" in an increasingly competitive Hindu temple "market". This paper is animated by an underlying concern with how spatial aspects of Sri Lankan Tamil religious life were formed and transformed in diaspora in ways that altered also what it means to act and be a Tamil person. It is important to note, however, that what is at issue here is not simply the effect on diaspora Tamil forms of exclusionary sociality (in this case, caste) due to the loss of an imagined or real territory – a traditional concern of diaspora studies and its worries about nostalgia – but rather changes in the religiously mediated relationship, via caste, between Tamil people and their landscapes, and hence changes forced upon social relations by confrontations with shifting or entirely new political geographies of an anxious world.

Keywords

Caste, Tamil Diaspora, Hindu Temples, Religious Markets, Personhood, Cultural Spaces

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Introduction

What happened to Sri Lankan Tamil notions of caste when the people who used them went into diaspora? More specifically, what happened to such notions (and associated practices) when over 100,000 Sri Lankan Tamils found themselves from the early 1980s onwards constructing new lives in Toronto, Canada, a place earlier little associated with Tamil people?[2] For the most part, caste-talk in Toronto has become a subtle practice in daily life, more often signaled obliquely and quietly in discussions of marriage or family history, and its importance may be quietly fading altogether for younger Tamils born in Canada. Many younger Tamil men and women I have spoken with, for example, claim to know little about caste, date across caste and ethnic lines, and do not believe caste identity should guide their marriage choices although some who have said this to me have gone on to have arranged marriages.[3] This development stands in some contrast to attitudes about caste that many members of the diaspora—the current older generation—brought with them into diaspora. Consider, for example, the famous case of Selvanayagam Selladurai, a 47-year-old father who in 2007 used his minivan to run down his daughter, her "low caste" boyfriend, and his son-in-law at a Scarborough strip mall, supposedly to prevent the "dishonor" her relationship would bring to the family. Most notable to me, here, is the obvious resistance of the victims—his daughter, her boyfriend, and, apparently, his son-in-law—to the strict caste etiquette motivating the father. The victims' apparent lack of interest in the everyday cultural practice of caste testifies to the shift I am interested in discussing here.[4] The more recent attempt by the Toronto School Board to ban caste-based discrimination at the urging of Yalini Rajakulasingham, a young Sri Lankan Tamil School Trustee from an oppressed caste, suggests, indeed, that second and third generation hostility to caste may be becoming more public in the future (Teotonio, 2023). In any case, fieldwork conducted in Toronto between 2001 and 2013 and continuous contact with Sri Lankan Tamil residents since then convinces me that this attitude is quite general.

Such anti-caste (or, at least, shy) attitudes among young Canadian Sri Lankan Tamils do not by themselves, of course, prove that caste is completely disappearing as

[2]Amarasingam (2013, p. 5) points out that while Sri Lankan Tamils show up in the Canadian census as early as 1948, the total population remained in the very low hundreds until the Sri Lankan civil war started in 1983. As of 2021 Statistics Canada counted 237,890 Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada of whom roughly half live in the Greater Toronto Area. (Bonnyman, 2023).

[3]Bucernius, Thompson and Dunford (2022) conducted interviews among young Sri Lankan Tamil men that appear to connect this anti-caste feeling to the war in Sri Lanka. For example, they record one twenty-six-year-old saying ""Our parents and grandparents still talk about the castes, and they used to dictate who you can marry and so on but really, this plays less of a role nowadays because of the war. There is no time to obsess....we are all in the same boat, so to say." (545).

[4]I am indebted to one of my anonymous reviewers for this example. See O'Toole 2010. I should note, however, that such attacks in the Tamil community (and in general) are rare according to a 2021 Government of Canada report, "Preliminary Examination of so-called 'Honour Killings' in Canada", which found only two reported instances, and only one—the Selladurai case—involving inter-caste relations.

a factor in daily life. Mounaguru (2019), for example, has documented the importance of caste considerations for diasporic Sri Lankan Tamils negotiating transnational marriages. Moreover, a disinclination to speak publicly about caste outside the family (or one's own caste and its associated controversies) has long been common among Sri Lankan Tamil people both at home and abroad, though I think for different reasons. I have experienced this reluctance to speak openly about caste—outside, that is, the special insider frameworks afforded by caste status battles and temple-centered arguments about "rights "(*urimai*)—in my own fieldwork in Batticaloa; and it has been noted by other scholars working in Jaffna (Thiranagama, 2018, p. 374; Kuganathan, 2022, p. 255). Yet in both regions caste has continued to be regnant despite such reticence (Paramsothy, 2018; Sanmugeswaran, 2020).

What explains this? In Tamil Sri Lanka this public reticence about caste (like an American reticence to talk publicly about race) likely emerged out of an ambivalent colonial and postcolonial history. The Portuguese and, later, the Dutch codified local caste practices into documents such as the 1707 Jaffna *Thesawalamai*, which legitimized Vellalar rule over four enslaved "untouchable" castes there (Esler, 2025, p. 384), and publicly accepted local practices such as those on the east coast involving spatially organized, pre-colonial, Mukkuvar caste-ruled, temple-centered polities, called *vannimai* or *teesam* (McGilvray, 1982, p. 59; Whitaker, 1999). But according to John Rogers (2004; Esler, 2025, p. 384), the British colonial government of Ceylon, unlike that of India, viewed caste as an illegitimate "form of social identification", outlawing compulsory caste labor in 1835, and officially ignoring caste henceforward, even while tolerating Vellalar dominance in the north, and never fully grasping the role that caste and temples were playing in local governance in the east (Whitaker, 1999). Here being quiet about caste fit the mutually incoherent agendas of both local caste elites and the British colonial government. If one adds to this the tenor of modernist rhetoric in later nineteenth and twentieth century state politics, which tended to ignore the local to advance the imperial or, later, the national, this public reticence to speak about caste outside the local communities where it was regnant becomes even more understandable.

Interestingly, somewhat similarly, American missionaries, who began to come to Jaffna in large numbers in the early nineteenth century to establish Christian schools and evangelize, eventually accepted caste for pragmatic reasons as a precondition of operating there. One American missionary, predictably, likened forcing Vellalar converts to associate with "low caste people" as amounting to forcing "affluent people in Boston and Newyork [sic] societies [….] to sit at the same tables with black or white labourers" (Amarasingam, 2015, p. 165; see also Balmforth, 2020).[5] One might argue that this tacit approval of (and subtle attraction to) caste may have been one reason the efforts of the Jaffna religious reformer Arumuka Navalar (1822-1879) proved so successful in resisting missionary Christianity. That is, in addition to being able

[5]Balmforth (2020) discusses in detail how the American Ceylon Mission after at first attempting to "break caste" in their schools eventually decided that an alliance with the Vellalar and a tacit acceptance of their enslavement of the three laboring castes, the *aṭimakaḷ,* was more practical.

to use the missionaries' own rhetorical and technological innovations against them, Navalar's full-throated defense of Jaffna Tamil Saivite practice (*samaya*) was also, without having to say so too publicly, a defense of Vellalar caste rule (Silva, 2021, p. 30; Thiruchandran, 2021, p. 59).[6]

Hence, in Sri Lanka itself a shyness about discussing caste openly has never been good evidence of the erosion of caste as an active form of social control and exclusion (Paramsothy, 2018). For example, Jaffna's Vellalars, have frequently defended the obligatory, caste-based, form of social control (*kaṭṭuppāṭu*) that favors their hegemony, opposing, for example, the *pañcamar* ("oppressed caste") temple entry movement of the 1960s (ibid; Pfaffenberger, 1982). In the east, meanwhile, caste disputes centered on temples continued to animate much public activity below the level (and understanding) of the postcolonial state (Whitaker, 1999). Of course, during the civil war caste talk and discrimination was vigorously suppressed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the militant separatist Tamil army which controlled much of northern and eastern Sri Lanka[7] until defeated (in sanguinary fashion) by Sri Lankan Government forces in 2009 (Bremner, 2013; Madavan, 2011; Kuganathan, 2022, pp. 245–251).[8] But during the war, caste continued as a central organizing activity within temples and the communities directly connected to them, often to the confusion and dismay of both Sri Lankan government forces and the LTTE (Maunaguru, 2020; Kuganathan, 2022, p. 253). And after the war, caste-based action returned to Tamil public life (if not as much to public expression) with surprising vigor. In interviews conducted in Jaffna, Batticaloa, and Colombo in 2015, middle-aged, dominant caste, men and women (in Jaffna, with Vellalar; in the east, with Vellalar and Ceerpathar) frequently expressed a fear that if "not high caste" people neglected their ritual caste obligations, this would create social chaos or, as they put it, a society of "no restraint" (*kaṭṭuppāṭu illai*).[9]

[6]Thiruchandran (2021) claims, correctly I think, that the role defending Vallalar caste privilege played in Navalar's reform efforts has been systematically under-emphasized by many scholars. She also raises the issue of whether caste and Hindusim are really linked. She thinks, theologically speaking, not. I think that empirically the link between caste and Hindu ritual in northern and eastern Sri Lanka is demonstrable. But since caste-style forms of organization extend, in South Asia as a whole, into Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and, Sikh communities, an essentializing definition of caste putting Hinduism (or the Vedas) at its core is also problematic (Mines and Lamb 2010: 154). See also Ambalavanar's discussion of the construction of a "Caiva Public" by Navalar (2006). Or consider Winslow's (2024) point that Sinhalese Buddhist caste is ontologically distinct. Caste in South Asia is a heuristic "family resemblance" category bespeaking similarities but, ethnographically speaking, not a singular, characteristic shared by all instances.

[7]Thiranagama (2018: 372) argues, somewhat to the contrary, that while the LTTE officially disallowed open expressions of caste prejudice it did not "rigidly enforce anti-caste laws, despite its official stance". Nonetheless, she also notes wavering transformations in practice, if not in attitudes, during the war such as inter-caste marriages within the LTTE between dominant caste and oppressed caste cadre, that, afterwards, were condemned by families trying to return to pre-war caste etiquette.

[8]A UN report (2011) estimated that at least 40,000 Tamil civilians died in the last month of the war.

[9]See Sanmugeswaran 2020 for a complete discussion of this fear among middle class Vellalar men.

This fear of social looseness was being expressed even as the departure of many relatively wealthy "upper" caste (and, a bit later, some "lower" caste) people from Jaffna and the eastern Batticaloa District during the war, and a subsequent eventual influx of diaspora money back to Sri Lanka, began to change some of the power dynamics of caste in Tamil Sri Lanka.[10] Sanmugeswaran (2020) has written with great sensitivity about attempts by Tamil people to rebuild villages destroyed by the war. He points out that the absence of the physical landmarks that once delineated caste spaces, and the presence of diaspora money flowing now, sometimes, to formerly oppressed caste people empowering them to "remember" old divisions differently, called old village hegemonies into question even if not, apparently, the very idea of caste itself (2020). Thiranagama (2012) has described this new postwar dynamic in Jaffna as a tension between two competing "poles" of Tamil civility: war-time ethnic egalitarianism (we are all Tamil!) and pre-war caste ("intra-ethic") hierarchy, with older, Jaffna Vellalars reasserting hierarchy and young oppressed caste people (newly empowered by Vellalar depopulation and diaspora money) championing egalitarianism. Sanmugeswaran (2020) has shown that similar postwar tensions often arise during the rebuilding of village temples as debates about the caste-rights (*urimai*) that emanate from them.

In Sri Lanka's Eastern Province, similarly, although caste practices have been revived with surprising enthusiasm, and the old game of temple-centered caste disputes continues, diasporic money is linked to the ongoing "agamic" (orthodox and Sanskritic) transformations of many of the area's important "regional" (*tēcam*) temples.[11] These transformations may ultimately roil caste positions in the region by

[10]Kuganathan (2022:260) suggests that Vellalar migration from Jaffna during the war may have cut down their population enough to have left them a minority in a District where they were once a majority.

[11]On Sri Lanka's eastern coast, and to a certain extent in Jaffna, people tend to distinguish between Āgama temples, organized along ritual lines laid down in a large set of Sanskritic texts, and *pattati* or, more often *pattaci (பத்தகி)* temples, organized according to local traditions. Since the war, there has been a tendency for east coast non- Āgama temples to "Āgama-cize". That is, by using orthodox texts to reorganize their rituals, by rebuilding their temples using South Indian temple architects, and by acquiring Brahmin priests – previously uncommon there. This process resembles what M.S. Srinivas famously called "Sanskritization" (1952). I avoid using that term about eastern temple dynamics, however, because local Batticaloa district intellectuals would, I think, vigorously protest its use, especially those I interviewed in the Batticaloa District in 2024 who are trying to preserve *pittaci* practices by arguing that they, to, are "traditional". Their arguments, of course, are also evidence of the postwar reaffirmation of caste, since the struggle between these forms of temple practice is also, often, a debate about which castes should control such temples. But other things are also going on, including, sometimes, a new emphasis on religious rather than strictly ethnic nationalism. Regarding the eastern term "*pattaci"* itself Fuller (2003) points out that in Tamil Nadu there was a similar distinction between Āgama texts written in Sanskrit and local rule books written in Tamil called *paddati.* This likely accounts for the origin of the East Coast Tamil term. For a comparable Jaffna instance see Ambalavanar's discussion of the transformation of Kannaki and Kali Ammon temples into Durga temples (2006, pp. 392–393). This involved a similar confrontation between Vellalar hegemony confirming *Caiva Āgama* texts, championed by Arumuka Navalar, and opposed to the local rules utilized in village temples dedicated to village deities such as

calling into question the status of individual castes in hierarchies linked to particular temples, but not without (quite "traditional") resistance, and, again, without calling into question caste as a form of daily life in itself. In sum, caste continues as an important practice in Sri Lankan Tamil daily life. A disinclination to talk about caste to outsiders, and even public disclaimers by some that caste is eroding, do not in themselves amount to evidence of its departure from socio-cultural practice.

Still, the anti-caste views and, increasingly, caste indifference of young Canadian Sri Lankan Tamils is, arguably, based on some fundamental factors unique to Canadian diaspora conditions and experience. First, young Canadian Sri Lankan Tamils of the second generation are rapidly moving out of the Tamil dominated enclaves (such as Scarborough) where their refugee and immigrant parents tended to cluster and where, perhaps, caste exclusions could most easily be practiced. Although most of the Canadian Sri Lankan Tamil population of 200,000 or more remained in the Greater Toronto Area through the first decade of the twenty-first century, many, perhaps half, have now spread out from central Toronto to Toronto suburbs and to other parts of Canada to seek (or express) upward mobility, and to find jobs and less expensive housing (Zarook, 2019, p. 34). This movement out from the center is also, as we shall see, a movement away from the close social relations that reaffirm forms of identity like caste.

Second, as several scholars have argued, many young Toronto Tamils carry a shared sense of collective trauma linked to how the 2009 LTTE defeat was experienced in diaspora. In 2009 numerous young and second-generation Sri Lankan Tamils, previously shielded by the preoccupations of young Canadian life—schooling, first jobs, dating—were suddenly thrust into politics by the catastrophic end of the civil war; a war in which, according to one UN estimate, over 40,000 Tamil civilians died in its final grisly month (Tamil Guardian, 2024; UN, 2011). Linked by sound and sight to the terminal battlefield's visual horrors via an extensive diaspora media network created by expatriates (most sympathetic to the LTTE), young people interviewed during and after 2009, some during the huge demonstrations that occurred that May all around Toronto, often described how they felt forced into a sense of common Tamilness even as they witnessed also, in their elders, a triggering of old trauma anew. One refugee parent, watching the event unfold, told me he suddenly found himself back in the massacre that destroyed his village, covered in remembered blood, and sobbing in front of his aghast children who had never before seen him cry. Witnessing all this, according to one study, led many younger Canadian Tamils to consciously reject caste divisions in favor of a "we are all in the same boat" sense of communal fragility (Bucenerius, Thompson, and Dunford, 2022, pp. 545–556; See also Esler, 2024, p. 386). These reasons alone would be enough to conclude that anti-caste sentiments among (at least) young Canadian Tamils rest on firmer foundations than mere embarrassment or a tactical shyness about addressing caste at all.

Kannaki generally controlled by oppressed castes. See Malathi de Alwis's (2018) masterful overview of the history of Kannaki-Pattini worship in Sri Lanka.

Yet in one arena of Toronto Tamil life caste is still, unabashedly, and publicly quite important: Toronto's Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu temples. There caste is important for two reasons: first, because of the role hereditary priestly castes and clans (*kuṭi*) play in temple organization and ritual; and, second, because of the way temples are used to provide *consilience;* that is, a temporary local environment in which various (sometimes contradictory) identity assertions can be made comfortably in an otherwise uncomfortable landscape, and where, if only briefly, what Appadurai calls 'life-worlds in flux" (1996, p. 56) can find momentary stillness amid intimations of theistic eternities (Whitaker 2015).[12]

Beyond this but associated with it as a kind of practical precondition, caste is also highlighted in Toronto's Hindu Temples because of the simple requirement such reassurance-providing temples have to *advertise* given the complex religious marketplace that neoliberal Toronto constitutes. That is, because Tamil people living in urban Toronto have lots of alternative temples (as well as other religions) to choose from, and because they lead complex, time-challenged lives that pull them in multiple directions at once, temples hoping to attract their attention as devotees must have, and must be known to have, 'genuine' (Brahmin) *aiyā* and *kurukkaḷ*,[13] that is, Brahmin priests with publicly unquestionable pedigrees, or, less often, priests from *Caiva Kurrukal,* or priestly clans. [14] This means, in effect, that the caste-identity of priests takes on something of the function of a neoliberal economic 'brand.' But does the 'branding' work of caste for retail purposes sit well with the sacred role caste plays in

[12]Is consilience merely diasporic nostalgia of the sort Appadurai wrote about in *Modernity at large* (1996)? The nostalgia of the deterritorialized is part of it, but only a part. In Kingsolver's (2011) *Tobacco Town Future: global encounters in rural Kentucky,* she writes about how people in one rural small town were so thickly tied together by overlapping webs of kinship, labor-swapping, and information that anyone even remotely connected to the town's people could be accurately "placed", as an identifiable social person, in relation to anyone else there. Kingsolver considers this cultural practice, "placing", a form of life, in Wittgenstein's sense, and as central to practical life in such small communities. I found this to be true while living for several years in a village in the Batticaloa district. In this light, consilience should be considered the practice of erecting this same sense of thick connectedness and, hence of identity confirmation "placing", through momentary ritual means. The impetus of doing this among Toronto Tamil people is not nostalgia, though doing so is clearly nostalgic. Rather, consilience, as I argue below, creates, momentarily, the confidence confirming arena people need to confront, negotiate with, and sometimes change the alien territory and forces they find themselves confronting in diaspora. It is not just remembering; it is reasserting.

[13]In Jaffna the term *kurukkaḷ* is used to refer to priests of non-Brahmin lineages; only Brahmin priests are called *aiyā.* However, I have frequently heard Batticaloa District Hindus refer to Brahmin and non-Brahmin priests alike as kurukkaḷ. This may reflect the hostility some eastern Tamil intellectuals have to admitting any real difference in sacredness between priestly lineages sanctified by local temple ideologies and imported Brahmin priests. As one of my anonymous reviewers helpfully pointed out, however, there is a priest at the Richmond Hill Ganesha Temple who uses *kurukkaḷ* as a suffix so perhaps the distinction is collapsing in Toronto.

[14]By "genuine" I mean priests who are either Brahmin or from recognized priestly lineages who are able to pass muster visually and in their competence as priests. Sri Lankan Tamils, however, are frequently skeptical about the pedigrees and off-duty behavior of Brahmin priests.

the construction of *consilience*? And what has all this to do with caste as it was once deployed in pre-war Sri Lanka?

To answer these questions, I will proceed as follows. First, to provide a kind of concrete baseline, I will discuss how caste as a cultural practice worked in eastern Sri Lanka before the inter-ethnic civil war. There, I will argue, caste consisted of a set of related practices concerned with the assertion of hereditary group rank and reputation generally connected to temple-anchored sacred landscapes.[15] I will turn then to the re-territorialized diaspora in Toronto and describe how, in my experience, caste tends to come up in everyday life mostly in subtle ways, and in venues such as marriages and family parties that focus on familial continuity. Otherwise, though, confronted by alien urbanity and the fact of diaspora itself, and thus removed from the sacred terrains integral to its use, I think caste is becoming increasingly difficult to deploy. An exception to this, however, is found in the Toronto Hindu temples I will turn to next, where people seek what I am calling *consilience*; a momentary ritual space within which identity assertions may comfortably be made. There caste practices are used more forcefully because they are so central to temple practice as such; but this centrality, in turn, is what turns the caste status of temple priests into a commodity within Toronto's religious marketplace. I will conclude with some remarks about how tensions inherent in the use of caste practices in the new landscape of diaspora may have implications for the future.

Caste in Tamil Sri Lanka before the War

I first did fieldwork in Sri Lanka's eastern Batticaloa District in the early 1980s before the war. At that time caste, considered as a set of familiarly related practices, was deeply tied to the district's sacred landscape as that was defined by a complex network of various kinds of temples. For example, the area surrounding the town of Mandur, roughly 20 miles south of Batticaloa town, was populated by three kinds of 'castes' (*cāti, kulam*). These castes were often described by people there as part of a moral hierarchy ranging from 'high' or 'good' castes at the top to 'low' or 'bad' castes at the bottom.[16] Hence, Mandur's Vellalar, Ceerpatar, Karaiyar and Mukkuvar castes,

[15]My assumption that temples and caste practices in the east are relevant to Toronto's Sri Lankan Tamils generally—despite most first-generation Tamils there having hailed originally from Jaffna—is, I believe, justified by my previous discussion of caste in both locations. This is not to argue that there are no important differences between how caste was practiced in the north and east before the war. Rather I am simply claiming that in this particular—the role of temples in articulating and maintaining caste distinctions and etiquette—Jaffna district and Batticaloa district practices are similar enough to warrant using my east coast findings as a baseline.

[16]In a fascinating overview of Sinhala caste practices Winslow (2024) argues that, contrary to scholarly assertions that Sinhala castes amount to a watered down versions of Hindu castes, they retain a character and ontology—based on a "cartwheel model of collective inequality"—that is quite distinct from castes in the Brahmanical "ladder" hierarchies with whom they are often compared. Interestingly, she points to a bifurcation of society in Sinhala caste practice into "high" and "low" that seems to find some resonance in east coast Hindu caste beliefs. This is not surprising since some villages in the east, such as the Ceerpatar village of

which dominated the demography, politics, and economics of the town, described themselves as 'high' people. But they tended to describe a middle group of 'service' (or *kuṭimai*) castes, composed of the town's washermen (*Vannan*), barbers (*Ampaṭṭan*) and temple workers (*Kōvilār*)—those still theoretically bound in hereditary service either to other castes or directly to a temple (or both)—as a mixture of good and bad, high and low. Finally, most Mandur people characterized as absolutely 'low' or 'bad' some castes such as the Cakkiliyar and the Paraiyar who were excluded from the town altogether in the 1980s except during ritual occasions (e.g., funerals, some exterior temple rituals) when they were needed.[17] But though this rhetoric of rank in Mandur was both hierarchical and moral, people mostly justified these rankings and judgments to me by talking about the relationship between these castes and Mandur's various temples. And this practice of discussing caste in terms of temples, though it was not the only practice available in Batticaloa, was, I think, generally in use among Tamils in the district as a whole.[18]

How did this work? There were three kinds of temples in the Batticaloa District that were directly relevant to caste practice: regional temples (*tēcattakkōvil*), village or *ūr* temples, and small temples (*cinna kōvil*). The first two kinds of temples tended to be large structures surrounded by walls and outbuildings and often supported by nearby farmland dedicated to the temple. Small temples, on the other hand, might range in size from a tiny, garlanded rock or hastily formed lingam at the base of a tree to a fairly full-sized worship hall. But the difference between these three kinds of temples was more a matter of organizational politics than size. Politically, regional temples tended to be owned and controlled by multiple castes and even multiple towns and villages; *ūr* temples by the dominant castes of the town or village they resided in; and small temples by the individuals who set them up or, perhaps, by no one in particular—as was often the case with, for example, the tiny roadside *Pilaiyar* (*Piḷḷaiyār* / Ganesha)

Thuraineelavanai, were set up under the auspices of the Kandyan kingdom (Whitaker, 1999, p. 128).

[17]The distinction between castes that were *kaṭimai* (bound in service to other castes) and *aṭimai* (enslaved by individual Vellalar landowners) is important to understanding how caste hierarchy was institutionalized in Jaffna prior to the 1840s (David, 1972), and the distinction was still clearly an important aspect of inherited social capital up to the eve of civil war (Pfaffenberger, 1982, p. 38). But this distinction was never so clear cut in Batticaloa. While the practice of caste in Batticaloa in the 1980s made use of the notion of *kaṭimai* as a social category—there were, some said, *kaṭimai* castes—I never heard anyone use the word *aṭimai* (slave) in this way—that is, to designate *aṭimai* castes. On the other hand, I did hear people use this term to accuse people they felt were treating them with disrespect, that is, as a slave. Nonetheless, Canagaratnam (1921, pp. 35–38) for example makes no mention of castes being neatly divided in this way between the bound and the enslaved. It is perhaps proper to note that in some contexts both words can mean "servant" or "slave".

[18]Other features of caste unique to the east coast was matrilineality (in contrast to a patrifocal emphasis, despite some bilateral and even matrilineal aspects, of Jaffna District practices; See David, 1973) and a "subclan" tradition ("*kuṭi marapu*") found both among Hindus and Tamil speaking Muslims in the region. In the case of Hindu *kuṭi*, however, these were still ranked and otherwise defined by their relationship to temples, their histories, and their village's sacred landscapes (Balasundaram, 2009, p. 142: McGilvray, 1982; Whitaker, 1999, pp. 14–18.)

shrines often found at particularly bad intersections in the district. In the Batticaloa District of the early 1980s, Mandur's Kandaswamy temple and Kokkadichcholai's Sivan temple provided good examples of regional temples owned and controlled by multiple castes and villages; Mandur's Mariyaamon (*Māriyammaṉ*)[19] temple and Karaitivu's Pilaiyar temple were fairly typical *ūr* temples controlled by key clans, lineages, and castes within their towns; and many a street corner, junction, or snake bite location from north of Batticaloa town to well south of Kalmunai were available to provide examples of the District's small temples, each an evanescent acknowledgment of some eruption of godly power.

Now in Batticaloa, at that time, 'ownership and control' of regional and village temples were generally expressed in terms of collective 'shares' (*paṅku*) and 'rights' (*urimai*) theoretically granted to particular castes, clans (*kuṭi*), matrilineages (and occasionally individuals) by the god at the time of the temple's foundation. This distribution of shares and rights often had a spatial character since their possession hierarchized and reconciled various groups distributed across the geographies of the villages and regions at issue by relating them to the sacred centers provided by gods. (The word *k*ōvil implies both a sovereign center, a ruler's palace, *and* a sacred one, a cosmologically generative God-point or *mūlastāṉam*.) In Mandur's case, for example, most of the castes, clans, and lineages of at least seven different villages found their ritual center, as defined by their rights and shares, in the Kandeswamy temple. Such original distributions were generally reckoned to have been accurately recorded in a special record, a *kalveṭṭu* or "stone cutting," at the time of the founding. But in most cases, I was told, such charters were eventually lost; and this ensured that the temple histories required to legitimate caste rank distributions generally had to be hotly debated.

This meant, in effect, that in Batticaloa temple histories acted as "sites" and "languages" of dispute for the groups whose status-positions were theoretically organized by the god. Temples, hence, were key arenas for the reiteration, challenging, and creation of the caste ranks and reputations they anchored to the district's many sacred landscapes. In the 1980s, for example, despite pressing national and global issues, local elites in the Batticaloa district spent much time and energy within temple communities competing for rank, power, and influence by arguing about the public reputation (or *kauravam*) of their respective groups in terms of relevant temple histories. And these intra-temple public disputes were complemented, at a district and provincial level, by similar *kauravam* disputes about rank argued in terms of regional historical poems (again, god-centered) such as the *maṭṭakkaḷappu māṉmiyam* (literally, Batticaloa's "greatness" or "treatise on the greatness of a sacred place…;" *Madras Tamil Lexicon*, accessed 8/14/2024), which similarly located the foundations of caste rank in grants of rights and shares in land and temples by gods or human sovereigns (sometimes even Kandyan sovereigns) acting as proxies for gods.[20]

[19] *Māriyammaṉ* is a goddess generally associated with protection from (and inflicting) infectious diseases, especially smallpox.

[20] I am aware that such historical arguments about the origin of *urimai* were also often used to assert caste status in Varnic terms. That is, by claiming the group's rights and status were

Was this way of practicing caste peculiar to Sri Lanka's Batticaloa District? Clearly, in many detailed ways, it was. Caste relations in Jaffna, for example, were both more rigorously hierarchical before the war, and more inflected by a key tension between the peninsula's Vellalar and Karaiyar elites, as well as by some modernist political mobilization of 'service' (*katimai*) and 'slave' (*aṭimai)* caste groups before independence (David, 1972; Russell, 1982). The rise of caste-antagonistic forms of Tamil nationalism in Jaffna in response to the increasing threat presented by government empowered Sinhalese nationalism also ensures that answering this question would require accounting for more than can be explored here. But I think, in outline, an important inter-relationship between caste, temples, their histories, and surrounding sacred landscapes can be seen in the Jaffna peninsula as well (Pfaffenberger, 1982; Banks, 1960; Kuganathan, 2022; Sivathamby, 1995). And Sanmugeswaran's work in postwar Jaffna, certainly, has demonstrated a still working (though weakened) matrix there between caste, memory, and the social imagining of a "bounded order" (*kaṭṭuppāṭu*) in Jaffna's large, borough-like "villages" (*ūr*)—really large towns divided into caste and caste-temple based "wards" (2020). Assuming, for the sake of argument, that a relationship between caste and space was indeed the case, what happened to Sri Lankan Tamil caste practices when such sacred landscapes were no longer available? What happened, that is to say, when caste went into diaspora?

Caste in the Toronto Metropolitan Area

Caste does not come up much in conversation among Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto, Canada. Or, at least, it has not come up much among the people I have been visiting there since 2001. One could argue, I suppose, that as a white foreigner, Tamil people would naturally steer clear of a topic as touchy, misunderstood and, in the sense of Dirk's colonial 'Ethnographic State ' (2002), politically misused, as caste. But I am thinking here mainly of conversations I have had with people who have known me for many years and who could care less what I think because far too much water has passed under the bridge.

But to say caste does not come up much is not to say it does not come up at all. It does, I think, but obliquely, and sometimes nostalgically. For example, I once attended a family party in Scarborough with more than one hundred members of two Vellalar Tamil 'families', all originally from (or the children of those who were from) a single town in the Jaffna Peninsula. They were celebrating the birthday of the father of

obtained as warriors, and thus, as *kshatriya*. Hence, the Ceerpatar of Turaineelavanai in Batticaloa claim their rights in land descended matrilineally from grants given by a Kandyan king, Batticaloa's Mukkuvar claim their rights similarly descend because of the warrior role they played for the Magha of Kalinga in his conquests, as do the Jaffna Vellalar. But I do not see these as incompatible claims. As arguments they still tie caste status to a sacred landscape. One innovation of Tamil nationalism as early as the 1970s was the widening of this argument to include all low-land Tamils and the entire landscape, *Eelam*, as a single whole. But other research shows that the relationship of up-country Tamils to this construction was more complicated (Daniel 1996; Balasundaram, Chandrabose & Sivapragasam 2009).

the wife of a couple whose marriage united them. This marriage was arranged before the war by the most important male members of the two richest lineages of the two most important families in town, the couple's fathers. The groom's father had pushed for the marriage to occur, I was told, despite the youth of the bride at the time (she had just passed her "A levels"), because he wanted his son properly married before he sent him abroad to avoid the war he felt was coming. People at the party pointed to the only survivor of that arrangement, the wife's father, brought over by his daughter's husband in the late 1990s after his home was destroyed, and now a wary and dejected elderly man who, at one point, grasped my arm and, weeping quietly, proclaimed himself still in mourning for his lost homeland—"my Eelam",[21] as he put it. So caste was mentioned here, of course, but only as part of this family history and to explain why everyone was at the party. Nor was everyone celebrating. The wife spent an hour explaining to me why she thought her arranged marriage had been a mistake because, she said, it denied her the freedom to take advantage of the new opportunities moving to Canada had opened up.

More occasionally, at family parties, I have heard men and women who were born in Sri Lanka discussing weddings as 'proper' or 'not proper', at which point older people will generally look knowing, while some young people born or largely raised in Canada will roll their eyes. Proper, here, means first of all, marrying another Tamil person; but also marrying the right kind of Tamil person: a terminological cross-cousin, ideally, but at least a member of one's "community" or caste. Sometimes, I know, families have sought brides or grooms from Jaffna or Batticaloa to satisfy this kind of propriety (Maunaguru, 2019), though in my experience young Canadian Tamils seem less interested in using caste as a factor in marriage choice.[22] Yet even when this kind of familial concern with caste as a marker of communal continuity is no longer at issue, as when a young Canadian Tamil person has looked outside the diaspora for marriage, and even when their choice has been accepted by their family, caste can still come up. Consider the following wedding scene.

The wedding was between a Sri Lankan Tamil woman and a non-Tamil man she met at law school. The bride's diaspora Tamil family was wealthy and arranged for the wedding to be conducted by an *Aiyā*, in this case a South Indian Brahmin priest, in a large white tent at a country club. As the bride and groom's family were mounting the stage to complete the ritual, one of the bride's relatives—a man of the Point Pedro Karaiyar of the Jaffna Peninsula—jostled my elbow, handed me a glass of white wine,

[21]Tamil Eelam (*īḻam*) is the term Sri Lankan Tamil separatists used for the Tamil state they envisioned. As one might expect, there are conflicting theories about the origins of the word concerning whether it originated in Pali or in ancient Tamil. Perhaps more relevant is its colonial rendering. *Winslow's A comprehensive Tamil and English Dictionary* (1862) gives four meanings: "gold", "a mass of metal", "Ceylon" ("the Cingalese country"), and "toddy".

[22]This antipathy toward considering caste as a factor in marriage seems to be somewhat independent of an antipathy toward arranged marriage. Several young people of my acquaintance expressed admiration for arranged marriage as superior to the Canadian free-for-all love lives of their non-Tamil peers even as they derided using caste as factor in any potential future parental negotiations.

for he claimed I looked 'dry', and said, gesturing with his own neat whisky, "Well, I'm glad to see they have done this properly."

"Properly? What do you mean?"

For I was puzzled. Was he being sarcastic? But I knew most of the family, including this man, approved of the wedding despite the young bride's complete (and rather amused) disregard for any marriage restrictions regarding caste or community. I just looked at him.

"The priest, man. The Brahmin."

"Oh!"

"Of course he knows it, the beast. I bet he is being paid plenty for this job. Because it's all a business to them, you know. And a good business, too."

So here was caste again, present at once as homage to the Tamil past *and* as a kind of identity-brand poised in tension between the sacred and the commercial. What is more, as Trouillet (2020) has pointed out, this kind of disdain for Brahmin priests as expensive hirelings is common among South Asian Tamil members of locally dominant castes (paragraph 21).[23] But such self-consciously nostalgic, slightly sarcastic, retail references are the way caste tends to come up in diaspora in my experience: as a memento (that is, as part of a historical memory or discussion), as a (possibly) fading factor in marriage, and as a multivocal pivot point between temples (and their rituals) and the urban world they try, momentarily, to subvert. Hence it is to Toronto's temples that we must now turn.

Conclusions: Temples, Space and Caste

According to the Canadian Government there are 90 Hindu temples registered in the Toronto Metropolitan Area; of these in 2013 roughly 22 were currently owned or controlled by Sri Lankan Tamils. In 2009, 2012 and 2013 a colleague, the folklorist Dr. E Balasundaram, and I conducted interviews with the owners and staffs of seven of these temples, all of which made direct and important use of the concept of caste in their ritual procedures and staffing.[24] Thus, we found that all these temples legitimized themselves in the eyes of potential devotees by obtaining priests from priestly castes (mostly Brahmin, and less often Saiva Kurrukal, or priestly Vellalar clans). But all seven of these diaspora temples were also different in six key ways from their counterparts in Sri Lanka; and I think these differences imply important shifts in the way caste is practiced.

[23]See also Pffafenburger, 1982. Pffafenburger explains that in Jaffna Brahmins are a small minority and the Vellalar caste tends to be politically and economically dominant. Hence, Vellalar owners of temples see Brahmin priests as hired hands. Trouillet (2020) argues that Brahmin priests, and the *Śivācāryas* subcaste they come from, have suffered a similar demotion in Tamil Nadu since the beginning of the twentieth century because of the rise of DMK-influenced anti-Brahmin Dravidian nationalist rhetoric and the intervention in temple affairs by the state.

[24]That is, just under 32 per cent. This was a convenience sample.

In the interest of clarity, let me briefly summarize the six differences our research found.[25] First, Hindu temples in Toronto were movable, urban sites, often rented warehouses or recycled storefronts, with locations entirely determined by urban zoning laws and the 'light industrial' retail market. This stands in marked contrast to Sri Lanka where, before the war, as I have argued, temples were miraculously fixed points anchoring sacred landscapes theoretically laid out by gods. Second, those who controlled temples in Toronto uniformly spoke of 'ownership' (using the English word) rather than of *urimai* (or 'sacred rights') even when describing temple affairs in Tamil. Again, the contrast with Sri Lankan Tamil temple politics before the war is quite clear. There *urimai* implied a place in a temple-centered caste hierarchy centered on a god, was vouchsafed by historical claims about how one's groups rights in the temple were divinely granted, and carried important implications both about one's "honor" (*karavam*) as an individual and as a member of a caste (Whitaker, 1999; Pathmanesan, 2020). Third, Toronto temples were often started and owned by priests acting alone as religious entrepreneurs, most but not all Brahmins. The new importance of such priestly "religious entrepreneurs" in Canada has been well documented by Trouillet (2020) in Toronto and Montreal. But I know of no temples controlled by priests in this fashion in Sri Lanka prior to the war, although research in 2015 turned up several examples of priest-owned and controlled temples in postwar Colombo, Sri Lanka. Fourth, most owners and owner-priests we talked to found it easy to move back and forth between describing temples as businesses and as *kōvil*. One temple owner, for example, started a temple with his wife on the site of their jewelry business and saw the joint growth of both institutions as divinely connected. Again, although smaller temples in prewar Jaffna and Batticaloa were sometimes founded by wealthy individuals to express their *kauravam* and individual piety, such establishments were still generally justified in ritual terms by being tied to divinely specified locations. After the war, however, a large Ammon temple was established on the outskirts of Batticaloa town by a diaspora businessman who, apparently, funded the enterprise from a distance and on easily available land. Fifth, all the temple owners we interviewed were well aware of the need to advertise (in newspapers, online, on TV and so forth) to attract devotees in Toronto's increasingly competitive temple market; and thus knew that broadcasting the caste status of the temple's priests was also an important part of this. Hence, the frequency of web sites, posters, and glossy calendars featuring pictures of priests conducting *pujas* while conspicuously wearing *pūṇūl*, the sacred thread that signifies their special, 'twice-born' status.[26] For example, the website of the Richmond Hill Hindu Temple, one of the best known Tamil temples in the Greater Toronto Area,

[25]For a fuller discussion of many of these characteristics see also Whitaker, 2015.

[26]For further examples see the online photo galleries of the Sri Ayyappan Hindu Temple and the Canada Kandaswamy Temple (the later also features photos of its wedding hall, another aspect of its marketing). This point, however, only applies to temples owned by or hiring Brahmin priests. One of the temples we worked with was owned by priests from the Batticaloa District, Vellalar, priestly matriclans associated with a specific ūr *kōvil* in Karaitivu, a large, predominantly Vellalar town south of Batticaloa. Another temple, similarly, was controlled by *Saiva Kurrukal* priests. In neither case would *ṇūl* have been appropriate.

features a photograph of its "highly qualified priests" with their *pūṇūl* prominently displayed ([https://rhht.ca/about] Accessed 8/16/24).[27]

Finally, sixth, unlike in pre-war Sri Lanka, where temples anchored fully realized moral-social communities of various sizes to sacred landscapes, Toronto's temples were attractive to diaspora devotees primarily because they offered a shelter from what many first generation people believed were urban Canada's morally corrosive, identity-eroding influences, and a place of memorial stillness in a cosmopolitan diaspora where many also felt they had no fixed community—only jobs. Indeed, many Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada, male and female, made this point in conversations in 2001 and 2009. "Here" one middle-aged woman told me, "We work all the time. That is it." One young Tamil man in his early twenties described his existence to me this way: "Here life is lived through a windshield…", that is, he elaborated, in constant movement, always going back and forth to one's job, and all anonymously. Another man, middle aged, and well established in Canada with a growing business, put it this way. In Toronto, he felt, it was impossible to be the kind of "well known man" (*nalla terinka maṉitaṉ*) one was in Sri Lanka because the factors of shared home places (*ūr*), nearby family members, and a local reputation that surrounded one there—what he called, in one combinatory term, "honor" (*kauravam*)—was no longer present to keep one in place. And while this was an advantage when it came to sidestepping some traditions (such as caste restrictions on marriage, for he was married to a non-Tamil woman) he nonetheless found it personally disorienting. For "…. here I am living in a city, a big city, one of the largest in the world…I am one of a million."

Arguably, it was to assuage this kind of felt rootlessness in first-generation Sri Lankan Tamils that Toronto's diaspora temples offered services such as language learning and classical dance training. Out of the hope, that is, of passing on "Tamil heritage" (*pāramparai*) to an increasingly Canadian next generation. Perhaps more important, however, was that Toronto temples provided periodic, well attended, collective rituals such as annual temple festivals, that allowed people to assert their identities in venues momentarily Tamil rather than Canadian. These festivals could last a week or more, and frequently involved processions that spilled out into the surrounding streets and required city government permits that, in turn, enjoined the cooperation of the Toronto police for traffic and onlooker crowd control. There was an irony in this especially apparent in the early twenty-first century. The Toronto police were often, then, very suspicious of Sri Lankan Tamil people, especially in the early 2000s when the civil war in Sri Lanka still raged, because gangs named after Jaffna villages and affiliated with the LTTE or other Tamil separatist groups openly clashed in Scarborough,[28] and temples, like other local Sri Lankan Tamil businesses, were often penetrated by the LTTE for funds ("taxes") and access. But during temple

[27]One of the peer reviewers of this article helpfully pointed out that the Richmond Hill Hindu Temple was founded by a mix of South Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils. Only later, as the civil war swelled the number of Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto, did the latter largely take control of the temple.

[28]See, for example, the 2001 CTV News report "Police arrest 51 gang members in Ontario" [https://web.archive.org/web/20090218052455/http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/print/

festivals, for a moment, contrariwise, Canadian streets and the powers governing them could be subverted into becoming supportive Tamil venues—cultural "hotspots" or *hauts lieux*, as Trouillet puts it—ordered by their own ritual agendas (Whitaker, 2015; Trouillet, 2012). Indeed, Trouillet' s discussion of Tamil temples in France and Mauritius suggests this subversion of local landscapes by ritual action may be a global phenomenon.

At the same time, however, such multi-day extravaganzas were always sponsored each festival day by a different named group—usually a specific Jaffna or Batticaloa Tamil community (ūr), that is, by their regnant castes—but also (in apparent contradiction) by caste-blurring local businesses and community groups. Arguably, then, these rituals also integrated together a remembered, homeland-style, Tamilness, including caste identity and its associated nexus of honor, with contemporary Canadian realities of urban agendas and deterritorialization. Such displays of sponsorship, then, provided Toronto's Hindu Tamils, especially (but not only) those of the first generation whose identities were once thickly tethered to practices, places and castes in Sri Lanka, a public communal site for the perpetuation and comfortable (if only momentary) display of themselves as people seemingly (but not really) fixed again by a specific, caste-infused, socio-cultural space. A ritual site, that is, of an all-enveloping, Canada-subverting, yet interpolating and ephemeral, 'consilience' (Whitaker 2015).[29]

But if these seven temples are at all representative of life in the Canadian Tamil diaspora more generally, then caste, shorn of its connection to specific sacred landscapes, and hence uncoupled also from its role in the local negotiation of ritually based social power, has shifted mightily from what it once was in prewar Sri Lanka to something somewhat new. Now a brand, a memory, a fading form of familial continuity, and a prop in the construction of ritual consilience and Canadian Tamil cultural resistance, but no longer really a fixed position on a socio-cosmic map, caste has been transformed by being uprooted. On the one hand, as Trouillet (2020) has argued, the important role that Brahmins play as agents of temple legitimization in Canada makes them, also, conduits for the continuing circulation and importance of caste as a form of

CTVNews/20011019/ctvnews818005/20011019/?hub=CTVNewsAt11&subhub=PrintStory] Accessed on August 19, 2024

[29]The meaning of such Toronto festivals is interpreted differently by the Consulate General of Sri Lanka, Toronto (representing the views of the Sri Lankan government) on its website, which primarily argues that their mixed bag of sponsors displays the interests of Sri Lankan Tamil "moderates" – that is, non-separatists. On its website, for example, the consulate discusses the Sri Varasiththi Vinaayagar Hindu Temple annual Chariot Festival on Jully 22, 2022 this way: "The festival was attended by more than 10,000 Sri Lankan Canadian Tamils including high-profile business community [sic] representing a cross section of their population. Also, the festival was attended by several Canadian provincial political dignitaries and senior officials of the public and private sector of Canada." It then claims: "This festival reflected the broadening space in the moderate Tamil community for a welcoming engagement with Sri Lanka." ([https://www.torontoslcg.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=684:toronto-sri-varasiththi-vinaayagar-hindu-temple-annual-chariot-festival] Accessed August 16, 2024). This is an unlikely interpretation; separatist sentiments remain strong in the Tamil diaspora.

socio-ritual life. And certainly, caste has maintained itself as a form of essentializing social exclusion among other South Asian diasporas in North America; for example, among the Sikh community in Vancouver and expatriate Indians in Silicon Valley, California, USA (Sabherwal, 2024; Tiku and DiMolfetta, 2023). But if caste among Canadian Sri Lankan Tamils is now (especially for most second and third generation people) a nostalgic brand one "buys" rather than a fixed position in a matrix of honor one inhabits, it remains to be seen whether its new retail utility will ensure its staying power amidst the diaspora's new uncertainties.

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Reimagining Resources: Analyzing the Politics of Dalit Land Struggles in Kerala, India with Special Reference to Chengara

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Abstract

This article explores the history of land alienation in Kerala, the representation of land in social reform movements and the ongoing land struggle in Chengara. The movements discussed in the present study have similarities in terms of the nature of social mobilization, which transcended the Brahmin-imposed sub-caste fragmentations and provided common platforms for the assertion of rights of the deprived sections. Even though the reform movements orchestrated by Ayyankali and Poykayil Appachan unified the slave castes around the issues of common concern, subsequently the ruling class succeeded in thwarting the movement by employing the strategy of sub-caste fragmentation. Similarly, the Chengara movement has also been facing the same plight. The Sadhujana Vimochana Samyukthavedi, inspired by Ayyankali's movement, succeeded in constructing a Dalit identity around the issue of land. However, the ruling class, with ardent support from the Communist Party of India (Marxist), tried hard to destroy the movement. The sub-caste issues played a vital role in the weakening of the movement. Therefore, the study observes that the guidance of a charismatic leader is significant in social mobilization, particularly in a caste-ridden society, for building trust and unity among the deprived sections and countering the maneuvers of the ruling class.

Keywords

Caste System, Land Alienation, Social Reform Movements, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Kerala Model, Dalit Land Struggles

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Introduction

The story of Chengara has always been fodder for students of the Social Sciences. The literature about the struggle generally statured around issues such as the inadequacies of land reforms initiated by the first Left Government in Kerala, the persistence of the colonial pattern of landholding (the much-celebrated land reform legislation did not touch the plantation sector), and the quest for a second land reform in Kerala (Rammohan, 2008; Sreerekha, 2012; Kapikkad, 2017; Iyer, 2018; Sebastian, 2019; Vipitha, 2023). The Dalits faced 'Triple exclusion' from land ownership: 1) exclusion due to the caste system, 2) consistently excluded from the process of land reforms, and 3) the current trends in land market activities tends to exclude the Dalits from land ownership (Yadu & Vijayasuryan, 2016; Herring, 1980). Evidently, 55 per cent of the Scheduled Caste population in Kerala lives in 26,109 Dalit colonies spread across the state and 92 per cent of the Adivasis lives in 4,645 colonies (Kapikkad, 2017, pp. 31–32). Therefore, the issue of land became a common denominator among the Dalits and Adivasis in Kerala. The Muthanga land struggle in 2003 was a breakthrough to the established images about the Kerala Model of development. The movement problematized the land alienation of the Adivasis and highlighted their constitutional rights (Raman, 2002; Bijoy & Raman, 2003; Raman, 2004). Thus, the Adivasi struggles in the later part of the twentieth century once again put the land issue in the center stage. In this premise, the Chengara land struggle occurred with new insights and strategies about social mobilization.

The present study locates the Chengara movement in the historical background of land alienation and subjugation of the lower caste people, their resurrection under the leadership of Ayyankali and Poykayil Appachan, the formation of an inclusive Dalit identity capable of bargaining with the established centers of power, and waning of the movement in the whirlpool of sub-caste power struggles. Similarly, the Chengara struggle stretched beyond the sub-caste contours and constructed a Dalit identity around the issue of land. However, as what happened in the reformist era, the movement declined due to sub-caste conflicts. Since the inception of the caste system in India, the ruling class scattered the underprivileged into numerous sub-caste groups. The graded-hierarchy imposed by Brahminical Hinduism remained a major hindrance to Dalit unity. The disunity of the Dalits provided enough immunity to the upper caste sections to accumulate more wealth and power, and the ruling class strategically used the sub-caste fragmentations to thwart any possible unified Dalit movement.

The study has been divided into four major heads. The first part explains the systematic exclusion of the Dalits from their ancestral land during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. The second address the representation of land in social reform movements led by Ayyankali and Poykayil Appachan, the two important visionaries of Dalit movements in Kerala. The third part of the study critically examines the nuances of the much-celebrated 'Kerala Model' of Development. The fourth links the erstwhile social reform movements and the ongoing Chengara land struggle. Laha Gopalan modelled the Chengara movement in tune with the movement of Ayyankali.

As an inclusive movement, the Chengara set the background for a mass movement of the Dalits in Kerala. However, the persisting sub-caste divisions and the leadership aspirations of the leaders paved the way for the decline of the movement. The methodology used in the study is historical and analytical. In the preparation of the manuscript, we gave paramount importance to original sources, and the primary data were collected from the field through in-depth interviews.

History of Land Alienation in Kerala

Land alienation in Kerala has been inextricably linked to the caste system that marginalized the Dalits and Adivasis from mainstream society. The caste system ideationally and materially enforced the social hierarchy and fragmented the untouchables into numerous sub-caste groups (Ambedkar, 1917/1979).[1] What the caste system did to the untouchables is well evident in the pattern of land possession existing in Kerala. Most importantly, history speaks about a story that would be helpful to understanding the Brahminical transformations in Kerala. Accordingly, much before the Brahmin settlement, private ownership of land began in Kerala. The owners were the 'untouchables' in the Brahminical period such as Pulayas, Idayas, Vedas and Valluvas, who were either cultivators or local chieftains (Pillai, 1970). With the coming of Brahmin settlers, the real inhabitants of the land were sidelined. The Brahmins succeeded in establishing their hegemony—sustained through rituals, social practices, unequal resource distribution, and division of labor as intellectual and physical (the caste system holds the image that mental labor is superior to physical labor). Therefore in Kerala, the lower caste peoples' lives were frozen for centuries without any material and intellectual development.

Erstwhile Kerala was divided into three parts: Malabar, Kochi and Travancore. Malabar was under direct British rule. Both Kochi and Travancore were under Monarchy and accepted a subordinate status to the British East India Company. The feudal system in medieval Kerala demarcated caste-based hierarchy of land rights. Accordingly the Agrestic Slaves: Pulayas, Cherumars, Parayas and others were prohibited to accumulate any wealth including the land (Pillai, 1970; Veluthat, 1978). However, the aggregated exploitative system in Malabar faced severe crisis during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The socio-political oppression by the upper caste sections under British patronage prompted the Mappila peasants to violently revolt against the exploitative system (Logan, 1951; Panikkar 1989; 2021). Even though the circumstances of the Hindu lower caste people was miserable, they were

[1]The Caste system had divided the Hindu society into four water-tight compartments- Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vyshya and Shudra. The Adivasis or the indigenous people were regarded as outsiders of the Varna system or they were treated as non-human. The caste system imposed a strict division of labour in which the Brahmins, the priest class, enjoyed the most privileged status. The Kshatriya were the warrior class who maintained the statuesque. The Vyshya caste were engaged in trade and commerce. The people in the Shudra caste were in the bottom line of the Varna system, assigned to do bonded labour to all other upper caste sections in the society (See Ambedkar, 1917).

not in a position to oppose exploitation. The ideological apparatus constructed and preserved by the Brahmins had given no space to the untouchables to be a unified force against the exploitative system.

Unlike Malabar, Travancore the southern princely state of Kerala considerably enjoyed immunity from foreign conquests, which had enabled the state to maintain the land-holding status quo. As elsewhere in Kerala, the Brahmins hold the land by using the theory of Jenmam rights. With the introduction of a graded hierarchy, the Brahmins became the owners of all the resources, particularly the land. The Travancore State Manual states that:

> … all the lands in Travancore belong to a body of Janmis. There are no lands that do not belong to some Janmi or other, also Sirkar (State/Government) itself is one of these Janmis, it having come to possess Janmam lands by gift, purchase, escheat, confiscation and otherwise (Pillai, 1940/1996, pp. 134–135).

In Travancore, the land administration was legally well-codified, and maintained the status quo without any alteration.[2] However, with the integration of the Travancore economy into the capitalist core, drastic changes happened in the state. Post the treaty signed between the Government of Travancore and British colonialists in 1795 and 1805, Travancore became an ally of the Empire and as per the treaty, the Government of Travancore had to pay a huge amount to the British government for providing security to the princely state. To deal with the situation, an increase in agricultural production was inevitable. In this context, the Travancore government was forced to distribute full ownership rights to the cultivators. The Government in Cochin princely state was also forced to make similar structural changes (Varghese, 1970). The Travancore government also initiated commercialization of the traditional agriculture sector by inviting the Europeans to start plantations in the hilly areas of the state (Government of Travancore, 1915). The emerging scenario set the framework for larger socio-economic transformations in Kerala. Specifically, in Travancore, with the Pandarappattom proclamation of 1865[3] (Pillai, 1953, pp. 144–145), there emerged a middle stratum of peasantry mainly from the upper castes, including a substantial number of Ezhavas (Varghese, 1970). Subsequently, the ownership of land was diffused among all caste groups, which had only a marginal effect on the untouchable slave castes of Travancore such as Pulayas, Parayas and Kuravas. They came under

[2]In Travancore there was well-codified land system. For the practical purposes it was divided into six categories- 1) Sirkar or Pandaravaga (Sirkar is in the position of landlord), 2) Sirkar Devaswamvaga (Devaswam land taken over by the Government), 3) Kandukrishi (private property of the sovereign, and tenants have no rights of property in them), 4) Sreepadamvaga (land possessed by Edavagas), 5) Sreepandaramvaga (lands allotted for temples) and 6) Janmam (Devaswam and Brahmaswam lands) (The Government of Travancore 1915, pp. 1-18).

[3]In Travancore, during the period of King Marthandavarma, the entire assets were regarded as the property of the State Treasury (Pandaram). The Pandarappattom Proclamation of 1865 together with the Janmi-Kudiyan Proclamations of 1867 is hailed as the 'Magna Carta' of the Travancore ryots. Pandarappattom was like a lease without any transferable right. By the royal proclamations, the holders of these lands were given full property rights (See Pillai, 1953).

the category of 'agrestic slaves', as noted in colonial and missionary documents, and were bought and sold like any other property by their landlords (Saradamoni, 1980, p. 10). The oral narratives of slaves available in missionary records show how they constantly feared the impending danger of separation and alienation (Mohan, 2015, pp. 27–28; Jeffrey, 2023).

With the expansion of British capitalist interests in the region, there were attempts to move on the existing stagnant economic system. The non-competitive and sluggish nature of economic activities based on social stratification was identified as a major hindrance on the path of British commercial interests. In the traditional Keralite society, land was only depicted as a status symbol. There were hardly any attempts to improve its productivity (Jeffrey, 1979, pp. 29–32). Conversely, the Britishers introduced the principles of modern capitalism, accordingly, the land was regarded as a transferrable material asset that might be used for making profit. They introduced new avenues of cultivation (plantations) that demanded cheap labour. The Travancore government ensured the availability of cheap labour through the abolition of slavery in 1853 (Menon, 1911, p. 262; Saradamoni, 1980, p. 80; Jeffrey, 1979; Yesudas, 1980; Raman, 2000; Balakrishnan, 2020). While the abolition of slavery only partially liberated the agrestic slaves from their traditional bondages, Saradamoni viewed that:

> The ruling powers native as well as foreign—wanted the status-quo to be maintained with minimum adjustments. This could be seen in the overt references of the Travancore rulers to caste practices and the British emphasis on the need to protect private property (1980, p. 96).

Similarly, in Cochin State Manual, Achyuta Menon observed that even fifty years after the formal abolition of slavery in the state, the life situation of the slave castes had not changed. After the formal ending of slavery, they had no land for cultivation and were paid in kind and at the same old rates (1911). Even though the abolition of slavery produced relatively free labour from the clutches of feudal landlords, the untouchable agriculture workers were not liberated from the caste structure—because, the native state rulers, as well as the colonialists, were reluctant to alter the root cause of slavery in Kerala—the caste system. However, the abolition of slavery and interactions with missionaries gave the slave castes new images of life. To attain the goals, they had to negotiate with the established regimes. With accessibility to new resources such as land, education and other secular institutional spaces, they were keen to start their lives as free people. In this scenario, social reform movements emerged in Kerala.

Representation of Land in Social Reform Movements

By the end of the nineteenth century, with missionary activities,[4] there was a realisation among different strata of people that modern Western education should be the source

[4]The activities of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and London Missionary Society (LMS) provided new religious practices and social space to the untouchable castes in Kerala. Missionary Christianity, Schools, hospitals, courts and markets opened up a new space for

of liberation from the anti-human social practices of a caste-ridden society. But the education of untouchables was vehemently opposed by upper caste landlords because they feared that if the agrestic slaves acquired education, they may not get cheap labour (Chentharassery, 2005, p. 21; Mohan, 2015, pp. 116–118). It was against this background that Ayyankali (1863-1941), a charismatic leader from Pulaya, an agrestic slave caste, emerged. Ayyankali was significantly inspired by the revolutionary movement of Sree Narayana Guru, a social reformer from southern Travancore (Saradamoni, 1980, p. 36).[5] Most importantly, the social reform movements orchestrated by Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and Poykayil Appachan attacked the discriminatory caste practices prevailing in Kerala society and they became torchbearers on the path of the liberation of the underprivileged.

Even though he belonged to the Pulaya community, Ayyankali (1803-1941), a pragmatic leader and revolutionary in spirit and practice, was not ready to limit his space within the contours of the sub-caste divisions imposed by Brahminical Hinduism. All people socially marginalised and exploited were one caste in his eyes (Chentharassery, 2005, p. 19). Taking inspiration from Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP, Organisation for the preservation of Sree Narayana Dharma) formed by Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali founded Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS, Servile Peoples' Welfare Organization) in 1907. Notably, the organization was not meant for any particular caste, rather it provided a platform for all the depressed servile people. The uniqueness of Ayyankali's movement was that he was uninterested in being a part of any religious sect, but rather deeply concerned about the deprived status of the Dalits. The SJPS brought solidarity among the marginalised sections, and unified them under the title 'Sadhu Janam' (Servile People). The SJPS and its activities can be seen as the genesis of the emergence of modern Dalit consciousness in Kerala (Nisar & Kandasamy, 2009, p. 75; Mohan, 2016, pp. 78–79).

Ayyankali identified three important pillars for the upliftment of the historically marginalised sections in Kerala: 1. accessibility to public space, 2. modern education and, 3. availability of land for cultivation. In 1913, Ayyankali led the historical struggle, the first strike by agricultural workers in Kerala to open the doors of schools for untouchable children. The upper caste landlords unleashed ruthless violence against the movement, though the laborers showed the strength of their unity amid extreme poverty and oppression. The strike spanned one year and in 1914 the historic strike of the agriculture laborers was called off as they had their demands accepted by

public interaction. However, as far as the slave castes are concerned, the institutional space was not fully accessible and with the Missionary teachings and prayers, the untouchables acquired a sense of new social imagination which was absent in their lived experiences. For a discussion see (Mohan, 2015; Balakrishnan, 2020).

[5]Sree Narayana Guru, a revolutionary Saint, who emerged from the middle caste Ezhava, had questioned the inhuman caste practices of the Hindu religion. His revolutionary endeavours inspired many and were the beginning point of social reform movements in Kerala. The activities of Guru such as temple consecration in Aruvippuram and elsewhere in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, his support to Vaikom Satyagraha and other anti-caste movements inspired his contemporaries and future generations (See Jeffrey 1974; 1976).

the Travancore Government (Chentharassery, 2005, pp. 28–29). The strike showed off the linkage between labor and land that had historically been undermined by the landlords. Simultaneously, Ayyankali demanded agricultural land for his people. Then onwards, the land has achieved a symbolic value, represented as a material base for liberation. He was nominated to the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly (SMPA, since 1912 Ayyankali was a member of successive state legislature for two decades). As the sole representative of the Dalits in the Assembly, Ayyankali represented the problems of the entire Dalits in the Assembly beyond narrow casteist mentality (Nisar & Kandasamy, 2009, p. 85). He fought in and out of the Assembly for social justice.

During his long tenure in SMPA, Ayyankali frequently raised land issues and demanded favors from the government (Saradamoni, 1980, pp. 159–160). In response to Ayyankali's demands in the assembly, Travancore state favorably considered the distribution of Puduval land for the Dalits. The Dalits were allowed to use land in few areas like in Neyyattinkara, Nedumangad, Viluvamcode, etc. (Nisar & Kandasamy, 2009, p. 86). Even though this had a marginal impact on the lives of Dalits, symbolically the issue of land got wider attention, and set a new perspective for Dalit politics in Kerala.

During the lifetime of Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan (Poykayil Sree Kumaraguru) a social reformer emerged among the slave castes, contested the religiously insisted caste segregations and abandoned Hindu religion. He belongs to the Paraya community, agrestic slave castes like the Pulayas, who was inspired by the religious teachings of Christian missionaries. Appachan was fascinated by the humanism of Christianity, and its concept of equality and spiritual security. He embraced Christianity and became a devoted follower of the Marthoma Church. He became a Christian evangelist, and worked among the slave castes in the plantations. However, he was disturbed by the caste discrimination within the Marthoma Church, where the converted Christians were represented as 'Pulaya' Christians and 'Paraya' Christians. In his speeches, Appachan problematized the caste segregation and eventually left the Marthoma Church with his followers (Rejikumar, 2005, pp. 14–21; Mohan, 2015, pp. 155–156; Mohan, 2016, pp. 87–89; Chirappad, 2015, pp. 24–28). The discrimination experienced by his people in both Hindu religion and Christian churches prompted Poykayil to start independent initiatives to liberate the slave castes. It was in this context Appachan formed Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS, The God that redeems in person organisation) in 1910. Like Ayyankali, Poykayil spoke for all the sections of the Dalit community. He had problematized the distribution of material resources, particularly land in Travancore, and recognised the lack of accessibility of land as the major reason behind the historical marginalization of his people. Often, he raised this question in SMPA.

Poykayil demanded land for all the people of his community and requested the government not to grant land to other communities without resolving their demand. He further requested the government to conduct a survey of the landless people of his community and to give 2-10 acres of land to each family without imposing base land prices and timber prices. He stated that many communities owned acres of land

and kept them without any cultivation. Therefore, he requested the government to grant the unutilized land to his people. Poykayil put forward another demand that the reserve forest land suitable for cultivation should be given to his people, and further, the government should impose a tax on those lands only after several years (Poykayil, 1921, March 1, cited in Rejikumar, 2005, pp. 51–52; Chentharassery, 1983; Chirappad, 2015). Poykayil observed that all the fertile and cultivable land was given to the upper caste people and only wasteland was distributed to his people. He requested the government to appoint experienced revenue officials in each district to allocate land to his people (Poykayil 1931, March 3, cited in Rejikumar, 2005, pp. 53–55). However, various bitter experiences from the upper castes prompted Poykayil to suggest his people to buy land with their labour. Following his words, the PRDS with financial support from his people purchased land across Kerala (Chentharassery, 1983, p. 48; Rejikumar, 2005, pp. 46–47, 60–66). Thus, Poykayil opened new avenues for his people to cope with the challenges imposed by the dominant centers of power in the emerging Keralite society.

Theoretically speaking, both Ayyankali and Poykayil set a common platform for Dalits. Ayyankali, through his mobilizations, problematized the historical issues responsible for their exclusion from the civil domain, and forcefully opened the doors of modernity to the slave castes. Most importantly, Ayyankali's perspective was modern and his focus was solely on the material and educational prosperity of his community. In a modern society, the availability of material resources, and accessibility to modern social and institutional space- abstractly, an inclusive civil society and public sphere is a necessary prerequisite for the people to get into the mainstream. Moreover, Ayyankali envisaged SJPS as an inclusive space, a Dalit space, for all the sub-caste groups to deal with the established centers of power. The very title of his organization resonates the necessity of unity among the untouchables. The fragmented people and their hierarchical social status prevented the slave castes from becoming a unified force against the exploitative system. Therefore, with the establishment of SJPS, Ayyankali provided a new space for the deprived sections and mobilized his people towards the issues of common concern. However, after Ayyankali left active politics, SJPS failed to sustain unity among its people. The ruling class succeeded in thwarting the lower caste unity. The government of Travancore's decision to nominate members from each sub-caste group to SMPA limited the possibility of the sustenance of Dalit unity, and also the internal schism in SJPS weakened the organisation. The decline of SJPS proved to be a setback for Dalit unity and liberation.[6]

[6]After Ayyankali left active politics, sub-caste groups asserted in the organization. The sub-caste rivalries paved the way for parochial caste identity-based movements that did not have a social vision to hold the diverse communities together. The new generation was led by Kesavan Sastri. He dismantled SJPS and started a new organization of the Pulaya caste. The organization was narrowly defined which was presumably against the visions of Ayyankali. The ruling class used Sastri to torpedo SJPS. Not surprisingly, Sastri was a worker in the Hindu mission, which was controlled by the upper caste Hindus. Sri. C.P. Ramaswami Iyer, a Brahmin Divan of Travancore, worked out a truce that culminated in the marriage of Ayyankali's daughter to Sastri. The very development had badly affected the leadership of Ayyankali.

Like SJPS, after the demise of Poykayil, PRDS became an arena of conflicting interests. The conflict arose based on the debate on the influences of Hindu and Christian religions on the organisation. The PRDS fragmented into various independent groups such as Ettupara PRDS, Zebulon PRDS, Karimpanakkuzhi PRDS, Sathya PRDS, Mannuthadam PRDS, Asan PRDS, Kanakkari PRDS, Thottakkad PRDS and Janamma PRDS (Chirappad, 2015, pp. 83-84). The fragmentation of the organization weakened its bargaining capacity and further deteriorated the socio-economic capabilities of the community. It is pertinent to note that especially after the demise of the founding leaders, the slave castes moved towards fragmentation. The upper caste and middle caste groups gravitated towards centralization and used their collective power to accumulate resources.

After independence, Dalit movements declined in Kerala for multiple reasons. First, the representation of Dalit leaders in the popular assembly limited their criticisms against the regime, and gradually, the leaders deviated from a mass social movement to mere representatives of their particular communities in democratic engagements with the state. The withdrawal of Dalit organizations from social movements weakened the unity of the deprived sections. Also, leadership conflicts within these organizations gave rise to caste identities superseding Dalit unity. Second, with the emergence of Communist movements in Kerala, the majority of the Dalits imagined the Party as the messiah of liberating the slave castes. Meanwhile the Communist Party pursued the dormant class approach and left the issue of caste in the super-structure. The Party stuck to its position that the advancement in productive forces would eventually erase parochial caste identities, which would be replaced by class identity. However, capitalism developed in Kerala without altering the basic caste structure. Therefore, the Communist Party failed to rise to the expectations of Dalits because Dalit issues had been inextricably linked to the caste system (see Teltumbde, 2018, pp. 91–116). Third, the caste-based reservation system crystallized the caste system in its originality. Leaders like Ambedkar opined that the reservation system (quota system to the deprived sections in education and government employment sector) has to be removed since the state-led social transformation has been completed. But in the post-independence period, the Indian state failed to accomplish the task of social transformation, therefore the Dalits were frozen in the pre-set framework of reservation. Therefore, Ambedkar's idea of 'annihilation of caste' gave way to the crystallization of the caste system, and the Dalits are still struggling to get basic resources such as land even in Kerala.

Dalits in "Kerala Model"

The widely acclaimed "Kerala Model" combines low-level economic development with high levels of social development indicators. The protagonists of the 'model' advocate social indicators such as high literacy rates, low infant and maternal mortality

Sastri's resentment of Ayyankali was his decision to nominate Pampady John Joseph to the Popular Assembly. These developments show the role of external forces in deciding the course of Dalit movements (See Chentharassery, 2005, pp. 36-37; Mohan, 2016, pp. 95-96).

rates, low population growth, low crude death rate, and a strong public health system (Parayil, 1996, pp. 941–942; Heller, 1999). A strong sense of social security is the noteworthy feature of the Kerala Model. However, there were criticisms against the Kerala Model from different viewpoints, particularly emphasizing the exclusionary nature of the model (Saradamoni, 1994; Uyl, 1995; Devika, 2010; Madhavan & Komath, 2023). In the present context, the most notable drawback of the so-called Kerala Model of Development is its failure to address the symbiotic relations between land possession and socio-economic and cultural status. Historically, in all societies, those who control the land control the surplus, therefore the land remains the core determinant factor in deciding further accumulation and social status (Albertus, 2025, p. 12). In Kerala, with the introduction of land reforms, the Communist Party concluded that the question of land alienation has been resolved forever. This immature conclusion stems from an improper understanding of the caste question in Indian society. The Dalit land alienation was inextricably linked to the historically prevailing Varna system that excluded the Dalits from material resources and the ideational realms. The intersectionality of caste, class, and gender had not been addressed by the Indian Communist parties. Therefore, land reform and redistribution of landed resources among the peasant communities, specifically the tenants, have not benefitted the Dalit communities (Madhavan & Komath, 2023, pp. 358–359).

The land reform legislation was brought forward by the first Communist Ministry in 1957 and subsequently implemented by the CPI (M)-led Ministry in 1969. As per the law, the tenants got ten cents each in panchayats, five cents in the municipal area, and three cents in the corporation area. The land reform was romanticized as "the land to the tiller" however, in reality, it was "the land to the tenants." The Communist Party understood the issue of land as the necessary conflict between the landlords and tenants. The Dalits were located outside of the tenant category due to their untouchable status and were forced to settle on the outskirts of the paddy fields. As tenants, the majority of the middle-caste groups like Ezhavas got small portions of land for settlement purposes, however, Dalits remained landless. Thus, the land reforms, a landmark legislation that propelled the Kerala Model excluded the Dalits and Adivasis. In due course, successive governments attempted to mitigate the issue with new strategies. M.N. Govindan in C. Achuthamenon's Ministry introduced 'Laksham Veedu', colonies for Dalits and Adivasis (houses constructed in a budget of Rs. One Lakh) which paved the way for the ghettoization of Dalits and Adivasis in three-cent colonies. Coincidently, the stereotypical images about the colonies also came up (Pramod, 2020). The Kerala Sastra Sahithya Parishad, a pro-left NGO, surveyed the community-based land distribution in the state and revealed that the per capita landholding of the upper caste is 105 cents, while the Dalit community has only 2.7 per cent (KSSP, 2006; KILA, 2009).

The land alienation of the Dalits, specifically the denial of land as a productive resource, badly affected the future development of Kerala. Indeed, social security

laws such as the Kerala Agriculture Workers Act of 1974 improved the working conditions of the Dalits, however, in the longer run, the decline in agriculture and large-scale conversion of farmland for other industrial and commercial purposes worsened the circumstances of the Dalits (Krishnaji, 2007; Isaac & Mohankumar, 1991; Devika, 2010). Paradoxically, Kerala is dependent on other states for food grains, and vegetables, however, the successive governments are not ready to give the land to the actual tillers of the land. Also, the lack of resources prevented the Dalits from competing in an open market society where the privileged social groups dominate. Moreover, the protagonists of the Kerala Model, particularly the CPI (M) and its votaries, always took an oppositional stand against the struggles of the deprived sections for resources.

Chengara Land Struggle: Linking the Past to the Present

The Chengara land struggle reflects the inadequacies of the land reforms in Kerala. The Communist Party-introduced land reform legislation only resolved the issues between landlords and the tenants. However, it failed to address the land issues of the Dalits because they did not belong to the tenant category. The Communist Party reduced the entirety of the issue between the landlords and peasants to the question of wage as in the industrialized society, hence failed to analyze the complexities embedded within the historical marginalization of the Dalits in the Indian situation (Krishnaji, 2007; Rammohan, 2008; Raman, 2002). The land reforms in Kerala excluded the Dalits, and reduced the other peasant categories such as the Ezhavas to small holdings. The reforms did not touch the plantation sector, and the Ceiling Act was not implemented. This policy approach had far-reaching implications—such as a decline in agriculture, emergence of absentee landlordism (Balakrishnan, 2008; Oommen, 1994; Radhakrishnan, 1981) monopoly of land by the upper caste/class people and continuing deprivation of the Dalits and Adivasis in Kerala.

After independence, the Dalit-Adivasi issues froze under the grand narratives of development. Even though the Dalits were the mass base of the Communist Parties, their life in the colonies (Pramod, 2020) statured around government concessions and freebies. This shows the limitations of the Communist Parties in pursuing a social movement agenda in the electoral democratic system.[7] By the 1980s, the reports of deaths due to starvation from Adivasi settlements once again problematized the disparities in land distribution in Kerala. It was in this background that the Muthanga struggle happened. It was a breakthrough to the tall images of the much-celebrated Kerala Model of Development (Raman, 2002; Bijoy & Raman, 2003; Raman, 2004).

[7]The policies of the first Communist government in Kerala (even though it failed to resolve the land issues of the vast majority of the people) provoked the upper caste/class, and they mobilized the followers against the government- known as the liberation struggle. This had deteriorated the law and order situation or the perpetrators succeeded in generating such an image, and based on the Governor's report, the Central government dismissed the democratically elected government under article 356 of the Indian Constitution.

The Muthanga struggle was exclusively an Adivasi land struggle that ended with an armed conflict between Adivasis and the State. Drawing insights from Muthanga, the Chengara land struggle took a different path. Laha Gopalan, leader of the movement, set a platform for the landless people in Kerala beyond caste differences and strategically orchestrated the movement without indulging in violence. In a pamphlet, Laha Gopalan narrates the background of the Chengara land struggle:

> In due recognition of the fact that last six decades of democratic rule and working of many caste, sub-caste organizations have eventually not produced social justice for the oppressed class; and for the liberation of all the untouchables in Kerala, demands an organisation to pursue the struggles initiated by Ayyankali. It was not a caste organisation, but rather an organisation for the liberation of poor people in all caste groups. This perspective has been reflected in the formation of *Sadhujana Vimochana Samyukthavedi* (SVSV, Servile People' Liberation Organisation), an organisation formed in Laha village in Pathanamthitta District on October 31, 2001, and got registration on March 13, 2002, in the register number P128/2002 (Gopalan, n.d., p. 2).

Laha Gopalan, formulated SVSV in tune with the middle caste and upper caste organizations. Despite the sub-caste divisions, these organizations displayed unity, especially in their dealing with the centers of power (Ibid). His movement was the continuation of Ayyankali and Ambedkar, who underscored the importance of Dalit unity. SVSV was the replication of Ayyankali's organisation SJPS, an organisation that fought for the uplift of the deprived sections beyond sub-caste divisions. However, the ruling class maneuvers significantly limited the sustenance of Ayyankali's movement beyond his lifetime. The sub-caste divisions were a major weapon used against Dalit unity. By employing the strategies of intimidation and selective co-option, the ruling class succeeded in preventing a united movement of the lower caste people in Kerala. Laha was well aware of the situation, especially the success story of Ayyankali and the subsequent weakening of the movement along the parochial sub-caste line. Therefore, Laha took stringent measures against liquor and sub-caste narcissism which he understood as the major hindrances on the path of Dalit unity (Gopalan, 2013). Rajendran, State Vice President of SVSV recollecting memories of Laha, said that strong leadership was necessary because there were several reasons to scatter the movement (Rajendran, 2023).

Chengara land struggle was not a spontaneous movement. Laha prepared the ground for the movement years back. On October 3, 2001, SVSV submitted a memorandum of 22 demands to the government regarding the constitutionally guaranteed rights of the deprived sections. Since then, the SVSV conducted corner meetings, awareness programmes, district meetings, picketing and press meetings. From August 15, 2005 to January 11, 2006, a Satyagraha was conducted in front of Mini Civil Station, Pathanamthitta. The approach of the caste leaders towards the

movement was lukewarm. Laha observed that 'the caste leaders took a passive stand towards the movement, criticized the movement and questioned the leadership of Laha Gopalan' (Gopalan, n.d. a., pp. 4–7). Because the sub-caste leaders were very cautious about the possible threats to their areas of influence, they maintained strict control over the people. The political parties in Kerala also recognised the privileges of the caste leaders, and were happy with the status quo. Laha said:

> In my understanding, the obstacle on the path of the development of our people was the sub-caste organizations and their innumerable leaders. Nobody can deny the role of B.R. Ambedkar and Ayyankali, who fought against injustice that had prevailed in a society where Manusmriti was the only law. They had succeeded in unifying the people, who were fragmented along four thousand caste titles, by convincing them their demands were the same. The ruling class understood the fact that the rights of the deprived sections have to be considered, otherwise, there might have been unified movements against the establishments. It was in this context that the ruling class recognised our demands. While the present generation not only failed to sustain the rights secured by our forefathers but also our caste leaders gave space for loosening of those rights in tune with the ruling class interests (Gopalan, n.d. a, pp. 11–12).

Laha's leadership was unacceptable to many Dalit intellectuals in Kerala. Even though few of them had supported the movement, they kept vigil not to highlight Laha's name in the discourses. At one point, Laha challenged the Dalit intellectuals to show their capacity to mobilize the people as he did in Chengara (Gopalan/Erumeli, 2014, pp. 22–25). Baby Cherippittakavu, State Secretary of SVSV, said 'many Dalit intellectuals were against the movement. If they were inspired and fought for the visions of Ayyankali and Ambedkar, there would have been one Dalit organisation. Because of the self-interests and the leadership aspirations of Dalit intellectuals that scattered our community' (Cherippittakavu, 2023). However, the unique feature of the Chengara movement was its inclusiveness. Leader Laha stood for all the deprived sections, the landless poor people, beyond parochial caste and sub-caste divisions (Babu, 2023). Harikumar, an active member from the upper caste Nair community, recollects his memory 'When the movement was at its most critical stage, we, nearly ten to fifteen people, had food from a single plate. This unity was only because of Laha's leadership. Nobody resisted his leadership. People were even ready to sacrifice their lives for social justice. Slogans about Ayyankali and Ambedkar were our only weapon' (Harikumar 2023). After Ayyankali, it was under the leadership of Laha Gopalan that the Dalit issues reverberated in the Kerala public sphere. He succeeded in mobilizing thousands of landless people from fourteen districts of Kerala towards Chengara. The movement not only bewildered the caste leaders but also the communist parties, especially the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M), self-imaged as the sole authority for

social mobilization and social transformation. Laha observed that CPI (M) was the only political party that had taken a negative approach to the Chengara movement. In his own words:

> The CPI (M) is being driven by the delusion that they have a monopoly over the Dalits in Kerala. If they accepted Laha's demand for land, the people who were chained in colonies with three cents land would recognize the fact that the party made them political slaves (Gopalan/Velam, Ashraf, 2009, p. 32).

Why did the CPI (M) oppose the Chengara movement is a valid question that reveals the fundamental shift that happened to the Party during the last couple of decades. There were four major reasons behind the policy deviation: 1) The paternalistic attitude of the Party in not recognizing the newest social movements; 2) The Party shifted from being a catalyst agent of social transformation to a pro-corporate agent of development; 3) The influence of a few workers in the Harrisons Plantations through the CPI (M)-led Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU); 4) If the movement succeeds under the leadership of Laha Gopalan, the CPI (M) was well aware that it would lead to a legitimacy crisis in the party. Therefore, the Chengara movement confronted challenges from various quarters such as the sub-caste leaders, the CPI (M) and Harrisons Company.

After four years of campaigning amongst the landless poor across Kerala, on August 15, 2005, SVSV started an open struggle in front of Pathanamthitta Civil Station. On January 2, 2006, the movement turned to a new phase, and began a blockade in front of the Civil Station. Nearly four thousand people participated. The transformation of the struggle from a few to a mass movement got political attention. Though the then Chief Minister of Kerala, Oommen Chandy discussed the issues with the leaders, however, his government failed to fulfill their demands. In the next general election, the CPI (M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) government came to power. V.S. Achuthanandan was the Chief Minister. Achuthanandan had a popular image of a sympathizer of social movements. However, the paternalistic approach of his party forced him to take a harsh stand on the Chengara movement. The movement went through a new leap- on the night of January 21, 2006, under the banner of SVSV, nearly 4,000 families entered the government-owned Koduman Plantations and constructed huts with tarpaulin sheets. The government requested more time to resolve the issue, however not arrived at any definite solution (Gopalan, n.d., pp. 2-6). In this scenario, SVSV opened a new struggle site at Chengara, which was strategically and legally advantageous to the participants.

Chengara or Cherupala land is surrounded by thick forest. Kallar River in the north-east, in the east the government owned teak forests, and in the west up to Puthikulam Harrison's rubber plantation. The only approach to Chengara is a small road connecting Athumbukulam Junction. Strategically the geographical position of Chengara helped to defend the land from external aggressions (Cherippittakavu, 2023; Prakkanam, 2009, pp. 42–43). Also, it was the land illegally possessed by

Harrisons Malayalam Plantations Ltd. after the lease period lapsed (Gopalan, n.d., p. 6). Therefore, the legitimate claims of the landless people on the illegitimately occupied government land was another unique feature of the Chengara land struggle (Sreerekha, 2012).

On August 4, 2007, over 5,000 families entered Harrison's illegally occupied land and began their lives without basic amenities. Harrisons sought judicial support, and the court issued a decree to evacuate the settlers within three months, without any physical force and bloodshed. On July 7, 2008, the first meeting with the Chief Minister was arranged. Laha said that the Chief Minister did not ask anything about the movement, their demands or possibilities for compromise, rather threatened the leaders, 'If you do not stop the struggle and leave Chengara, you would have to face fierce policing' (Gopalan n.d., p. 11). The government, in association with the CITU, employed every possible measure to evacuate the Chengara settlers. Hence, the people in Chengara followed a non-violent strategy of resistance,. On August 4, 2008, CITU in association with other trade unions started a blockade in Athumbukulam, the only entrance to Chengara. The blockade worsened the situation of the Chengara people. Many organizations, including the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI), helped to deliver food to the site via dangerous forest routes. On September 3, hundreds of CPI (M) supported people marched towards Chengara. While the police blocked the party workers on their way to the struggle site, Laha observed that it was a strategic move of the government (Ibid., pp. 13–17). Moreover, it was also a victory of the civil society in Kerala. There was a mass 'online movement' titled 'Do not repeat Muthanga' that called for sending text messages to the Secretary of CPI (M) Prakash Karat requesting preventive measures to avoid an open confrontation between the party men and Chengara people.

In short, the Chengara movement successfully generated wider support from civil society. However, the CPI (M) was keen to sideline Laha Gopalan and his struggle. Finally, the LDF government unilaterally declared the 'Chengara Package' without any discussions with the leaders of the struggle. Laha observed that the Chengara Package was a betrayal of the landless poor in Kerala. The land allotted to the majority was not useful for cultivation and housing. Only sixty families got cultivable land and others who accepted the government's offer were cheated. Many people were not ready to leave Chengara. Therefore the struggle continued despite government negligence and efforts from the ruling class to thwart the movement (Gopalan, 2013). At one point, Laha was forced to leave the struggle site due to strong internal differences regarding his leadership. In an interview, the state secretary of SVSV admitted that 'we had mistaken Laha due to the maneuvers of some people. The movement had weakened in the absence of Laha' (Cherippittakavu, 2023). The state vice-president of SVSV, Rajendran said, 'Laha's initiatives helped us to study more about Ayyankali and Ambedkar that developed a feeling of self-respect and consciousness about ourselves' (Rajendran, 2023). After the demise of Laha Gopalan, Chengara still struggles and 'lack of coordination is the main issue' (Chandrakumar, 2023). P.K. Babu, the state treasurer of SVSV concluded from his experiences in the struggle: 'Laha stood for the

landless poor people beyond the caste, sub-caste divisions. This was the unique feature of this movement' (Babu, 2023). From a social movement perspective, the Chengara struggle has several credentials, its contributions are unique and offer important lessons to Dalit movements in India.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is pertinent to note that the Chengara movement was not the final word regarding the right assertions of the deprived sections in Kerala. It was one among many land struggles active in Kerala. However, the movement has provided important lessons to the protagonists of social movements from below, especially in the Indian context. The creative and generative features of the struggle were not spontaneous, but rather the outcome of a systematic understanding of the social mobilizations since Ayyankali. The most unique feature of the movement was its inclusiveness and the construction of a Dalit identity around the issue of land. The leaders of the movement recognised that the issue of land was the common denominator and the root cause of the marginalization of the Dalits in Kerala. The movement also succeeded in highlighting the land issue of the Dalits in the public sphere, and the movement got wider support from civil society. As an immediate result of the struggle, few families got cultivable land elsewhere in Kerala, but the majority of the people were cheated with rocky lands in remote areas. Few hundreds of families remained at the Chengara struggle site even without voter ID cards. They do not have house numbers and their names were not entered in the citizens register. In short, the government has not yet recognised the Chengara people as citizens of India. Thus, the assertions of the Chengara people are still alive.

Chengara represents the exclusionary side of the 'Kerala Model' and the failure of the Communist Party to pursue an inclusive social movement agenda. The Communist Party failed to address the specificities of social formation and power relations in Kerala. Capitalism developed in Kerala concomitant with the prevailing caste hierarchy, and the upper and middle caste sections and the influential religious minority groups reaped the benefits of postcolonial development at the expense of the historically vulnerable people. The indomitable unity of the upper caste sections at the top of the governance system systematically excluded the backward caste groups from the mainstream. There are two important reasons behind the failure of the Communist Party to address the Dalit question in Kerala: 1) The economic reductionism of Western Marxism put constraints on the Communist Party in understanding the influence of the ideational sphere in determining the material realities. Decades before Ambedkar rightly pointed out that: "If the sources of power and domination is, at any given time or in any given society, social and religious, then social reform and religious reform must be accepted as the necessary sort of reform" (1936/2013, p. 230). He viewed that without addressing the caste question, precisely without annihilating caste, a coordinated working-class movement in India could not be possible (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 232; also see Teltumbde, 2018). 2) As like many other institutions in the state,

the caste hierarchy influenced the Communist Party. The 'Secularized Casteism' is a general feature of both civil and political societies in Kerala (Devika, 2010, p. 802).

Another important reason behind CPI (M)'s antipathy towards the Chengara movement was the result of the transformation that happened to the Party under the neoliberal phase—the shift from the catalyst agent of social transformation towards an institutionalized mechanism for legitimate corporatization. The CPI (M), in association with the Harrisons Malayalam Plantations, tried their best to torpedo the movement. As far as the CPI (M) was concerned, many disturbing facts prompted them to blindly oppose the struggle. The mass mobilization of the landless people, irrespective of their caste and religious differences, challenged the monopoly of the CPI (M) over social mobilization. The Chengara movement also problematized the tall claims of the CPI (M) that the land issue was resolved with the erstwhile land reforms. If the movement succeeded, there would be a legitimacy crisis in the Party, because the major support base of the Party were the Dalits who were chained in the three cent colonies in the post-land reform period. As a response to the new consciousness developed among the deprived sections in the bottom line of society, the CPI (M) employed the usual strategy. It created organizations 'Pattika Jathi Kshema Samithi' (Scheduled Caste Welfare Organisation, PKS) and 'Adivasi Kshema Samithi' (Adivasi Welfare Organisation, AKS) to curb the outflow of the Dalits and Adivasis from the Party. Hence, it opened up new avenues of confrontation amongst the underprivileged sections in Kerala.

In short, since the inception of caste system, the ruling class scattered the deprived sections into numerous sub-caste groups. However, history showed glimpses of unified movements of the Dalits as we have seen in the reform movements of Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan, and also in Laha Gopalan-led Chengara land struggle. Such unified movements brought out remarkable changes in society. Therefore, a common platform around core issues of concern will certainly unite the people, and remarkably, such movements were possible only with the direction of a charismatic leader, who can sculpt the strategies to transcend the challenges posed by the ruling class.

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Struggle for Emancipation and Dalit Consciousness in the Autobiography *My Father Baliah*

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Abstract

Dalit life narratives as a genre from the Telugu states are of recent origin. Unlike life narratives in Marathi, Hindi, and Tamil languages, few from the Telugu states caught the attention of scholars. Despite this, Y.B. Satyanarayana, a teacher and writer from Telangana wrote an auto/biography, *My Father Baliah,* in 2011 making it a valuable addition to the stream of Dalit life writings. It narrates an inspiring story of three generations spanning across two centuries. Originally written in English, this life narrative serves as an important intervention in the social history of India because it is a product of a Dalit agency where the story is written from the point of view of Dalits, a perspective often marginalized by mainstream narratives. Using this life narrative, this article attempts to deal with the cultural politics of Dalit literature, the dynamic between the Dalit life narrator and the Dalit community, the implications of writing Dalit literature in English, and more importantly the need to recognize Dalit agency in colonial modernity with the ultimate objective of making a case for Dalit emancipation.

Keywords

Dalit Literature, Dalit Life Narratives, Dalit Consciousness, Colonial Modernity, Dalit Writing in English, Y.B. Satyanarayana

Introduction

Beginning from the 1960s, Dalit literature in the form of poetry, novels, essays, drama, and songs has been instrumental in challenging the canon of Indian literature that is either heavily fraught with a patriarchal and caste-ridden Hindu consciousness glorifying the pre-colonial past or in the guise of modernity, restricts the discourse on caste to the traditional, inadequately educated rural spaces thereby rendering caste as a matter of the past. For a long time and perhaps even today, Indian literature both written

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in *bhashas* (regional languages) and English, fell short of taking a radical view on caste and offering solidarity with the political and cultural movement of Dalits. Dalit writers have been challenging such trends and notions to present an alternative perspective on Indian society with an intention to bring about change using the intellectual legacy of Buddha, Phule and Ambedkar. This perspective or what is popularly called as Dalit consciousness advocates equality, self-respect and human dignity, which is antithetical to the hierarchical and discriminatory brahmanical/*savarna* (caste Hindu) ideology. Dalit literature has consistently countered the representation of Dalits by non-Dalits as "objects of pity, helpless, child-like" (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 8). This misrepresentation which was particularly observed in the writings of "upper" caste social reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, snatched away the agency and lived experience of Dalits. Later, in the postcolonial India, Dalit writers had to build a cultural base inspired from 1970s Dalit Panthers movement to reveal the discrimination, suffering and exploitation of Dalits right under the nose of the liberal and democratic Indian state. This cultural project required representing the authentic experience of Dalits and employing realism that demanded a solidarity with the Dalit movement instead of a realism that pleaded for sympathy. This movement which started in Maharashtra slowly inspired other states such as Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu leading to the emergence of the most celebrated genre in Dalit literature, i.e., the autobiography. It's safe to say that this genre made Dalit literature popular across India. The autobiographies were published in various bhashas beginning with Marathi in the 1970s and followed by Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, and Odia. Some notable works such as Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (originally published in Marathi in 1978), Kumud Pawde's *Antasphot* (originally published in Marathi in 1981), Baby Kamble's *Prisons We Broke* (originally published in Marathi in 1986), Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (originally published in Hindi in 1997), Vasant Moon's *Growing Up Untouchable in India* (originally published in Marathi in 1995), Bama's *Karukku* (originally published in Tamil in 1992), exposed the ugly truth of graded inequality, i.e., the caste system that has been lurking under the much-celebrated veil of diversity and national unity of India. Those works represented simultaneously the awareness of being oppressed and the consciousness of change which are fundamental to Dalit movement. This generated a distinct set of literary aesthetics through which Dalit literature was able "to make it possible to talk in the language of caste" (Kumar, 2018, p. 57).

Today, other than realism, Dalit writers have been exploring various genres and narrative techniques where works such as *Kusumabale* by Devanoora Mahadeva (1988), Cho. Dharma's *Koogai* (2005), Des Raj Kali's *Shanti Parav* (2009) employ elements of fantasy, horror, magic realism and experimental aesthetics. However, there are important reasons to consider as to why Dalit writers made autobiography almost synonymous with Dalit literature. As Dalit literature is inextricably entwined with Dalit political movement, Dalit writers felt that autobiographies could act as testimonies thereby creating a much bigger political impact than other genres such as poetry, drama and fiction (Abraham & Misrahi-Barak, 2018, pp. 21–22). Apart from political movement, Dalit literature also has the objective of recontextualising the

rhetoric around history and culture. Dalit writings wanted to look at history and culture from the point of view of the marginalized which helped in understanding how savarna consciousness always acted as an undercurrent in determining not only the popular notions around history and culture but also the interventionist methodologies such as Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Studies. These methodologies have either collapsed caste into class or did not privilege the lived reality of Dalits according to which caste becomes a constituent factor in historical, cultural and political consciousness. Hence, Dalit writers resorted to life narratives that had the scope to retrieve the history and culture of Dalits by which they can act as the "site of counter-memory to power". (Kumar, 2018, p. 60).

Life narrative is the term that is being used today to discuss self-referential writings such as autobiographies as the "term autobiography is inadequate to describe the extensive historical range and the diverse genres and practices of life narratives and life narrators in the West and elsewhere around the globe" (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 4). Dalit writers and scholars further understand the category of life narratives as "critical life narratives" to describe the patriarchal caste-ridden Indian society or *testimonio* to emphasize both a group's oppression and a sense of agency in the Dalit narratives. Critics such as Gopal Guru, Bhikhu Paarekh, and Raj Kumar have tried to discover the socio-historical context responsible for the emergence of self-referential writings in Indian literature. Kumar (2004) points out that "the consciousness of new individuality during British rule and loosening of the community bond gave rise to the subjectivity necessary in autobiographies" (p. 52). Similarly, Bhikhu Parekh locates the British colonial period during which "modern individualism and rationalism" were introduced whereby "access to western literature offered the necessary intellectual tools for writing autobiographies" (1989; as cited in Kumar, 2004, p. 52). Hence, it is safe to argue that "autobiography as a practice is linked to individualism that articulates itself in the conditions of modernity" and "in India, writing autobiography, therefore, is a modern phenomenon" (Guru, 2017, para. 1). Though the same context of modernity and individuality led to the Indian autobiographies—initially written by "upper" castes and then followed by Dalits—the Dalit life narratives represent a consciousness different from the "upper" caste ones. Kumar's (2004) observation substantiates this difference when he writes:

> Even when successful, none of them [Dalits] has celebrated life achievement. This is in contrast to the upper caste Indian autobiographies who have invariably recorded their achievements in different fields with a sense of self-satisfaction and celebrated their glories and power in public. Dalits are not sure about their social positions and hence they seem to be insecure till the very end of their autobiographies. They use their community culture and identity for Dalit solidarity and self-assertion like an ethnographic account rather than as a personalized self (p. 200).

The objectives and issues that predominantly feature in Dalit life narratives also constitute what Margo Perkins calls "rewriting the self" where "struggle against the

socially dominant untouchable identity is a fundamental battle for Dalit writers as they attempt to undermine old definitions with new imaginations" (2000; as cited in Hunt, 2014, p. 199). Similarly, Dalit life narratives are also identified as countering the "silence and misrepresentation of Dalits" (Rege, 2006, p. 13) and a "source of intrusion in the calm, contemplative and reflective mode of autobiographical writings" (Kumar, 2018, p. 60). Guru (2017), as mentioned earlier, talks about the influence of bourgeois society on the development of Indian autobiographies where the individual self "I" becomes prominent (para. 1). Then the question arises as to how an individual Dalit self in the autobiographies can speak for its community when Dalit consciousness is fundamentally concerned with establishing a political subject called Dalit. However, Pandian argues that "Dalit life narratives have violated genre boundaries by depleting the "I"—an outcome of bourgeois individualism—and by displacing it with the collectivity of the Dalit community" (Rege, 2006, p. 13). But a more nuanced analysis of this individual-community dynamic is given by Hunt (2007) in her discussion on Hindi Dalit autobiographies where she complicates the notion of the Dalit individual "self" representing the Dalit community. She talks about the "complex picture of Dalit subjectivity where the protagonist (I) and the Dalit community (We) are inextricably linked in a complex web of meaning, yet without loss of either the individual or the community" (2007, p. 551). She also writes, "By reinforcing a certain presence of individuality, emotional interiority and intellectual life, Dalits claim their status as equal human beings without threatening their simultaneous claims to a communal identity" (p. 557). Therefore, we can argue that the complexity of Dalit life narratives lies not only in their challenge to the savarna representations but also in the tension between representing their individual self and collective self. Hence, one has to understand how the genre of Dalit life narrative negotiates with categories such as caste, class, religion, and gender and in this regard, this article aims to bring out how Y.B. Satyanarayana's (2013) *My Father Baliah* becomes an exemplary text to not only discuss those issues but also to make a case for Dalit emancipation. This article is divided into three sections which establish *My Father Baliah* as an important intervention in the context of socio-cultural history of Dalits, argue for the importance of English for Dalit articulation, and discuss the Dalit agency in the context of colonial modernity respectively. The concluding section identifies the limitations within the chosen text and attempts to contemplate the appropriate direction that Dalit cultural movement needs to take.

My Father Baliah – An Important Intervention

Dalit literature in Telugu-speaking states was not only influenced by Ambedkarite politics but also shaped by the movements which arose owing to the specific socio-political history of those states. These include the Dalit Nationalist movement of the 1920s and 30s which fought against the Brahmanical hegemony in the Indian independence struggle; the Telangana Armed Rebellion in the late 1940s in which the peasants rose against the oppressive landlords under whom they were forced to do bonded labour; the Naxalite movement of the 60s and 70s to which the landless and the exploited Dalits supplied cadre but the movement's leadership failed in offering a

radical response to the caste question because of its preference to the identity of class; the rise in atrocities against Dalit communities in 70s and 80s among which the horrific 1985 Karamchedu massacre led to a popular Dalit *Mahasabha* (Congress) movement in Andhra Pradesh which highlighted the importance of establishing a solid political front for Dalits; the *Dandora* (Clarion call by Drum beat) movement which spoke for the relatively more exploited sections among Dalits and the centenary celebrations of Ambedkar and Phule coupled with debates over backward castes' reservation in the 90s and finally the more recent writings of the twenty-first century which brought women writers and experimentation to the spotlight in order to represent a distinct Dalit world-view. These movements led to a rich repertoire of Dalit writings in this region in various forms such as poetry, songs, plays, short stories, and personal narratives. This article attempts to establish that the autobiography *My Father Baliah* published in 2013 enables one to get the sense of complex history and social life of Dalits as seen through the inspirational journey of the author's family.

Although in the introduction, this article had autobiography in focus, it is difficult to strictly confine *My Father Baliah* to any one genre. The text is divided into two parts, namely, Narsiah's World and Satiah Speaks. The first part deals with the stories of the author or life narrator's great-grandfather (Sr. Narasiah), grandfather (Jr. Narasiah), and father (Baliah) and is narrated in the third person point of view. The second part completely deals with Baliah and his family narrated in first person by the author. Hence, the narrative spans three generations and two centuries. Satyanarayana himself says in the preface that the story of the first part is based on whatever his father has told him making it an oral history and an auto/biography—biography inserted within an autobiography. However, even in the second part where we have Satyanarayana narrating his story, the focus of the narrative is less on Satyanarayana himself and more on the struggle of his entire family, making it a family chronicle. In addition to this, it is also has elements of social history—writing history about the marginalised sections using lived experience—where the author depicts the life of Dalits during the times of feudal, colonial, and post-independent Telangana. The second part is a life narrative where Baliah becomes a "significant other" whose story is "deeply implicated in the narrator's and through whom the narrator understands her or his own self-formation" (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 65).

First, this text serves as an important intervention in the social history of India because it is a product of a Dalit agency where the story is written from the point of view of Dalits, a perspective often marginalized by mainstream narratives. One of the distinct features of Dalit literature is to engage with the project of "cultural politics" reconstituting "the terms of cultural and political discourse in India" (Kumar, 2018, p. 57). Satyanarayana (2013) in his preface, reveals the intention of writing about his family as:

> It is time we started writing our own histories. The stories written by Brahmins beginning with 'Once upon a time, there lived a poor Brahmin …' should stop now. I feel that it is not my family alone but every Dalit – and non-Dalit – who should know about our past in order to create a better future (p. 16).

Second, autobiographies also have legacy motives for passing memory on to one's posterity. Satyanarayana states that he has written the life narrative for his granddaughter to preserve their family history. This could be understood as not only preserving history but also acknowledging its "potential for reshaping the future" as he implied earlier (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 21).

Throughout the text, even when he is narrating his great-grandfather and grandfather's story, Satyanarayana (2013) in an auto-ethnographic style, gives a detailed description of the cultural and social life of Dalits. This makes his life narrative a rich repertoire of India's subaltern culture. In some instances, through these cultural descriptions, Satyanarayana tries to situate Dalit culture in stark contrast with savarna culture. His description of priesthood serves as an example—"Unlike in Brahminism, where the priest is a Brahmin, male and hierarchical, and the Varnashrama Dharma is institutionalized, there are no priests for these deities, and every untouchable is a priest unto himself or herself" (p. 27). But he mentions this when he was commenting about the superstitions among Dalit communities during the time of his great-grandfather. Similarly, when describing his parents' marriage, he writes, "Unlike the Brahmin priests, the baindlaina rendered just one Sanskrit shloka 'Shuklambara dharam …' to solemnize the wedding" (p. 59). He talks about this *baindlaina* (a person who performs weddings among the untouchable castes) for the last time when the Brahmin friends of his brother were mocking him for his non-Brahmanical accent and also as he knew only one shloka (p. 153). Based on these observations, this article argues that though Satyanarayana was trying to point out how distinct Dalit culture is and how it has more egalitarian features such as priesthood irrespective of caste, and women being allowed to carry the bier of the dead, he was also viewing that culture with a critical eye. This criticism becomes even sharper when he laments the fact that the belief in certain superstitions among Dalit communities such as "witch-hunting, sorcery, and persecution of—and incantations against—evil spirits" eventually paralyzed the leg of one of his nieces (p. 162). This tendency among Dalit life narratives to simultaneously assert the recovery of Dalit culture and to maintain a critical distance from the same culture has been well discussed by Hunt (2007). She argues that "Dalits have struggled against externally ascribed untouchable identity in an effort to redefine their caste community in positive and self-assertive terms" (p. 546). However, she also cautions about the cost of this positive self-assertion in the form of "ambivalences" with which Dalit autobiographies "struggle to reconcile their low-caste identity with their current urban middle-class status and their claims to represent all members of Dalit community are challenged" (p. 545). This argument looks fair but instead of viewing it as an ambivalence, it is important to recognize the potential of Dalit writers themselves offering an internal critique in achieving emancipation from all forms of oppression and for all Dalits. This article believes that *My Father Baliah* subscribes to such emancipation and also overcomes the unfortunate tendency of "drifting away from a sense of collective movement" observed in second-generation Dalit life narratives (Devaprakash, 2019, p. 17). This is so because, throughout the narrative, the

author never finds it problematic to identify with the Dalit community. This becomes evident as the narrator on multiple occasions shows how Dalits have internalized the caste hegemony and the need to come out of it and whenever he or his family members faced any humiliation, he expressed his concerns not in personal but collective terms. For example, when his grandfather fails to explain why the "upper" caste teachers won't allow Baliah to school, Satyanarayana (2013) writes:

> Narsiah had no answer to his son's argument; he was unable to explain to his son the laws of Manusmriti, that sage Manu had codified everything about the Hindu way of life, and untouchables had, for centuries together, been segregated. Sin and punishment – papamu and dandana – are infallible tenets of Hindu laws regarding Sudras and untouchables. This ideology conditioned the minds of the untouchables to believe that they would be committing a grave sin if they went against this law (p. 37).

Satyanarayana also repeatedly makes it a point that compared to other Dalits, his family is better privileged. Commenting on the life of Dalits in the railways he writes:

> The family, unlike other untouchable families, actually lived a comfortable life, though not in luxury. There was no struggle for food, shelter and clothing as the wages from the railways took care of these necessities. This was the case with most untouchable families working in the railways. They could even think of educating their children. For these very reasons, these families were also alienated from their own communities in the villages (p. 43).

Though the entire narrative is about how Baliah's family rose out of poverty and untouchability, the author's repeated reference to their relative privilege could be understood as his intention to inspire his community to move to the cities and get empowered through education. This becomes clear when Satyanarayana (2013) in his preface acknowledges—"We could very easily have been in the same state as impoverished Dalit families living in villages" (p. 14)—if not for his grandfather's decision to migrate away from the village and join the railways along with his father's uncompromising insistence on providing education for the children. Satyanarayana writes, "That migration had changed the course, not only of his own life, but also of the generations to come" (p. 56). Therefore, instead of viewing the narrator of *My Father Baliah* as a relatively privileged Dalit middle class individual, his work should be read as a "conscious textual intervention in the making of a homogenous Dalit community which otherwise is fragmented" (Kumar, 2018, p. 61, Note 9).

Choice of English

Caste and English

My Father Baliah is an important text for its choice of language, i.e., English. Dalit writings are mostly written in the *bhashas* (Indian languages other than English) and

they have gained prominence across the country due to their translations into English. One reason why Dalit literature is mostly associated with bhasha literature could be because of the regional character of the Dalit movements in post-independent India. As discussed earlier, Maharashtra holds the distinction of being the foremost state in building the necessary cultural base for the movement which was taken up by other states subsequently at different junctures depending on their own states' socio-political circumstances. Another reason could be the reluctance of postcolonial Indian writing in English to privilege caste over class and religion thereby rendering caste as ultra-vires to the modern individual citizen of India. Vivek Dhareswar makes an elaborate argument regarding this issue when he writes:

> The postcolonial elite in India has used English, both as language as much as a semiotic system symbolizing modernity to impose their secular categories on the social world. This modern subjectivity framed in English has allowed caste to be the private domain suffused with the vernacular (1992; as cited in Menon, 2006, p. 3).

Therefore, the choice of English in texts like *My Father Baliah* should be read as an attempt to speak the language of caste in English.

Dalits and English

Most Dalit writers still choose *bhashas* over English, maybe because English is not the dominant lingua franca among the majority of the Indian subaltern groups thereby falling short of representing their life and culture. Nevertheless, English has its own advantages when it speaks about caste. Kothari (2013) writes, "By being foreign, English does not normalize and legitimize caste, and by being an ex-colonial language with global reach, it becomes empowering" (p. 61). She also finds English to be conducive to constructing a nationwide Dalit consciousness. She writes, "English helps redefine identity and imagine a pan Indian Dalit unity while also allowing a vocabulary of human rights" and also with respect to the inadequacies of English in representing Dalit life, she asserts that "English's potential to translate the Dalit life from fatalism to an identity of rights outweighs considerations of its distance from Indian reality" (p. 67). Reading not only the present text which was originally written in English but also other Dalit texts translated into English, one cannot escape observing the delegitimization and denormalization of caste.

Aspiration for English in *My Father Baliah*

Modern Dalit literature has always been oriented towards speaking the language of human rights and human dignity. Its politics has always been for encouraging the oppressed sections to fight for their own advancement. This is reflected in their texts which often depict modernity as the means of empowerment. English education and migration to cities signify that modernity in those Dalit texts. We can see this

recognition of English education as an enabler of empowerment reflected in the present text when the narrator writes:

> Having seen the lifestyle of higher-level and upper-caste staff, he wanted to ensure that his brother learnt English. . . . It was the first attempt in the Yelukati family to learn English, another attempt to achieve a better life. (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 69)

In another instance, he writes:

> Very few students from the untouchable community (like my brother) were in the English medium, and these students had a good chance of securing better jobs after graduating through matriculation, for English was desirable in government jobs. (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 134)

The narrator also frequently mentions his affinity towards the English language and how his father used to feel proud about his children speaking in English. Thus English education for Dalits implies a better chance to compete with "upper" castes and achieve self-respect and liberation. Even in the Dalit literature written in bhashas, the Dalit writers tend to privilege aspiration/liberation over backwardness by differentiating the characters who speak modern dialect of a language and its marked register. This has been used by Dalit writers for resisting the stereotypical representations of Dalit characters by non-Dalits where the Dalit character always speaks the marked register and the non-Dalits speak the modern dialect. As Laura Brueck (2014) writes, ". . . for a character to speak in a 'marked' (simplified, non-modern standard) version of Hindi is to exhibit a deficiency of Dalit Chetna [consciousness], to be characterised not only as 'rural' or 'traditional' but more specifically to be condemned as 'backward'" (pp. 104–105).

However, *My Father Baliah,* unfortunately, is one of the few Dalit life narratives originally written in English in the body of Dalit writing from the Telugu region. The only other such life narrative coming from Telugu community is Sujatha Gidla's (2017) *Ants Among Elephants*. Dalit life narratives in English are also uncommon among Dalit literature from other states. We have only a handful of such texts like D.R. Jatava's (2000) *A Silent Soldier*, Balwant Singh's (1997) *An Untouchable in the IAS*, I.D. Pawar's (1981) *My Struggle in Life*, and Ashok Bhoyar's (2001) *Encounter with Dronacharya*. *My Father Baliah* holds a distinct place among these narratives because, on the surface level, it seems to be telling a simple inter-generational family story but it skilfully embedded a wide variety of themes within that story as discussed in this article. Nevertheless, Dalit narratives in English did not gain as much prominence as translated works like Bama's (1992) *Karukku* or Omprakash Valmiki's (2003) *Joothan* did. However, the situation looks hopeful with the publication of Yashica Dutt's (2019) *Coming Out as Dalit*, which has garnered widespread popularity recently due to its honest representation of Dalit middle class life particularly focussing on the

precarious situation of contemporary Dalits where economic progress falls short in improving their social status and therefore are left with no choice but to blend in with the "upper" castes by hiding their Dalit identity. Therefore it is time that Dalit literature recognizes the importance of writing in English taking inspiration not only from *My Father Baliah* but also from Dr. Ambedkar himself who "was far-sighted in realizing the importance of writing all his works in English" (Anand, 1999, p. 2056).

Dalit Agency in the Colonial Modernity

Speaking of modernity, it is important to look at the source of modernity and its encounter with Dalits in India. The distinguishing feature of *My Father Baliah* that holds our attention throughout the narrative is the description of the lives of Dalits working in the railways that were established in nineteenth-century British India. Jr. Narasiah was the first in the family to grab a job in the then Nizam–guaranteed State Railway (NSR) which later merged into the Indian Railways. Though it was the Nizam who owned the railways, it was the British who built and operated it (Kuncheria, n.d., p. 7). That's why we find a British officer, Sir Franklin, who not only gave Baliah a job, but also saved him in one instance by restoring his job. Yelukati Ramaswamy changes his name to Baliah upon the insistence of Sir Franklin so as to get back to his job. Baliah later took his first son Balraj to Sir Franklin to request a job in the same railways. The narrator describes Sir Franklin as a "young British officer, and nice to the Class IV employees [mostly Dalits and Sudras], often helping them in times of need" (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 72). The institutions and changes brought during the colonial period such as railways, English education, postal services, and missionary activities had a significant disruptive effect on the colonized societies beginning from the nineteenth century. The mainstream response to these changes brought in during the colonial period is understood as colonial modernity. Menon (2006) defines colonial modernity as "the specific contradiction between a rhetoric of universal modernity and a practice of accommodation with existing fault lines of power, tradition, and custom is what characterizes colonial modernity in India" (p. 76). There could be two ways of understanding this aspect. One is that British colonialism was only able to affect small changes to the pre-modern structures of oppression like the caste system so as to retain their rule which ultimately led to partial liberation for the subaltern communities. The other way of viewing this is that colonialism under the guise of modernity was only trying to exploit the Indian society by dividing it based on caste and religious lines i.e., *divide et impera* (divide and rule). This second way of considering colonial modernity mostly constitutes the mainstream response to colonialism in the form of nationalism and sometimes postcolonialism putting the entire blame on the colonial rule for Indian maladies. The problem with this position is that it "frames colonialism as a homogenous and singular structure of oppression. It does not sufficiently explain the different responses of various social groups within society" (Rao, 2022, p. 187). This is what the first way of viewing colonial modernity reflects though it still finds the

liberation inadequate. However, it is extremely important to recognize the agency of the subaltern communities whereby they negotiated with the opportunities opened up by the colonial institutions to emerge as modern individuals free from the traditional markers of subordination. This is what this article points out as Dalit agency in colonial modernity which is aptly represented by *My Father Baliah.* As mentioned earlier, Jr. Narasiah's decision to move out of the village and join the railways during the period of twentieth century pre-independent India changed the lives of Baliah and his family forever. The narrator describes this change as follows:

> He [Narasiah] was happy to be thus liberated from slavery under feudal lords. That migration had changed the course, not only of his own life but also of the generations to come. He felt this intensely since he perceived the change in the atmosphere and in the new lifestyle that they had since come to adopt in the city. He was even happier for his son, who had become literate. He could never have foreseen this, but he knew now that subsequent generations would also receive an education. (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 56)

The narrator also traces the source of this change when he writes:

> It was a strange situation: untouchables, who were outcasts and segregated in every village, were suddenly living in the same quarters [railway quarters] as Sudras! The environment had changed, and now they had the means to learn many new things, not just about work, but about society and social structures too. In many ways, it was the British Indian era that opened the doors of development to the untouchables. (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 35)

Echoing Lefebvre's notion of social space being a social product, the narrative gives a contrasting picture regarding the organization of space in the feudal, caste-ridden village and the modern grade-based railway quarters in colonial towns and cities. The narrator delineates the social space of Sr. Narasiah's village as follows:

> A village has the perfect Hindu caste set-up with all the characteristic features codified by Manu. It has two types of dwellings, varna houses and avarna huts, separated by either a boundary or a well-maintained distance. In order to avoid pollution (from the casteless untouchables) through wind to caste Hindus, the houses of each varna (caste) are built in such a way that the wind blows from the dwellings of the Brahmins to the rest of the village. Untouchable (avarna) houses are located in the east and the main village in the west, since the wind always blows from west to east. Houses are built in ascending order of the caste hierarchy from east to west – Sudras, Vaishyas, Kshatriyas, and Brahmins. The houses of those belonging to the productive caste (the Sudras) cluster together, and towards the east, finally, is the agraharam, Brahmins' dwellings – the 'beginning' of the village. (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 18)

On the other hand, the narrator describes the life in a modern place like Tandur as follows:

> "This was the first time in Baliah's career that he had been posted full-time at a big station and was living in quarters where different classes of workers stayed. The size of the quarters differed according to the grade of the employee." (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 18)

Dr. Ambedkar argued regarding such caste-based segregation in Indian villages that led to the "ghettoization" of the "untouchables" and therefore contrary to Gandhi's village republics, he urged Dalits to leave the villages and move to the cities (1989; as cited in Prasad, 2021, p. 134). Therefore, cities for Dalits act as sites of transformation "in which new individuals can be forged as subjects unmarked by subjection" (Menon, 2006, p. 94). This transformation is rightly described by Satyanarayana (2013) when he writes:

> The untouchables who lived in the railway colony enjoyed the same freedom as the higher castes. There wasn't any social restriction here. In colonial times, cantonment areas and railway colonies were 'free zones' for untouchables, where they could aspire to better social lives, and earn their livelihoods like caste Hindus. (p. 81)

Similarly, there is also a significant difference in the subjectivity of Sr. Narasiah, a Dalit living under the mercy of an "upper" caste landlord in a caste-ridden village, and Baliah, a Dalit railway employee living in modern towns and cities. For example, in Narasiah's village, Dalits generally do not object to the "upper" castes' disrespectful way of addressing them as "Narsiga" for Narasiah (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 19). Also, Narasiah's extent of internalization of caste hegemony is so deep that he feels "relieved" when the landlord instead of beating him to death, allows him to retain two acres of land out of the fifty acres that were gifted to Narasiah by the Nizam (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 20). On the other hand, Baliah was exposed to colonial spaces like railways which developed a strong desire in him to educate his children so that he could see them working as higher officials in the railways. Although Baliah is also used to "upper" castes treating him as an "untouchable", he nevertheless dares to stand up for his dignity. This is seen when the narrator details the way Baliah deals with his superiors:

> He [Baliah] told his superiors to expect respect only when they gave respect; there had to be reciprocity. The officials would address him as 'Baliah' rather than 'Baliga', an appellation they would have used for a subordinate. It was now known in the railway circuit that Baliah would not have borne this patiently. He objected to officials addressing their subordinates with contempt. He also politely refused to do the personal work of the stationmasters, such as going to the market or taking their children to school, or washing their clothes.

> Because of this perceived insubordination, he was transferred many a time, but Baliah never had any regrets. (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 91)

Unfortunately, some scholars with savarna consciousness tend to consider colonial modernity as problematic as they glorify the "pre-modern or pre-colonial and of everything that seems to have remained immune to the invasions of colonial modernity" (Pouchepedass, 2000; as cited in Zecchini, 2018, p. 74). This would only lead one to revert to the language of hierarchy and discrimination instead of fighting for liberty and equality. Based on the above observations and inferences, this article argues that colonial modernity has an enabling role in the development of a consciousness of equality and dignity among Dalits like Baliah.

Conclusion

My Father Baliah depicts the changes that the Yelukati family has seen over three generations by pointing out the trajectory of the caste system/untouchability during that period. The article believes that during the time of Sr. Narasiah, and his son, untouchability presented itself glaringly just like the sound of a howling steam engine. Whereas when it comes to the time of Baliah and later his children Balraj, Abbasayulu, Satyanarayana, and others, the caste system became antithetical to the modernity infused via colonialism. However, it did not vanish altogether. Instead, it transformed into subtler forms by silently lurking under the modern institutions thereby posing a threat to the struggle for Dalit emancipation. In the above section, the article has argued that colonial modernity encouraged the upliftment of Dalits through modern education and employment. However, as the narrative indicates, the "upper" caste people and also the Sudras were unable to shed their superiority/purity claims over Dalits not only within colonial institutions but also in post-independent India. For example, Satyanarayana (2013) complained that even after "the untouchables gained entry into jobs in the railways and into the railway quarters, and started living alongside the Sudras in the same areas, sometimes even the same buildings", the "Sudras still tried to maintain untouchability, though" (p. 35). Similarly, after celebrating the fact that Dalits were able to enjoy equal rights within the railways, he cannot resist stating the reality in which "the caste Hindus still tried to avoid contact with the untouchables for fear of pollution" (p. 81). In addition to this, the narrator also mentions that "the higher-caste drivers and Brahmin guards still preferred the Sudras to the untouchables when it came to carrying their boxes" (p. 103). For argument's sake, one could agree that it is too soon to expect the discrimination to die when we are talking about the colonial period as colonial modernity and also the social reform movements started creating an impact only from the nineteenth century. But as Satyanarayana narrates his own experiences occurring in the 1970s and 80s, we come to notice that the caste ideology still continues to influence the attitude of "upper" caste people. The discrimination came in the form of opposing reservations, doubting the academic and professional

potential of Dalits, refusing to give houses for rent, etc., ultimately rendering Dalits vulnerable in modern India as well. This frustrates the narrator as he writes:

> No constitutional safeguards so far had really helped the hapless Dalits; they still remained excluded, segregated and untouchable in free India. The mindset of upper-caste Hindus had not changed much in spite of the relentless efforts of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. (Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 207)

Therefore, acknowledging Dalit agency in colonial modernity is as important an issue as it is to continue the struggle for Dalit emancipation using both constitutional means and cultural struggle to build on the achievements secured during the colonial period.

Lastly, the article finds the representation of women's lives in the narrative to be problematic. Because, Narasamma, the wife of Baliah, and the mother to not only Satyanarayana but also to her other 11 children, has endured a far more arduous struggle than Baliah and other family members yet her voice is not given adequate presence in the whole narrative. This reveals a tendency common to most of the Dalit male autobiographies where "woman is projected as a sacrificing mother or a mother patiently enduring pain and suffering but very rarely as the agency for change" (Guru para. 6). Except for this limitation, *My Father Baliah* is an indispensable piece of Dalit writing that sets the stage for engaging with significant historical, social, political, and cultural issues thereby powerfully advocating for a radical transformation of Indian society.

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Research Article

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From Margins to Mainstream: The Journey of Scheduled Caste Women through Panchayati Raj Institutions in Haryana, India

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Abstract

Taking into account widespread illiteracy among elected Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in 2010, as 30.06 PRIs were illiterate against the 24.45 per cent general rate of illiteracy in the state, the government of Haryana enacted Panchayati Raj Amendment Act, 2015; under which educational qualifications have been made mandatory to participate in the PRIs elections. This amendment has been based on the premise that educated PRIs will be playing a more constructive role for development at village, block and district levels. Since Scheduled Caste (SC) women are less educated, therefore this study is addressed to assess the impact of the amended Act on the empowerment of SC women. The study reveals that the share of SC women PRIs among the total PRIs increased from 11.32 per cent in 2010 to 13.41 per cent in 2016, while the composite score attained by them increased from 45.65 in 2010 to 129.29 in 2016.

Keywords

Scheduled Castes, Women Empowerment, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Haryana Panchayati Raj Amendment Act, 2015

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Introduction

Empowerment refers to the process of granting power and intervention to marginalized groups within society, encompassing social, economic, political, educational, and psychological dimensions. These aspects are interconnected, collectively contributing to the overall empowerment of individuals. At its core, empowerment involves the redistribution of power, particularly for those who have been historically denied the ability to make choices. The concept can be understood through three interrelated dimensions: resources (preconditions), agency (the process of exercising choice), and achievements (the outcomes of empowerment efforts) (Kabeer, 1999, pp. 435–464). It represents a transition from powerlessness to empowerment, manifesting over time through improvements in education, health, economic conditions, and political participation (Desai, 2010, pp. 1–75). Ultimately, empowerment addresses the issues of social, economic, and political exclusion.

In India, social exclusion is deeply rooted, stemming from longstanding feudal, caste, and patriarchal structures. Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and women have historically faced marginalization, often being deprived of their rights and opportunities (Singh, 2013, pp. 62–71). Empowerment also signifies the authority and ability of marginalized individuals to participate in decision-making processes. It is crucial for the development of society as a whole (Ghosh et al., 2015, pp. 294–314). Recognizing that sustainable development requires the inclusion of all people, regardless of caste, class, religion, region, or gender, has become increasingly accepted (Kaur, 2009, pp. 333–344).

Among marginalized groups, the exclusion of women is particularly critical, as they constitute approximately half of the population. Their empowerment is thus an essential issue. The ongoing exclusion of women lacks justification, given their vital role as agents of political and economic transformation (UNDP, 1995). Women face numerous crises, including dowry practices, female infanticide, gender-based violence, and systemic inequalities in health and education (Sharma & Das, 2008, pp. 815–823). Although many women are educated, they often lack awareness of their rights, leading to ongoing discrimination and violence perpetuated by male family members and societal norms (Agnihotri & Malipatil, 2017, pp. 14301–14308). Men generally have greater access to resources and societal power, reinforcing their dominance over women (Huis et al., 2017, pp. 1–14). Empowering women means rectifying these historical injustices, challenging patriarchal structures, and ensuring that women have access to both material and informational resources (Pradhan & Dutta, 2008, pp. 559–577).

Women's empowerment operates on multiple levels, fostering individual confidence and the collective strength of women to address structural barriers to equality (Kudva, 2003, pp. 445–463). It is essential to contextualize the analysis of women's marginalization, considering how structural factors differ across regions, castes, classes, religions, and cultures (Hust, 2002, pp. 1–27).

Similarly, Scheduled Castes (SCs) also face systemic marginalization and oppression in Indian society. Historically, they have been subjected to discrimination and exploitation, resulting in enduring socio-economic challenges (Inbanathan & Sivanna, 2010, pp. 1–26). Despite governmental initiatives aimed at uplifting SC communities, many remain entrenched in poverty, particularly in rural areas. They often possess limited land, low literacy rates, and suffer from inadequate access to employment and fair wages due to a lack of industrial development (Pai, 2000, pp. 405–422). Even when SC individuals attain positions of authority, they frequently face barriers imposed by dominant communities, preventing them from exerting genuine influence in decision-making processes (Baviskar, 2020, pp. 168–174).

The unique challenges faced by SC women necessitate special attention. They experience compounded marginalization due to their gender and caste, often finding themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Reddy et al., 2009, pp. 11–16). Opposed by dominant communities, SC women face increased obstacles in accessing opportunities and resources (Singh, 2013, pp. 62–71). The hierarchical nature of the caste system further inhibits their ability to operate independently and effectively in society (Sinha, 2018, pp. 34–41).

To harness the potential of women, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 introduced a significant policy change by reserving one-third of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This move marked a pivotal moment for women's participation in local governance in India (Sinha, 2018, pp. 34–41). The reforms aimed to enhance representation from marginalized communities and facilitate greater decision-making power at the grassroots level (Ulrike, 2016, pp. 158–182). The representation of SCs, STs, and women in PRIs has been crucial in amplifying their voices and addressing their specific concerns (Sukumar et al., 2019, pp. 72–88).

Although seats have been reserved for the females to ensure their participation in the electoral system of the country, yet the low level of education, particularly among the SC women is the major impediment towards their political participation. Female education is considered as an index of socio-economic transformation and political advancement of a society. Education paves the way for freedom, fearlessness, productivity, economic earning, authority to take decisions, power and liberalization (Siwach, 2008). The national policy on education recognizes the criticality of education as the most important vehicle for social, economic and political transformation (MHRD, 2016). Education eliminates the social and psychological disparities among the people. Education is fundamental to individuals' and groups' social, economic and cultural progress (Singh & Baghal, 2023).

By mandating women's representation in local government, the governance process is expected to reflect the interests of women, thereby contributing to democratic participation and empowerment (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2008). Gender quotas in PRIs are essential strategies to promote women's involvement in the political system (Kudva, 2003, pp. 445–463). Enhanced participation in local governance is anticipated to improve transparency and accountability while fostering greater social equity (Bryld, 2001, pp. 149–172).

In conclusion, the empowerment of women, particularly in political contexts, is vital for advancing gender equality and enabling them to combat marginalization and exploitation (Pandit, 2010, pp. 1139–1148). The statutory reservation of seats in PRIs has opened avenues for women's active involvement in development and decision-making processes at the grassroots level (Hazarika, 2006, pp. 245–260). This study aims to assess the effect of the Haryana Panchayati Raj Amendment Act of 2015 on the empowerment of Scheduled Caste women through their participation in PRIs during the elections held in 2010 and 2016.

Objectives

The major objectives of the study are:

- To examine the extent of empowerment among Scheduled Caste (SC) women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in 2010 and 2016.
- To assess the levels of empowerment for SC women in PRIs in 2010 and 2016.
- To evaluate the progress in the empowerment of SC women in PRIs from 2010 to 2016.
- To emphasize the variations in empowerment among SC women across different PRIs.

Study Area

Haryana, which accounts for 1.34 per cent of India's area and 2.10 per cent of its total population, is situated in the northwestern region of the country, spanning from 27° 39' 00" to 30° 55' 05" north latitude and 74° 27' 08" to 77° 36' 05" east longitude. The state has a literacy rate of 76 per cent, with 84 per cent of males and 66 per cent of females being literate. In rural areas, approximately 52 per cent of females are literate, but only 34 per cent have completed secondary education. Among scheduled castes, the literacy rate stands at 56.91 per cent, with rural literacy at 55.84 per cent. Of the literate rural scheduled castes, 14.12 per cent have completed matriculation; the rates for males and females are 15.77 per cent and 10.77 per cent, respectively. Agriculture serves as the backbone of the state's economy, with most residents relying on agriculture and its related sectors. About 65 per cent of the population resides in rural areas, particularly in districts like Mewat, Mahendragarh, Fatehabad, and Bhiwani, where over 80 per cent live in rural settings. For administrative purposes, Haryana is divided into 21 districts, 80 tehsils, and 125 community development blocks, encompassing a total of 6,841 villages.

Database and Methodology

The study utilizes secondary data from the reports on General Election to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Haryana for 2010 and 2016, published by State Election Commission of Haryana. To illustrate variations across the state in the representation

of Scheduled Caste (SC) women in PRIs, the total number of SC women in these positions has been aggregated at the district level, with percentages calculated for both 2010 and 2016.

To assess the empowerment levels of SC women, the difference between the number of elected Scheduled Caste women in PRIs and the seats reserved for them is calculated across all PRI categories. To quantify the hierarchical status of these categories, weightage scores are assigned: 5 points for each additional seat won by Scheduled Caste women Panches beyond their reservation, 10 points for Scheduled Caste women Sarpanches, 15 points for Members of Panchayat Samiti, and 20 points for Members of Zila Parishad. The additional seats won by Scheduled Caste women in each category are then multiplied by their respective scores.

Composite scores at district level are derived by summing scores of all PRIs and dividing by total number of PRIs (four). The index of improvement in empowerment of elected Scheduled Caste women PRIs is calculated by subtracting composite scores of 2010 from those of 2016 at district level and dividing by state average. Results are analysed using tables and figures.

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are elected bodies responsible for grassroots governance and local self-government in rural areas. The term "Panchayat" combines two words: "Panch," meaning five, and "Ayat," meaning assembly. Historically, villages in India would elect five wise elders to resolve disputes, address grievances, and manage local administration. Elected members of the panchayat are called "Panchs," while the head is known as the "Sarpanch." The term "Raj" signifies rule.

The village panchayat system was introduced by the British as a way to address demands for local autonomy. After India gained independence, the Panchayati Raj System underwent various reviews and was formalized by the Lok Sabha through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992. This established a three-tier Panchayati Raj System, consisting of Gram Panchayat at village level, Panchayat Samiti at community development block level (which groups several villages for administration), and Zila Parishad (District Council) at district level. Members of Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad are elected representatives.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act also establishes Gram Sabha (Village Assembly) as foundational element of Panchayati Raj System. States have authority to determine powers and functions of all PRIs, ensuring their election over time.

Panchayati Raj Institutions in Haryana

In 2010, Haryana had 6,083 Gram Panchayats, 119 Panchayat Samitis, and 21 Zila Parishads. By 2016, number of Gram Panchayats had increased to 6,205 and Panchayat Samitis to 126, while the number of Zila Parishads remained unchanged. Additionally, the number of seats available in these institutions rose from 58,783 for Panches, 6,083 for Sarpanches, 2,771 for Members of Panchayat Samiti, and 374 for Members of Zila Parishad in 2010, to 62,629 for Panches, 6,205 for Sarpanches, 3,002 for Members of Panchayat Samiti, and 416 for Members of Zila Parishad in 2016.

Haryana Panchayati Raj Amendment Act, 2015

Panchayati Raj System offers PRIs opportunity to understand and address the needs of their villages, particularly concerning the economic and social challenges of modernization. Recognizing the high illiteracy rates among elected PRI members in 2010, the Haryana Government enacted the *Haryana Panchayati Raj Amendment Act, 2015*. This legislation established minimum educational qualifications for candidates: matriculation for general category candidates, eighth grade for women (general) and scheduled caste candidates, and fifth grade for scheduled caste women candidates.

Additionally, candidates must have functional toilets in their homes and be free of outstanding power bill payments. They cannot have been charge-sheeted by any court or be loan defaulters. These measures were implemented to enhance quality of leadership and governance in rural areas of the state, with the belief that educated representatives would be more accountable to their constituents than their illiterate predecessors. Consequently, Haryana became the second state in India, following Rajasthan, to mandate educational qualifications and other criteria for candidates contesting Panchayat elections.

Results and Discussion

Magnitude of SC Women in PRIs Empowerment, 2010 and 2016

SC women are considered to be more empowered if there is an increase in the share of SC women in PRIs among the total members of PRIs in state. The study shows that the share of SC women in PRIs increased from 11.32 per cent in 2010 to 13.41 per cent in 2016, suggesting improvement in empowerment of SC women in PRIs during study period (Table 1).

Table 1: Haryana: Percentage Share of SC Women in PRIs to Total members of PRIs, 2010 and 2016

District	Share (per cent)		District	Share (per cent)	
	2010	2016		2010	2016
Ambala	15.56	18.94	Mahendragarh	10.45	12.34
Bhiwani	10.62	11.10	Mewat	5.12	7.79
Faridabad	9.85	10.60	Palwal	9.66	10.58
Fatehabad	12.89	17.49	Panchkula	11.24	12.88
Gurgaon	10.64	11.97	Panipat	11.10	12.55
Hisar	11.70	13.40	Rewari	11.30	12.01
Jhajjar	10.22	11.69	Rohtak	9.94	13.42
Jind	11.07	11.67	Sirsa	12.63	16.00
Kaithal	12.14	13.72	Sonipat	10.44	11.06
Karnal	11.75	14.50	Yamunanagar	14.23	17.15
Kurukshetra	12.57	15.82	State	11.32	13.41

Source: Tabulated from Haryana PRIs Election Reports, 2010 and 2016

Furthermore, Ambala district recorded the highest share, while Mewat district had the lowest, both in 2010 and in 2016. However, with the introduction of educational qualifications required to participate in PRI elections, inter-district variation in empowerment of SC women in PRIs became more pronounced in 2016 compared to 2010. This change can be attributed to significant inter-district gap in rural SC literacy rate in general (19.41 percentage points) and educational status of rural SC females (8.48 percentage points), which are key factors influencing SC women's participation in PRI elections (Table 3).

In 2010, SC women in PRIs recorded a very high share in Ambala and Yamunanagar districts. By 2016, four new districts—Fatehabad, Sirsa, Kurukshetra, and Karnal—entered this category, indicating a threefold increase in areas experiencing significant SC women PRIs empowerment compared to 2010. Fatehabad, Sirsa, and Kurukshetra improved their status from areas of high empowerment, while Karnal advanced from a moderate level of empowerment in 2010. Among districts previously classified as having a high level of empowerment in 2010—Fatehabad, Sirsa, Kurukshetra, and Kaithal—only Kaithal maintained its status in 2016. Additionally, six new districts—Rohtak, Hisar, Panchkula, Panipat, Mahendragarh, and Rewari—joined this category in 2016 (Fig. 1). Except for Rohtak, which maintained a low level of empowerment, all other districts improved from a moderate level of share in 2010. Consequently, there was approximately a twofold spatial expansion in areas reporting a high level of SC women empowerment in PRIs in 2016 compared to 2010 (Fig. 1). As a result, the percentage of districts registering a moderate share of SC women in PRIs declined from 52 per cent in 2010 to 33 per cent in 2016.

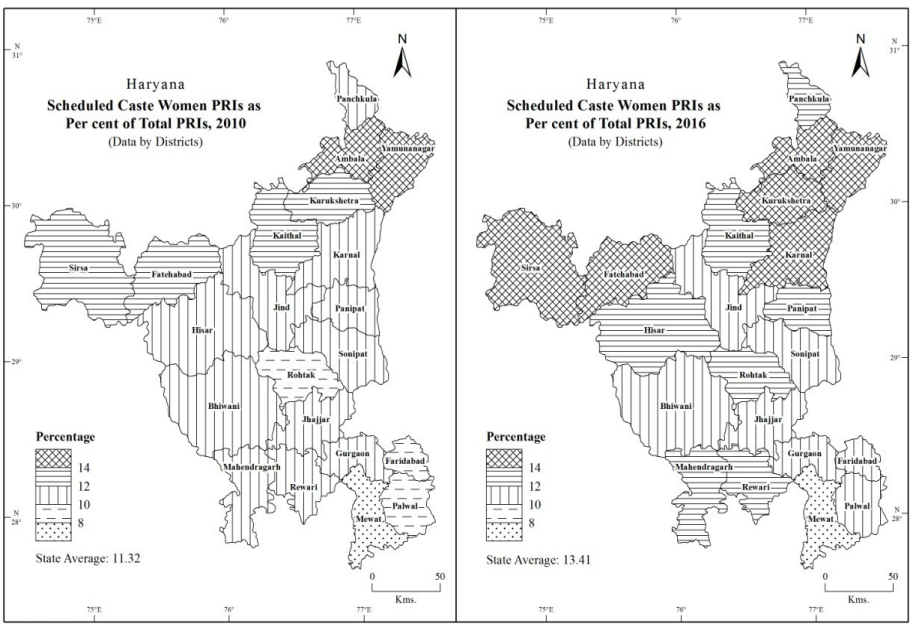

Fig. 1

Source: Table 1

In 2010, three districts—Rohtak, Faridabad, and Palwal recorded a low level of SC women empowerment. However, by 2016, no districts remained in this category. Mewat is the only district that maintained a very low level of SC women in PRIs share in both 2010 and 2016. Although Mewat stayed in the same category, the percentage share of elected SC women in PRIs increased from 5.12 per cent in 2010 to 7.79 per cent in 2016. This study highlights that, following the introduction of educational qualifications for PRI elections, all districts in the state experienced an improvement in the share of SC women in PRIs from 2010 to 2016, with Fatehabad district registering most significant gain.

Levels of Empowerment of SC Women in PRIs, 2010 and 2016

The levels of empowerment of SC women in PRIs were assessed based on the number of additional seats they won beyond those reserved for them in each category of PRIs. The study indicates that SC women in PRIs achieved a composite score of 129.29 in 2016, compared to 45.65 in 2010, reflecting approximately a threefold improvement in their empowerment during this period. Similarly, the inter-district variation in empowerment increased from a composite score of 121.25 in 2010 to 243.75 in 2016, demonstrating significant spatial differentiation in spread of empowerment of SC women over this time (Table 2). This variation is attributed to disparities in educational qualifications of rural SC women (Table 3).

Table 2: Haryana: Levels of Empowerment of SC Women in PRIs, 2010 and 2016

District	Composite Scores		District	Composite Scores	
	2010	2016		2010	2016
Ambala	127.50	266.25	Mahendragarh	17.50	147.50
Bhiwani	45.00	146.25	Mewat	6.25	136.25
Faridabad	15.00	32.50	Palwal	45.00	76.25
Fatehabad	31.25	182.50	Panchkula	17.50	22.50
Gurgaon	20.22	71.25	Panipat	61.25	105.00
Hisar	77.50	168.75	Rewari	21.25	81.25
Jhajjar	40.00	100.00	Rohtak	26.25	137.50
Jind	97.50	72.50	Sirsa	21.25	143.75
Kaithal	65.00	125.00	Sonipat	57.50	98.75
Karnal	51.25	195.00	Yamunanagar	57.50	210.00
Kurukshetra	57.50	196.25	State	45.65	129.29

Source: Tabulated from Haryana PRIs Election Reports, 2010 and 2016

In 2010, only two districts—Ambala and Jind—recorded a very high level of empowerment of SC women in PRIs. By 2016, this number increased to 16 districts, including Ambala, Yamunanagar, Kurukshetra, Karnal, Fatehabad, Hisar, Mahendragarh, Bhiwani, Sirsa, Rohtak, Mewat, Kaithal, Panipat, Jhajjar, Sonipat, and Rewari. This represents an eightfold increase in areas witnessing a very high level of empowerment of SC women in PRIs compared to 2010 (Fig. 2).

In 2016, Ambala retained its position from 2010, while Hisar, Kaithal, and Panipat advanced from high empowerment category. Kurukshetra, Sonipat, Yamunanagar,

Karnal, and Bhiwani moved up from moderate level, and Jhajjar, Fatehabad, Rohtak, Rewari, and Sirsa progressed from low level. Mahendragarh and Mewat improved their status from very low level of empowerment of SC women in PRIs in 2010. This study illustrates how introduction of educational qualifications has encouraged educated SC women to participate in PRI elections in 2016.

In the same year, Palwal, Gurgaon, and Jind were categorized as having a high level of empowerment of SC women in PRIs. Among these, Palwal and Gurgaon improved their status from moderate and low levels of empowerment in 2010, while Jind dropped from very high level of empowerment it had previously achieved. Similarly, in 2016, Faridabad and Panchkula fell into low levels of empowerment of SC women in PRIs category, having transitioned from a very low level in 2010.

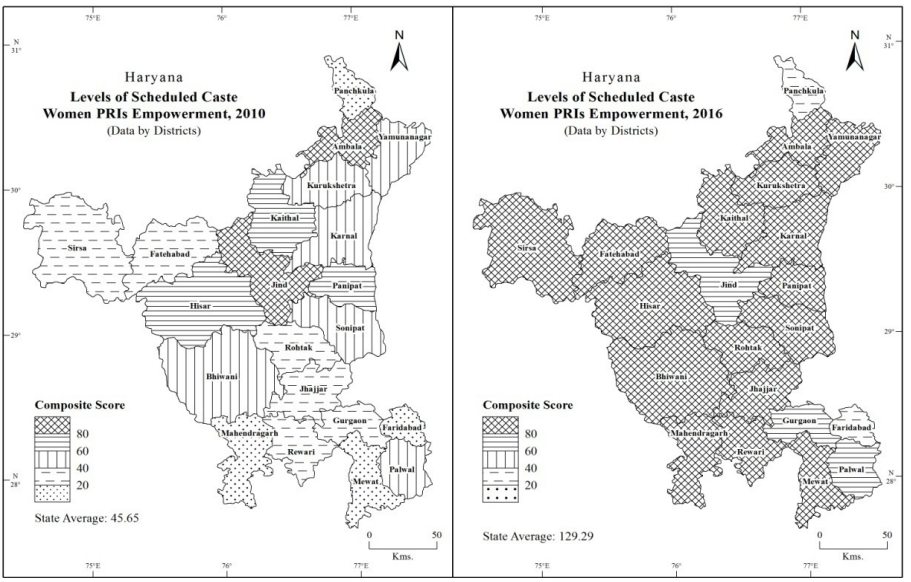

Fig. 2

Source: Table 2

It is noteworthy that in 2016, no districts were categorized as having a moderate or very low level of empowerment of SC women in PRIs, whereas 48 per cent of districts fell into these categories in 2010. This study highlights that, following the introduction of educational qualifications for PRI elections, all districts in the state, except Jind, experienced improvements in empowerment of SC women in PRIs from 2010 to 2016. The most significant advancements were observed in areas classified as having a very high level of empowerment of SC women in PRIs. Conversely, Jind district experienced a slight decline in empowerment of SC women in PRIs in 2016 compared to 2010. This decline can be attributed to low participation rates among SC women in PRI elections, driven by a low literacy rate of 52.04 per cent among rural SC population in general, and particularly low educational attainment among rural SC women, with only 8.83 per cent of literate females in district having completed matriculation (Table 3).

Table 3: Haryana: Index of Change in empowerment of SC Women in PRIs in 2016 with respect to 2010, Rural SC Literacy Rate and Rural SC Female Matriculates as per cent of Total SC Female Literates

Districts	Index	Literacy Rate (per cent)	Matriculates (per cent)	Districts	Index	Literacy Rate (per cent)	`Matriculates (per cent)
Yamunanagar	1.82	62.99	12.60	Rewari	0.72	64.73	12.38
Fatehabad	1.81	46.74	7.44	Jhajjar	0.71	52.53	13.59
Karnal	1.72	54.10	10.26	Kaithal	0.71	49.35	8.28
Ambala	1.66	62.80	14.07	Gurgaon	0.61	65.19	13.45
Kurukshetra	1.66	57.11	11.10	Panipat	0.52	57.00	10.31
Mahendragarh	1.55	63.72	12.26	Sonipat	0.49	59.92	12.81
Mewat	1.55	54.83	6.61	Palwal	0.37	54.54	8.13
Sirsa	1.46	45.78	7.54	Faridabad	0.21	58.88	9.78
Rohtak	1.33	58.69	11.25	Panchkula	0.06	61.79	15.09
Bhiwani	1.21	56.67	11.90	Jind	-0.30	52.04	8.83
Hisar	1.09	51.97	9.34	State		55.84	10.77

Source: Tabulated from Haryana PRIs Election Reports, 2010 and 2016 and Census of India data, 2011

Change in Empowerment of SC Women in PRIs, 2010-2016

The change in empowerment of SC women in PRIs following the enactment of the Act has been assessed by calculating an index of change. A higher index indicates greater improvement in empowerment of SC women in PRIs in 2016 compared to 2010. Districts such as Yamunanagar, Fatehabad, Karnal, Ambala, and Kurukshetra achieved an index of improvement greater than 1.60, placing them in category of very high improvement in empowerment of SC women in PRIs in 2016 (Table 3; Fig. 3). Notably, Fatehabad, despite having the lowest rural SC literacy rate in the state (46.74 per cent) and the second lowest percentage (7.44 per cent) of matriculate rural literate SC women, entered this category due to a significant mobilization of SC women for PRI elections in 2016. Consequently, the district's empowerment of SC women in PRIs scores surged from 31.25 in 2010 to 182.50 in 2016 (Table 2).

Yamunanagar, Karnal, and Kurukshetra also made significant gains, advancing from moderate to very high levels of empowerment of SC women in PRIs in 2016, thanks to their high rural SC literacy rates and active participation of educated rural SC women in the elections. Ambala demonstrated real improvement by maintaining its status as a district with a very high level of empowerment of SC women in PRIs in both 2010 and 2016, attributed to its high rural SC literacy rate and a significant percentage of educated rural SC women who were already aware of the importance of participating in PRI elections.

The districts of Mahendragarh, Mewat, Sirsa, Rohtak, and Bhiwani experienced a high level of improvement in empowerment of SC women in PRIs in 2016 compared to 2010 (Fig. 3). These districts progressed from very low, low, and moderate levels of empowerment to areas of high improvement in 2016, largely due to their low base levels. Mahendragarh, Rohtak, and Bhiwani benefited from a higher rural SC literacy rate and educated rural SC women who actively participated in PRI elections after amendment of the PRIs Act. In Sirsa, the heightened awareness among SC women led them to winning 33 per cent more seats in the Zila Parishad and 17 per cent more seats

in the Panchayat Samiti than were reserved for them in 2016. This shift indicates that SC women in PRIs became significantly more empowered by capturing higher-tier seats, which are considered four and three times more valuable than those of a Panch.

Interestingly, Mewat, which had the lowest composite score (6.25) for empowerment of SC women in PRIs in 2010, recorded a high level of improvement in 2016 despite having the lowest rate of education among rural SC females in the state, with only 6.61 per cent of literate rural SC females being matriculates. To address this educational gap, families adopted strategies to maintain political power. The amendment to the PRIs Act rendered elderly illiterate women ineligible to contest PRI elections, leading to a surge in marriages where families sought educated brides, even from outside the district if necessary. In cases where elections could be contested unopposed, families sometimes arranged second marriages for their sons to ensure they had an educated daughter-in-law, thereby securing PRIs seats for their families.

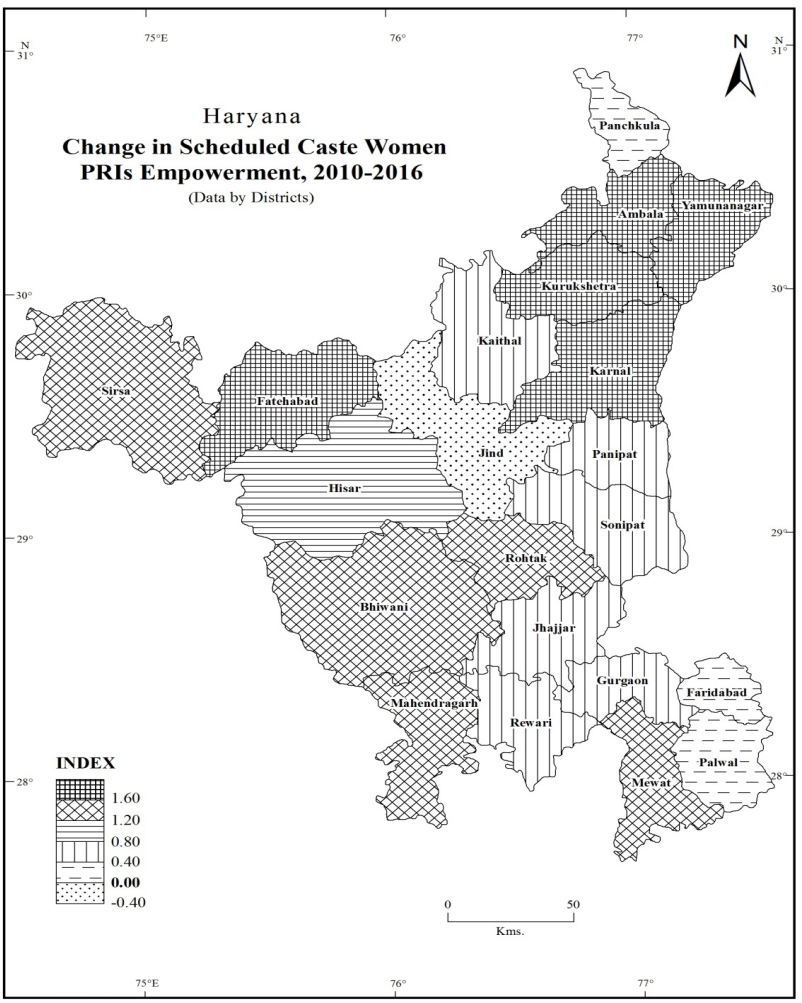

Fig. 3

Source: Table 3

Mewat district has a predominantly Muslim population, where female education levels are notably low, and second marriages are common. At least 50 marriages inspired by electoral participation have occurred in Mewat (Sharma, 2015, p. 6). In instances where families could not find an educated daughter-in-law, they encouraged their daughters to run in PRI elections to retain seats within the family. Typically, daughters do not enter PRIs elections because they are expected to leave their villages after marriage.

In contrast, districts such as Rewari, Jhajjar, Kaithal, Gurgaon, Panipat, and Sonipat exhibited low improvements in empowerment of SC women in PRIs from 2010 to 2016. Despite Rewari, Jhajjar, Gurgaon, and Sonipat having a high percentage of educated rural SC women, and Panipat showing moderate percentages, SC women in these districts did not perform better in the 2016 elections compared to 2010, resulting in minimal improvement in their empowerment during this period. In Kaithal, the educational level among rural SC women is very low, with only 8.28 per cent of literate rural SC females being matriculates, which contributed to their limited participation in PRI elections and, consequently, low empowerment levels.

Similarly, Palwal, Faridabad, and Panchkula experienced very low improvements in empowerment of SC women in PRIs from 2010 to 2016. Palwal's low educational attainment among rural SC females can be attributed to the predominance of the Muslim population. Although Faridabad is the most industrialized district in the state, the educational status of rural SC females remains low, with only 9.78 per cent being matriculates. Thus, the performance of SC women in both the 2010 and 2016 elections was poor, leading to minimal improvement in their empowerment.

Interestingly, despite having the highest educational status among rural SC women in the state, SC women in Panchkula did not perform well in PRI elections in either year. They failed to win any extra seats beyond those reserved for them in the Zila Parishad elections, and in the Panchayat Samiti elections, they could not secure even the reserved seats in 2016. Their performance across other categories of PRIs also showed little improvement from 2010 to 2016, largely due to a lack of motivation and encouragement for SC women to participate in the elections. Consequently, this district, despite its high educational attainment, witnessed the lowest improvement in empowerment of SC women in PRIs during the study period.

Jind is the only district in the state that experienced a decline in SC women empowerment from 2010 to 2016. This decline is primarily attributed to the low educational level of rural SC women, with only 8.83 per cent of literate rural SC women being matriculates. As a result, their participation in PRIs elections was significantly poor in 2016 compared to the 2010 elections. SC women won 10.24 per cent more seats in the Panches elections than were reserved for them in 2010, but this figure dropped to only 6.15 per cent extra seats in 2016, indicating a decline in their empowerment.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that following the introduction of educational qualifications for PRI elections, SC women improved their empowerment in 95 per cent of districts in state in 2016 compared to the 2010 elections, although

there were significant variations in the magnitude of improvement across different areas.

PRIs-wise, Variations in Empowerment of SC Women, 2010-2016

The functional importance and status of PRIs increase from lower to upper hierarchies within these institutions. Therefore, understanding SC women's empowerment through their performance in elections across different categories of PRIs is essential. The study reveals that SC women in Jind district won 10.24 per cent more seats in the Panches elections than those reserved for them in 2010 (Table 4). However, with the introduction of educational qualifications for PRI elections in 2016, this percentage declined to 6.15 per cent. As a result, their empowerment in relation to Panches decreased in 2016 compared to 2010. In contrast, SC women in all other districts experienced gains in empowerment, albeit to varying extents. The most significant improvement was observed in Mewat district (55.91 percentage points), followed by Fatehabad (24.98), Ambala (22.29), and Kurukshetra. Conversely, the least improvement was noted in Sonipat district (2.91), followed by Kaithal (5.67) and Palwal (6.94). Overall, the state witnessed a 15.10 percentage point increase in the empowerment of SC women within the category of Panch PRIs.

In Sarpanch category, SC women in the state recorded a 14.51 percentage point improvement in empowerment during the study period, although there were significant inter-district variations. Empowerment among SC women in this category declined in Jind (67.75 percentage points), followed by Rohtak (22.37), Palwal (10.88), and Panchkula (1.11) districts in 2016 compared to 2010. In contrast, the highest gains were seen in Kaithal (48.89 percentage points), followed closely by Yamunanagar (48.84), Kurukshetra (40.74), and Mahendragarh (40.43). Ambala and Faridabad maintained their positions from 2010 in 2016, while the least improvement was observed in Bhiwani (2.18), Jhajjar (2.78), and Hisar (5.07 percentage points).

In Member Panchayat Samiti category, several districts, including Panchkula (50.00 percentage points), Palwal (29.12), Faridabad (25.00), Kurukshetra (11.90), Gurgaon (4.17), and Karnal (2.08), comprising 29 per cent of the total districts, could not maintain their 2010 positions, resulting in decline in empowerment of SC women. The highest improvements in this category were recorded by Rohtak (69.32 percentage points), Mahendragarh (62.73), and Fatehabad (55.83). In contrast, the lowest empowerment was noted in Panipat (8.08), Jhajjar (11.12), Sirsa (11.83), and Kaithal (12.63 percentage points). Overall, the state witnessed an 18.40 percentage point improvement in empowerment of SC women within this category during the study period.

In the Member Zila Parishad category, the highest tier of PRIs, SC women experienced a 100 per cent decline in empowerment in Mewat and a 50 per cent decline in Kurukshetra (Table 4). Conversely, there was a remarkable 150 per cent improvement in Palwal, with 100 per cent improvements in Bhiwani, Jind, Mahendragarh, Rewari, and Rohtak. Improvements of 50 per cent were noted in Karnal, Sonipat, Fatehabad, and Yamunanagar, while a 33.33 per cent increase was observed in Sirsa. Other districts maintained their positions from 2010 to 2016. The state as a whole recorded a

17.68 percentage point improvement in empowerment of SC women in this category during the study period.

Table 4: Haryana: PRI-wise, Percentage of Extra Seats Won by SC Women than Seats Reserved for them, 2010-2016

District	Panches		Sarpanches		Member P. Samiti		Member Z. Parishad	
	2010	2016	2010	2016	2010	2016	2010	2016
Ambala	10.77	33.06	64.29	64.29	20.00	40.00	100.00	0.00
Bhiwani	6.22	17.60	5.71	7.89	6.25	26.32	0.00	100.00
Faridabad	4.63	18.64	22.22	22.22	25.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Fatehabad	3.13	28.11	11.76	21.05	6.67	62.50	100.00	50.00
Gurgaon	5.73	22.92	7.14	33.33	16.67	12.50	0.00	0.00
Hisar	8.66	23.11	16.67	21.74	23.81	40.91	33.33	0.00
Jhajjar	4.62	21.24	25.00	27.78	44.44	55.56	0.00	0.00
Jind	10.24	6.15	90.48	22.73	15.38	35.29	0.00	100.00
Kaithal	12.54	18.21	11.11	60.00	23.08	35.71	0.00	0.00
Karnal	6.30	26.17	11.54	46.43	18.75	16.67	0.00	50.00
Kurukshetra	8.95	30.81	0.00	40.74	33.33	21.43	0.00	-50.00
Mahendragarh	2.73	20.00	3.57	44.00	10.00	72.73	0.00	100.00
Mewat	3.57	59.48	0.00	34.78	0.00	40.00	0.00	-100.00
Palwal	7.11	14.05	26.67	15.79	50.55	21.43	0.00	150.00
Panchkula	9.47	17.92	11.11	10.00	25.00	-25.00	0.00	0.00
Panipat	14.97	27.40	8.33	20.00	55.56	63.64	100.00	0.00
Rewari	1.44	22.99	4.00	27.27	18.18	62.50	100.00	100.00
Rohtak	4.76	16.94	45.45	23.08	12.50	81.82	0.00	100.00
Sirsa	3.21	18.57	0.00	17.39	5.56	17.39	0.00	33.33
Sonipat	9.86	12.77	13.04	20.83	15.38	57.14	0.00	50.00
Yamunanagar	6.80	19.74	7.41	56.25	20.00	41.18	0.00	50.00
State	6.95	22.05	17.36	31.87	19.92	38.32	21.21	38.89

Source: Tabulated from Haryana PRIs Election Reports, 2010 and 2016

Overall, the study indicates that districts such as Bhiwani, Fatehabad, Mahendragarh, Rewari, Sirsa, Sonipat, and Yamunanagar saw improvements across all categories of PRIs. In Hisar, Jhajjar, Kaithal, and Panipat, SC women experienced empowerment gains in three categories, while in the Member Zila Parishad category, they could only secure the seats reserved for them in 2016. In Ambala, Gurgaon, Jind, and Palwal, empowerment was gained in only two categories. In Faridabad and Panchkula, SC women saw improvements only in the Panches category. At the state level, SC women gained empowerment in all categories of PRIs during the study period, with the most significant improvement seen in the Member Panchayat Samiti category, followed by Member Zila Parishad, Panches, and Sarpanches. The study, therefore, suggests that SC women's performance is better in higher categories of PRIs, which hold greater status and offer more opportunities for empowerment.

Conclusions

This study evaluates the effects of the Haryana Panchayati Raj Amendment Act, 2015, on the empowerment of Scheduled Caste (SC) women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) by comparing election data from 2010 and 2016. It reveals an increase in the share of SC women in PRIs from 11.32 per cent in 2010 to 13.41 per cent in 2016,

indicating enhanced empowerment. All districts showed improved performance, with those reporting a high share rising from 29 per cent to 62 per cent. The composite empowerment score for SC women tripled, from 45.65 to 129.29, and districts with very high levels of empowerment increased from 24 per cent to 90 per cent.

The findings suggest significant progress, especially in districts like Yamunanagar and Karnal, while highlighting Mewat's notable improvement despite historically low education levels among SC women. However, several districts, including Jind and Kaithal, still struggle with low educational attainment, hindering SC women's participation in PRIs. The study emphasizes the need for targeted educational initiatives, particularly in Mewat district with high Muslim populations, along with Jind and Kaithal districts to encourage female participation.

Despite gains in representation, the study underscores that increased seat capture does not guarantee SC women's involvement in decision-making. Therefore, further research is needed to assess their actual influence and performance in leadership roles within the villages where they serve as Sarpanches.

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Caste Prejudices in Denial: Analysing Student Perceptions in an Indian University

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Abstract

How do caste prejudices vary across students from different socio-economic communities? Do perceptions on caste (e.g., inter-caste marriage, existence of caste in modern times, reservation policy, etc.) correlate with caste prejudice levels? What are the factors that impact 'Caste Prejudice Levels' among students? In answering these questions, we measure the Caste Prejudice Levels among students of varying socio-economic backgrounds in a Central University in India. Statistical methods like two independent samples t-test, ANOVA, Chi-square test, Effect Sizes, etc., have been performed for analysing data. Overall, the results reveal that the people who are more likely to deny or are not aware of the relevance of caste today in terms of its impact on people's lives are more likely to have higher caste prejudices. The findings provide empirical insights into the literature around caste prejudice and inform policies to eradicate caste-based discrimination, especially in higher education.

Keywords

Caste Prejudice, Discrimination, Reservation, Higher Education, Policy

Introduction

Understanding prejudice is crucial as it underpins the behaviours that lead to discrimination (Allport et al., 1954). While prejudicial attitudes are learned through socialization processes, it is when these attitudes are enacted in behaviour that results

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in discrimination (Pettigrew, 1998) and when discrimination receives state backing, such as when individuals with prejudiced orientations become embedded in formal institutions, that it becomes systemic and leads to structured oppression (Oommen, 1990). Therefore, any intervention aimed at equity, diversity, and inclusion must address not only the process and outcomes of discrimination but also the underlying prejudices that shape such processes and outcomes (Chakravarti, 2018).

Caste-based discrimination has persisted for centuries in the Indian subcontinent, rooted in deeply entrenched systems of social hierarchy, power asymmetry, and cultural practices (Ambedkar, 2022). Despite the legal abolition of untouchability and the implementation of affirmative action policies such as reservations, caste prejudice remains a pervasive and enduring reality. Particularly within Indian higher education, the persistence of subtle and explicit caste bias continues to undermine the constitutional ideals of equality and social justice. Recent reports and testimonies from Dalit and other marginalized students indicate that campuses remain contested spaces, marked by social exclusion, intellectual devaluation, and stereotype-based marginalization (Ramvilas, 2022).

Even elite, meritocratic institutions that pride themselves on inclusivity remain fertile grounds for caste-based prejudice. Scholars have argued, entering multicultural or heterogeneous environments alone does not dissolve deep-seated biases—unless consciously and structurally addressed, such biases persist and adapt (Jodhka, 2016). This underscores the need to examine caste prejudice not merely as a personal belief but as an outcome of collective socialization, identity processes, and cultural narratives. The endurance of caste prejudice among educated youth points to the limitations of formal inclusion and necessitates deeper engagement with the psychological and relational underpinnings of bias.

While there exists an extensive body of literature on caste discrimination—highlighting manifestations such as untouchability, underrepresentation in institutions, and socio-economic deprivation (Jodhka, 2002; Jeffery et al., 2007)—there is inadequate empirical discussion on the variation in caste prejudice across different socio-economic communities, particularly within educational contexts (Thorat et al., 2016). This gap in research is critical, given that caste-based attitudes are often shaped by intersecting factors such as identity, status, exposure, and institutional culture.

In this regard, the present study contributes to a growing call for empirical and conceptual investigations into caste prejudice among students from different caste and class backgrounds (Deshpande, 2004; Thorat & Newman, 2007; Sharma & Jogdand, 2024). Specifically, we examine how caste-based prejudice varies among students in a Central Indian university, how it relates to students' perceptions on caste-related issues (such as reservation and inter-caste marriage), and how socio-demographic and educational factors influence prejudice levels. In doing so, we respond to the need for a deeper understanding of caste prejudice as a social-psychological phenomenon, rooted in individual cognition but shaped by group dynamics and structural ideologies.

Given the growing heterogeneity of university campuses—facilitated by affirmative action policies and demographic shifts—these spaces present an important

arena for examining social interaction, attitude formation, and identity negotiation (Relph, 1997; Shaban, 2017). As higher education institutions are sites of both social reproduction and transformation (Merret, 2004), they are uniquely positioned to explicate the mechanisms through which caste-based biases are either challenged or reinforced.

By empirically analysing caste-based prejudice and its correlates among students, this study aims to shed light on how caste continues to structure perceptions and interactions in contemporary academic spaces. Further, we seek to inform policies and pedagogical interventions that might help promote equity and inclusivity in higher education, and to contribute to the theoretical discourse on caste, prejudice, and social identity.

Theoretical Foundation

This study is built upon a comprehensive theoretical framework to understand the persistence of caste prejudice in Indian higher education, described below:

Caste as a Social-Psychological Construct

The caste system in India is one of the oldest surviving social systems in the world, predating many of the largest religions. Despite its antiquity, a universally accepted definition, origin, or understanding of the caste system remains elusive due to its immense diversity across the country. In a generic sense, caste system is a highly elaborate and nuanced social institution, maintained by endogamous marriages, and characterized by an unequal socio-religious and economic relationship between people who are hierarchically arranged by the principle of purity and pollution.

More than 6,000 castes exist across India, each with their own sub-castes and localized social structures. However, popular categorizations tend to cluster castes within the Varna system: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, while the "Untouchables," now referred to as Dalits, fall outside this classificatory order. These hierarchies are further reinforced through distinctions such as Savarna/Avarna (touchable vs. untouchable) and Dwija/Non-Dwija (twice-born vs. non twice-born). The Brahmins, situated at the apex of this structure, historically exercised the ideological power to define caste positioning (Ambedkar, 2022). For lower castes, this system is one of deprivation and systemic exclusion; for upper castes, it operates as a system of entrenched privilege (Phule, 1983).

A growing discourse, particularly by Ilaiah (2009, 2012, 2019), challenges these dominant narratives by classifying castes into 'productive' and 'non-productive'—assigning economic and cultural value to castes traditionally engaged in physical labour while problematizing the roles ascribed to privileged caste groups. This framework reasserts caste as a lived, material condition, rather than merely a symbolic or religious identity.

Importantly, caste is not confined to Hinduism but cuts across religious groups, manifesting in social exclusions, spatial segregation, and unequal material outcomes

among Muslims, Christians, and others (Ambedkar, 2022; Trivedi, Goli, & Kumar, 2016). Inequities in land ownership, access to education, and wealth distribution highlight the ongoing material implications of caste stratification (Marar, 2019). Attempts to resist these structures are frequently met with coercion and violence—honour killings, caste atrocities, and everyday harassment serve as mechanisms to preserve caste hierarchies (Ambedkar, 2020).

In recent years, scholars have urged a theoretical shift towards understanding caste not only as a sociological but also as a psychological construct. They argue for theorising the cognitive and affective mechanisms through which casteist beliefs are maintained and expressed (Jogdand, 2024). Contributions in this field include the psychological conceptualisation of caste prejudice at the group level (Sharma & Jogdand, 2024), as well as explorations of how people internalize narratives related to reservation, suffering, victimhood, collective memory, and even everyday practices such as food taboos and colorism (Choudhary, 2024; Harshitha, 2024; Mukherjee et al., 2024; Chereches, 2024).

From a social-psychological perspective, caste can be understood as a salient social identity that organizes people into in-groups and out-groups, much like ethnicity or race. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals derive a sense of self from their group memberships and seek a positive social identity by favourably comparing their own group to others. In the context of caste, this implies that belonging to a higher-status caste group may become a source of pride and positive self-esteem, whereas lower-caste identity may be socially devalued. This theory helps explain why caste divisions can powerfully evoke in-group and out-group biases and prejudices. Even in modern educational spaces, students who strongly identify with their caste group might display favouritism toward peers of their own caste and harbour distrust or derogatory views of those from castes traditionally deemed "lower". Such group-based biases reinforce the existing hierarchy by valorising high-status castes and marginalizing lower-status ones.

Notably, caste is an ascribed identity, one is born into, with a historically entrenched hierarchy that carries centuries of social significance. Social identity processes intersect with this stratification; members of dominant castes may develop a psychological investment in preserving their group's elevated status, resisting equality with lower castes and rationalizing prejudice as a means of protecting group prestige. Beyond Social Identity Theory, Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 2012) suggests that individuals ascribed with higher position group inequality and are more likely to endorse casteist beliefs, oppose affirmative action, and view the caste hierarchy as legitimate.

Caste Prejudice

Prejudice is a foundational concept to explain social-psychological phenomena such as exclusion, discrimination, and oppression. While stereotypes refer to oversimplified and generalized beliefs about particular groups, prejudice involves evaluative attitudes,

typically negative, held against group members based on these assumptions (Allport et al., 1954). Discrimination, in turn, is the behavioural expression of such prejudices, and oppression refers to systemic and institutionalized injustices sustained by such attitudes (DiAngelo, 2022).

These processes are deeply interlinked. Prejudices are often rooted in early socialization, wherein individuals internalize group distinctions, values, and stereotypes from family, school, media, and community (Bandura & Walters, 1977). In the Indian context, this is shaped heavily by the caste system's compartmentalization. The early life social interactions being not caste-neutral, aided by casteised socialisation contributes to group-based attitudinal formation. Caste-based prejudices become naturalized through these interactions, embedding themselves in one's psychological schema.

Although extensive literature documents the structural and institutional aspects of caste discrimination, relatively few studies focus on measuring caste prejudice and examining its variation across caste and class groups. Understanding caste prejudice allows scholars and policymakers to trace the attitudinal roots of discrimination and to design targeted interventions (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). It also helps identify which groups are more susceptible to holding or reproducing prejudiced attitudes, and which are most affected by them (Desai, Dubey, & Joshi, 2011; Sharma & Jogdand, 2024). Thus, we ask:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): *How does the 'Caste Prejudice Level' vary across students from different socio-economic communities?*

In contemporary academia, caste prejudice often intersects with debates over meritocracy and affirmative action. Upper-caste prejudice may be cloaked in rhetoric about "academic standards" or "misuse of reservations," reflecting modern prejudice—biases expressed in ostensibly non-prejudiced terms (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). For instance, an upper-caste student might harbour resentment that reserved category students "take away" opportunities, or suggest lower-caste students need to "prove" themselves more due to presumed deficits. As Ambedkar (2022) argued, caste bias is rooted in cultural notions of purity and pollution, creating a sense of social disgust toward castes that are low in hierarchy that lingers in subtle and explicit forms, such as reluctance to share meals or living spaces with Dalit classmates.

Prejudice and Perceptions for/against Caste

Socialization also reproduces broader cultural capital and distinctions that inform individuals' perspectives on caste (Bourdieu, 1977). In India, caste informs not only social interaction but also moral and political perception. People from different socio-economic backgrounds often develop distinct understandings of caste injustice and the policies meant to address it.

One key site of divergence is in perceptions of affirmative action, particularly the reservation policy outlined in Articles 15, 16, and 46 of the Indian Constitution (1949). One of the key objectives of the reservation policy is to ensure equitable representation of disadvantaged groups in various spheres of life. By providing quotas

in educational institutions, government jobs, and legislative bodies, the reservation policy has facilitated access to opportunities and resources for these groups, reducing caste-based disparities and empowering historically marginalized communities. Designed to correct historical injustices, these policies have enabled increased participation of marginalized communities in education and employment (Thorat & Newman, 2007; Desai & Kulkarni, 2008). By facilitating access to resources, and allowing individuals from underprivileged castes to succeed in diverse areas such as education, employment, or politics, these policies challenge caste-based prejudices and stereotypes, especially when beneficiaries succeed in competitive environments (Woodard & Saini, 2006; Ghosh, 2018).

However, these policies are often met with skepticism or opposition from upper-caste individuals who lack exposure to the lived experiences of caste marginalization (Thorat & Newman, 2012). Conversely, individuals from disadvantaged communities tend to view these policies as essential for equality and empowerment (Jodhka & Shah, 2010).

Similar divides emerge around inter-caste marriage. Despite its potential to disrupt caste boundaries and promote social integration, same-caste marriage remains overwhelmingly dominant (i.e., more than 90% of marriages) (Mondal, 2021). These perceptions—of who deserves support, of what constitutes fairness, or of how marriage should be arranged—are shaped by underlying caste attitudes and socialization. As perceptions affect one's socialization practices, a caste-prejudiced mind is likely to prefer same caste marriage even though inter-caste marriages are considered a potent means of weakening the caste system as they challenge the boundaries between castes and promote social integration (Thorat & Neuman, 2012).

Thus, the association between one's perceptions for/against reservation policy or inter-caste marriage and their caste prejudice levels can be explained by the varying experiences and socialization processes that shape one's habitus. The exposure of individuals to different aspects of the caste system plays a critical role in shaping their understanding of the problem of caste. Greater exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences of caste can foster empathy and support for anti-caste efforts (Miles & Brown, 2003). In contrast, limited exposure to the realities of caste-based discrimination and inequality may lead to a lack of awareness or denial of the problem, resulting in hostile attitudes towards reservation policies (Deshpande, 2005).

As a result, one's stance on caste-related policies and practices often correlates with their level of caste prejudice. Individuals with low caste prejudice levels may be more inclined to support reservation policies, recognizing the need for such measures to address historical and ongoing caste-based inequalities (Jodhka & Shah, 2010). Considering the fact that there is lack of theoretical as well as empirical exploration of the underlying basis of various popular perceptions against caste-related statements (Thorat et al., 2016), we therefore ask:

Research Question 2 (RQ2): *Does one's perception on caste-related matters (e.g., reservation policy & inter-caste marriage) correlate with one's Caste Prejudice Levels?*

Factors Influencing Caste Prejudices in Higher Educational Institutes

Higher education plays a critical role in secondary socialization. University spaces can challenge or reinforce caste-based attitudes, depending on the nature of peer interactions, faculty engagement, curriculum content, and institutional ethos (Tinto, 1997). Students at different stages of their academic journey may have varying degrees of exposure to critical thought, diversity, and intergroup contact. Students pursuing advanced degrees may have more opportunities to interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds, influencing greater understanding and empathy towards different social groups (Gurin et al., 2002). Additionally, higher levels of education often correlate with increased critical thinking skills, which can help students question and challenge existing social hierarchies and prejudices (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Disciplinary orientation also matters. As fields of social science foreground aspects related justice, inequality, and inclusion, students are most likely to be encouraged with progressive attitudes towards caste. In contrast, disciplines that remain detached from these concerns may do little to provoke critical introspection (Milem, 2003).

The composition and inclusiveness of the university environment also significantly affect student attitudes. Diverse campuses that promote inter-caste dialogue and explicitly engage with equity issues tend to foster lower levels of prejudice (Hurtado et al., 1999). In contrast, homogenous or hostile environments risk perpetuating or intensifying biases (Smith et al., 2004).

Thus, the educational, disciplinary, and institutional contexts within which students are embedded shape how caste prejudice is formed and sustained. Considering these factors are important for discussions, as policymakers can design educational initiatives that promote critical thinking and empathy among students, encouraging them to question social hierarchies and work towards a more inclusive society (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Accordingly, we ask:

Research Question 3 (RQ1): *What are the factors that impact 'Caste Prejudice Levels' among students?*

Methods

Sample and Data Collection

A Central University from north India has been chosen for the case study. The university has the reputation of being one of the oldest and premier higher education institutions in the country, attracting students across India, making it a suitable site for investigating socio-psychological phenomena such as caste prejudice in a heterogeneous academic environment. The fieldwork for data collection was conducted between January 31, 2020, and February 13, 2020.

For a reasonably large population, a sample size of approximately 400 is considered appropriate for a ±5% precision level, 95% confidence interval, and a degree of variability of 0.5 (Israel, 1992). A total of 506 valid responses were collected, exceeding the minimum threshold and thereby increasing the statistical robustness of

the analysis. Although a *non-probability* sampling method was used, the final sample closely mirrors the social category composition of the university's enrolled student population for the academic session 2019–2020.

Out of the total 506 samples, 250 respondents (49.41%) belong to the General category, 166 (32.81%) to the OBC category, 63 (12.45%) to the SC category, and 27 (5.34%) to the ST category. These proportions closely correspond with the university's reported student enrolment for the same period: General (49.41%), OBC (32.81%), SC (12.36%), and ST (5.08%).

For the purpose of data collection, a structured questionnaire was developed by the researcher and administered through Google Forms. The questionnaire was presented before the Doctoral Research Committee (DRC) for review and approval on October 1, 2019.

Methodological Procedure

The analysis proceeded in three broad steps corresponding to the three research questions and associated theoretical constructs. To address the RQ1—*How does caste prejudice vary across students from different socio-economic communities?*—a Caste Prejudice Index (CPI) was developed to quantify individual levels of caste-based prejudice. The CPI reflects attitudes internalized through primary and secondary socialization and aligns with the broader theoretical framework that views caste prejudice as a learned psychological orientation.

The index is based on student responses to four carefully framed statements, designed to elicit biases regarding caste. Each statement was assessed using a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree):

- General category students are more hardworking than reserved category students.
- Do you think upper-caste students are more intelligent than reserved category students?
- Reserved category people have got more benefits due to reservation than they deserve.
- Reserved category students do not need to study hard to progress in life.

Each response was scored as follows: +2 (Strongly Disagree), +1 (Disagree), 0 (Neutral), -1 (Agree), and -2 (Strongly Agree). These were summed to create a Caste Prejudice Score (CPS) for each respondent. The CPI was calculated using the formula:

$$Index\ Value\ = \frac{Actual\ Value - Maximum\ Value}{Minimum\ Value - Maximum\ Value}$$

Where,

Actual Value = CPS of each respondent.

Maximum Value = Maximum possible value of CPS, i.e., (+8)[1].

[1]Maximum score for one question is (+2), there are a total of four question. Thus, maximum possible score = (2) + (2) + (2) + (2) = (8).

Minimum Value = Minimum possible value of CPS, i.e., (-8)[2].

The resulting CPI values range from 0 (no caste prejudice) to 1 (maximum caste prejudice), allowing comparisons of Caste Prejudice Levels across respondents. To ensure the reliability of the CPI, Cronbach's Alpha (α) was computed and found to be 0.8013, which exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.80 for widely used indices (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). This indicates high internal consistency and confirms the robustness of the index as a psychometric measure of caste prejudice.

The second stage of analysis addresses the RQ2. For this purpose, CPI values were categorized into three levels:

- Low Prejudice: CPI < 0.3
- Medium Prejudice: CPI between 0.3 and 0.6
- High Prejudice: CPI > 0.6

These three levels of prejudice were cross-tabulated with student responses to the following five statements:

- Is reservation policy in higher education justified?
- Reservations should solely be based on economic criteria.
- I would like to go for inter-caste marriage in the future.
- Caste is the thing of the past; it is alive due to the reservations.
- Discrimination in India today is about class (rich and poor), not about caste.

Statements 1, 2, 4, and 5 were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, while Statement 3 was recorded as "Yes," "No," or "Can't Say." These perceptions serve as proxies for the respondent's attitudinal orientation toward caste-related issues. Pearson's chi-square tests were performed to assess the statistical significance of differences in perception across prejudice levels, thus operationalizing key social-psychological assumptions regarding social cognition and stereotype maintenance.

The third step explored RQ3—*what factors impact caste prejudice levels among students*— focusing on broader cultural and structural variables such as education level, disciplinary training, and family income. These are conceptualised as domains of secondary socialization that may either reinforce or reduce caste-based attitudes. To assess these influences, various statistical methods were applied depending on data type and distribution, e.g., two-sample t-tests to compare mean CPI scores between two groups (e.g., undergraduate vs. postgraduate students), one-way ANOVA for multiple group comparisons (e.g., across academic disciplines), Chi-square tests to examine categorical associations, and Effect size calculations to assess the magnitude of observed differences.

These analyses illuminate how academic and economic contexts intersect with attitudinal dispositions, supporting the theoretical position that caste prejudice is not fixed but shaped through ongoing social experiences. This step, therefore, allows for a nuanced understanding of the role that educational institutions play in either reproducing or challenging casteist attitudes in Indian higher education.

[2]Minimum score for one question is (-2), there are a total of four question. Thus, minimum possible score = (-2) + (-2) + (-2) + (-2) = (-8).

Findings

Caste Prejudice Index among Different Social Groups

Table 1 presents the average Caste Prejudice Index (CPI) values across different social categories. The General category exhibits the highest mean CPI value of 0.5845, followed by OBCs at 0.3414. In contrast, the SC and ST categories register substantially lower mean CPI values of 0.1706 and 0.2268, respectively, indicating lower levels of caste prejudice among historically marginalized groups.

These findings suggest that caste prejudice is most prevalent among students from socially dominant groups (General and OBC), with significant differences between them and SC/ST respondents. This confirms the view that caste-based prejudice is more pronounced among dominant caste groups, while those from historically disadvantaged communities exhibit greater awareness of structural inequalities.

Table 1: Category Wise Caste Prejudice Index (CPI)

Social Groups	Freq.	CPI	Std. Dev.
General	250	.5845	.2192
OBC	166	.3414	.2076
SC	63	.1706	.1560
ST	27	.2268	.1451
Total	506	0.4341	.2585

Source: Estimated by authors using fieldwork data

Caste Prejudice Levels and their Perceptions

To address RQ2, respondents were asked about their views on caste-related statements. These responses were cross-tabulated with their CPI categories (Low, Medium, and High Prejudice Levels) to explore the correlation between prejudice and perception.

It reveals that among individuals with Low Prejudice Levels, the majority (49.38 per cent) *strongly agree* that reservation in higher education is justified, with another 30.25 per cent agreeing. Conversely, among those with High Prejudice Levels, 53.47 per cent *strongly disagree* and 29.17 per cent *disagree* with the policy. The chi-square test statistic of 242.45 ($p < 0.001$) indicates a significant association between caste prejudice and support for reservation.

In the Low Prejudice group, 34.57 per cent *strongly disagree* with the idea of reservation based solely on economic criteria, compared to 70.83 per cent *strongly agreeing* among the High Prejudice group. The association is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 176.85$, $p < 0.001$), reinforcing that opposition to caste-based reservations is positively correlated with higher caste prejudice.

Willingness to consider inter-caste marriage declines as CPI increases. In the Low Prejudice group, 60.49 per cent expressed willingness, compared to only 41.67 per cent among those with High Prejudice, where uncertainty (36.81 per cent) and outright rejection (21.53 per cent) were more common. The chi-square value of 25.92 ($p < 0.001$) confirms a significant association.

Furthermore, a majority (52.47 per cent) of Low Prejudice respondents *strongly disagree* with the claim that caste exists only due to reservations, while those with High Prejudice predominantly *agree* (32.64 per cent) or *strongly agree* (41.67 per cent). This suggests that higher caste prejudice is aligned with narratives that deny structural caste inequality. The association is again significant ($\chi^2 = 186.51$, $p < 0.001$).

Among Low Prejudice respondents, 35.19 per cent *strongly disagree* and 31.48 per cent *disagree* with this statement. In contrast, 31.94 per cent of High Prejudice respondents *strongly agree*. The chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 88.81$, $p < 0.001$) confirms a significant relationship.

Table 2: Caste prejudice levels and perceptions on caste-related statements and questions

Statements/Questions \ Caste Prejudice Levels		Low Prejudice Level	Medium Prejudice Level	High Prejudice Level	Total	Pearson Chi2 (P-Value)
Is reservation policy in Higher Education Justified?	Strongly Disagree	3.7	20	53.47	24.31	242.45 (0.0000)
	Disagree	8.64	29	29.17	22.53	
	Neutral	8.02	19	9.03	12.65	
	Agree	30.25	23.5	6.94	20.95	
	Strongly Agree	49.38	8.5	1.39	19.57	
	Total	100	100	100	100	
Reservations should solely be based on economic criteria.	Strongly Disagree	34.57	5	0.69	13.24	176.85 (0.0000)
	Disagree	22.84	10.5	2.78	12.25	
	Neutral	10.49	12.5	6.94	10.28	
	Agree	17.28	30	18.75	22.73	
	Strongly Agree	14.81	42	70.83	41.5	
	Total	100	100	100	100	
I would like to go for inter caste marriage in future.	Can't Say	32.1	46	36.81	38.93	25.92 (0.0000)
	No	7.41	9.5	21.53	12.25	
	Yes	60.49	44.5	41.67	48.81	
	Total	100	100	100	100	
Caste is the thing of Past. It is alive due to the Reservations.	Strongly Agree	8.02	19	41.67	21.94	186.51 (0.0000)
	Agree	9.26	26	32.64	22.53	
	Neutral	11.73	20.5	13.19	15.61	
	Disagree	18.52	25	9.72	18.58	
	Strongly disagree	52.47	9.5	2.78	21.34	
	Total	100	100	100	100	

Discrimination in India today is about Class (Rich and Poor) and not about Caste.	Strongly Agree	9.88	17.5	31.94	19.17	88.81 (0.0000)
	Agree	14.81	29	29.86	24.7	
	Neutral	8.64	17.5	15.28	14.03	
	Disagree	31.48	26.5	15.97	25.1	
	Strongly disagree	35.19	9.5	6.94	17	
	Total	100	100	100	100	

Source: Estimated by authors using fieldwork data

These findings reveal that respondents with higher prejudice levels are more likely to resist caste-based reforms (e.g., reservations, inter-caste marriage) and adopt views that delegitimize caste as a category of contemporary discrimination. This pattern mirrors broader societal trends in India, where dominant caste groups often endorse economic or meritocratic framings to avoid acknowledging caste inequalities.

Factors Affecting the Caste Prejudice Index

To gain insights around why CPI values vary, we examined how educational, disciplinary, and economic backgrounds influence the CPI scores using multiple analytic techniques. For example, an ANOVA test ($F = 6.01$, $p = 0.0026$) revealed a significant difference in caste prejudice across educational levels. Mean CPI for Bachelor's and Master's students is similar (0.4496 and 0.4504), but significantly lower for PhD students (0.3357). This suggests that advanced academic exposure may contribute to a reduction in caste bias.

An independent samples t-test indicates that Humanities students have a lower mean CPI (0.3922) than Science students (0.4809). The difference of -0.0887 is statistically significant ($t = -3.4918$, $p = 0.0005$). The effect size (Cohen's $d = -0.3494$) suggests a small to medium effect. This aligns with prior research indicating that disciplines engaging with social justice themes may facilitate more critical reflection on caste.

Additionally, a Pearson's chi-square test examining CPI distribution across income groups yielded a p-value of 0.1578, indicating no significant association. This suggests that within a largely middle-class, university-educated sample, income levels do not significantly shape caste prejudice.

Table 3: Variation in CPI across different socio-cultural groups

Tests Performed	**Levels of Study**		**Mean CPI**	**Std. Dev.**	**Frequency**
Results of ANOVA	Bachelors		0.4496	0.2615	232
	Masters		0.4504	0.2524	204
	PhD		0.3357	0.2478	70
	Between Groups	SS=0.7875	df=2, MS=03937	F-value=6.01 P=0.0026	
	Within Groups	SS=32.9608	df=503, MS=0.0655		
	Bartlett's equal-variances test: chi2(2) = 0.4385 Prob>chi2 = 0.803				

Results of Two Independent Sample T-Test	**Streams of Study**	**Obs.**	**Mean CPI**	**SE**	**Std. Dev.**
	Humanities	222	0.392	0.017	0.265
	Science	173	0.48	0.018	0.238
	Combined	395	0.431	0.012	0.257
	t value= -3.491, df = 385.217, p-value=0.0003 Effect Size: Cohen's d= -0.349				
Results of Chi-Square Test	**Monthly Income Groups**	**Low Prejudice Level**	**Medium Prejudice Level**	**High Prejudice Level**	**Total**
	< 20k	36.6	39.15	24.26	100
	20k - 40k	28.69	42.62	28.69	100
	40k - 80k	26.37	39.56	34.07	100
	> 80k	25	34.62	40.38	100
	Chi2= 9.29, p-value=0.1578				

Source: Estimated by authors using fieldwork data

Our findings reveal that caste prejudice is influenced by educational trajectory and disciplinary context more than by economic standing within the student population. While PhD training and Humanities education are associated with lower prejudice, the level of household income is not a differentiating factor. These results reinforce the idea that academic socialization, especially in critical disciplines, can serve as a key factor in reducing caste-based biases.

Discussion & Conclusions

Overall, this study offers empirical insights into how caste prejudice manifests among university students, particularly across different social categories, and how it relates to broader policy attitudes and identity-based affiliations.

Variation in Prejudices Across Social Groups

Our findings confirm that privileged social groups, by virtue of their social standing, are more likely to exhibit higher prejudices compared to disadvantaged social groups (Reicher & Haslam, 2017). Students from historically privileged caste communities displayed significantly higher levels of caste prejudice compared to those from SC/ST communities. This supports the premise of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which suggests that individuals derive self-worth from group affiliations and often elevate their in-group while denigrating out-groups. In this context, high-status caste identities serve as sources of pride and entitlement, reinforcing hierarchical social schemas.

The privileged groups tend to maintain their social status by adhering to the norms and practices of the caste system, such as endogamy or marrying within their own caste (Ghurye, 1969). This pattern is further reinforced by individuals, especially those from dominant groups, who are motivated to defend the existing social order, even when it perpetuates inequality. By rationalising caste hierarchies as natural, deserved, or merit-based, prejudiced individuals uphold structural inequality while maintaining a positive self-concept. This dynamic was visible in the data: those most invested in the caste status quo also scored highest on caste prejudice.

Students from marginalized communities, on the other hand, reported lower prejudice levels, reflecting their critical awareness and personal experience of caste-based disadvantage. However, prior research suggests that even members of oppressed groups can internalise casteist ideologies, sometimes shaping the perceptions around discrimination they face (Pew Research Centre, 2021). Nonetheless, in our study, SC/ST students largely rejected casteist statements, highlighting the salience of lived experience in shaping counter-hegemonic attitudes.

Prejudice and Caste-Related Attitudes

The study also reveals a strong association between caste prejudice levels and respondents' views on caste-related policies and practices. Students with high prejudice levels were significantly more likely to oppose caste-based affirmative action and social integration measures, such as inter-caste marriage.

This correlation reflects patterns where discriminatory attitudes are expressed indirectly through seemingly neutral language, such as advocating for meritocracy or economic-based reservations. These "coded" expressions allow individuals to resist equity policies without appearing overtly biased, functioning as what scholars term "legitimising myths"—rationalisations that preserve privilege while deflecting accusations of prejudice.

Such patterns echo what is found in other contexts of symbolic racism, where opposition to policies benefiting the disadvantaged is couched in the rhetoric of fairness or cultural difference (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). In the Indian case, students opposed to caste-based reservations often invoked meritocratic ideals, denying the structural barriers that necessitate affirmative action in the first place. Individuals with high caste prejudice may also believe that caste is no longer relevant in contemporary society. However, this reflects both cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957)—where individuals reconcile the contradiction between prejudice and self-image—and system-justifying ideology and cognitive support for the existing social order (Jost et al., 2003). By asserting that caste is not relevant today, such individuals can distance themselves from the discriminatory practices associated with the caste system while still adhering to its norms and practices in their personal lives.

Thus, findings of RQ2 illustrate how caste prejudice is not just an abstract bias; it translates into tangible social and policy positions that resist caste integration and equity. This underscores the importance of addressing both the attitudinal aspect and the ideological narratives that render casteism socially acceptable under the guise of neutrality.

Factors Shaping Caste Prejudice

Our findings further reveal the underlying factors that influence caste prejudice, offering a nuanced perspective grounded in social identity theories and ideological orientation. Group Identification emerged as a key predictor in shaping the views on reservation policies. Individuals belonging to the General category may perceive

the policy as unfair and discriminatory, as it often results in a reduced number of opportunities for them (Sahoo, 2009). Conversely, those from SC, ST, and OBC categories are more likely to support reservation policies, as they directly benefit from these affirmative action measures (Jodhka, 2017). Views towards reservation policy are also shaped by whether they are beneficiary of reservation policy or not. Members of reserved groups may be more supportive of the policy, while unreserved individuals may see it as unjust (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008).

As a consequence, students who identified with their privileged caste background, viewing their caste as superior or central to their identity, tend to report higher prejudice levels. This reminds one of the work by Roccas et al. (2006), who distinguish between "attachment" (a benign form of group loyalty) and "glorification" (a superiority-driven form), the latter being more likely to generate out-group hostility. In our analysis, students with strong glorified caste identities consistently scored higher on the Caste Prejudice Index.

Demographic factors also play a critical role. People's views on reservation policies can also differ based on their place of permanent residence. Rural and semi-urban residents may be more inclined to support reservation policies, as they may face more socio-economic challenges compared to urban dwellers (Gupta, 2005). A higher education level among parents may lead to more critical views of reservation policies, as they may believe that merit should be the primary determinant of opportunities. Conversely, parents with lower education levels may be more supportive of the policy, as they may consider it an opportunity for their children to overcome socio-economic barriers.

Individuals with high caste prejudice tend to favour economic-based reservations, suggesting that their objection is not against the concept of reservations per se but against who benefits from them. This stance indirectly perpetuates caste prejudice by denying the continued relevance of caste in determining social opportunities and access to resources. However, contrary to popular expectations, the findings indicated that family income did not significantly correlate with caste prejudice. This finding challenges the common assumption that economic advancement fosters egalitarian attitudes. Instead, it affirms that prejudice reduction depends more on exposure, empathy, and education than on class status alone (Pager & Shepherd, 2008).

Similarly, the relationship between education and caste prejudice reveals interesting patterns. As students advance in higher education, their caste prejudice tends to decrease. This could be attributed to increased exposure to diverse perspectives and critical thinking skills acquired during higher education (Brint & Cantwell, 2010). Humanities students typically exhibit lower levels of caste prejudice than science students, possibly because the former are more likely to engage with issues of social justice, human rights, and inequality (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that caste prejudice among students is sustained through an interplay of group identity, ideological frameworks, and socio-cultural context. Students from dominant castes who strongly identify with their group and endorse hierarchy-justifying ideologies are more likely to exhibit casteist attitudes.

By contrast, students who belong to marginalized groups or embrace egalitarian principles are more likely to reject caste prejudice.

These insights have important implications for educational and policy interventions. Reducing caste prejudice requires more than individual attitude change; it calls for dismantling the ideological structures that legitimise group identities and inequality. Interventions should therefore aim to challenge myths of meritocracy that mask privilege; develop space for critical dialogue around caste and structural inequality; promote meaningful intergroup contact in university settings, as suggested by Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954); and cultivate curricula and campus cultures that actively disrupt caste normalisation.

This study also reaffirms the importance of higher education as a potential site of transformation, provided it engages students in meaningful reflection and cross-group interaction. Combating caste prejudice on campuses is not merely a cultural or moral imperative but a political and psychological challenge. It requires sustained efforts to interrupt the reproduction of caste hierarchies, not just in institutional practices, but also in how individuals understand themselves and others.

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Consciousness Not Without Danger: Theorising Violence Faced by Dalit Converts

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Abstract

The present article views Dalit conversion as a gradual process or bottom-up reassessment strategy for a democratic environment assumed to provide a space to challenge the social structure of the Hindu caste system. To theorise this, the article deploys Victor Turner's concept of liminality and studies religious conversion as a transition, liminal process, *or* threshold that promises to bring change and alternation in the existing rigid structure. It aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how religious conversion functions as a space of both rupture and renewal in Dalit identity formation. The epigram of this article spells out the objectives to show when, why, and how they follow the path of conversion. It argues that due to their peculiar position in the Hindu caste hierarchy and exclusion from the Varna category, Dalits are open to change their religion from Hinduism to another religion. The willingness to change their Hindu religion either in the form of protest and assertion, or compulsion to escape from the practice of untouchability, explains the capacity of Dalits to break the caste structure and possibly become an entirely new self. Furthermore, the article argues that this process of becoming a new self is surrounded by danger; Dalits, as transgressors, who challenge the social stratification of the Hindu caste system by converting to other religions, are often drawn to violence. The prevalence of the concept of conversion as a consciously chosen path by Dalits strikes controversy among caste Hindus, and the flexibility with which Dalits approach religion becomes one of the main causes of violence. Finally, it argues that when Dalit consciousness manifests itself through conversion, it invites danger, threat, or violence, and this threat and violence may not necessarily appear in physical and overt form but in covert forms such as violations of certain constitutional rights.

Keywords

Dalit Consciousness, Religious Conversion, Liminality, Caste-Violence, Violation of Constitutional Rights

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Introduction

Religious conversion is an extremely personal phenomenon. Yet conversion, as personal as it often is, can also ramify outward into the world with great force, galvanizing new communities, breaking old ones, and completely transforming the political landscape. Early modernity sees conversion come into full flower as a sublime instrument of imperial power—a way for sovereigns to exercise control over their subjects' souls as well as their bodies, whether those subjects are Iberian Jews or Muslims, French Protestants, or English Catholics (Wiegers, 2016). However, conversion is also seen as a potent instrument of resistance to the power of the State or the Church, and also a way for subjects such as Dalits to stand against the practice of untouchability and the caste system in Hinduism.

This article spells out the objectives to show when, why, and how Dalits started following the path of conversion. To understand this, one needs to study various reasons that make Dalits as inferior human beings financially, spiritually, and politically, and last but not the least, numerically weak. This political and numerical weakness together arise from two interrelated facts: (a) The kind of heterogeneity Dalits as a social group has in terms of linguistic, regional, religious, and occupational identity and even their demonstration of socio-political assertions differ (b) Despite this heterogeneity, the socio-political history of Dalits reflects a remarkable sense of unity, rooted in their shared experiences of caste-based discrimination and experiences. A significant expression of this unity can be observed in the case of mass conversion movement to Buddhism. Through this collective act, Dalits not only attempt to challenge the deeply entrenched caste hierarchy but also seek to reclaim a distinct religious identity outside the folds of Hinduism. Despite these powerful assertions of autonomy and resistance, their efforts have often been disregarded and, in many instances, met with violence and systemic violations. One such watershed moment in the history of Dalit Political Identity is the Poona Pact of 1932, which made Dalits completely dependent upon Hindus for selecting their own leader. By denying the separate electorates to Dalits, the pact diluted their political independence and compelled them to be absorbed into the fold of Hinduism, which made it difficult for Dalit leaders to emerge without pandering to dominant caste interests. However, when Ambedkar's advocacy for separate electorates for the upliftment of Dalits was compromised, he reasserted the demand for separate electorates in 1947 in "*States and Minorities"*, due to his experience in politics which showed him that Dalit representatives in joint electorates were often submissive to majority interests.

However, this suppression of Dalits' distinct socio-political identity has a vast history starting from ancient times such as the violent suppressions of Buddhists including the loss of royal patronage of Buddhists, their systematic suppression through monastery destruction, monk killings, and cultural erasure including absorption of Buddha as a Vishnu avatar, stripping Buddhism of its revolutionary core by Brahminical traditions (Ambedkar, 1957; Thapar, 2012; and Omvedt, 2003). The systematic disappearance of Buddhism and the appropriation of Dalits' distinct

religious identity by Hindu majoritarian forces have been quite prevalent in Indian History along with this, institutional biases diluted the political potential of the Dalit conversion movement to Buddhism. Moreover, it has been pushed into its communalist corner by the dominant discourse, and due to which it could not provide an escape from their subaltern conditions (Fuchs, 2004; Chatterjee 2004; Lee, 2018)

Apart from this systematic historical suppression of ancient times, there have been many instances of violence—both overt and covert—faced by Dalits whenever they try to raise their voice for their rights, challenge the caste system, or denounce their Hindu identity by embracing a non-Hindu identity through conversion. For instance, the Nadar Movement of the nineteenth century, the Mahad Satyagraha in 1927, the Kalaram Temple Entry movement in 1930, the Kilvenmani massacre in 1968, the Khairlanji massacre in 2006, and the 2016 Una flogging underscore how economic and occupational assertions by Dalits provoke brutal responses. Even in 2020 and 2022, incidents such as the Hathras case and Bhima Koregaon violence reveal that Dalits' attempts to claim dignity and pride are met with both overt aggression and institutional bias, highlighting the persistent force of caste-based oppression in India.

Anand Teltumde (2016) contextualises these caste atrocities and violence faced by Dalits as an outcome of the interplay of three factors: "caste consciousness", "asymmetry of power between Dalits and non-Dalits", and "a triggering event". These triangular factors of caste violence, as discussed by Teltumde (2016), can provide a strand to begin my argument about conversion and its related caste violence.

Religious emancipation as a prominent way for assertions began to take shape as a political movement during colonial times, especially with the emergence of Dr. Ambedkar as a Dalit leader. Ambedkar's desire for religious conversion in his delivered speech on 31 May 1936 at the Yeola Conference encouraged his fellow Dalits to leave Hinduism. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in 1956 and transformed this religious emancipation of Dalits into a political movement. However, this approach of religious emancipation was in practice before the arrival of Dr. Ambedkar. For instance, Bhakti saints like Basvanna, Ravidas, Kabir, Chokhamela, and Namdev at the time of the Bhakti movement of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, or the role of Iyotheethas, Ghasidas, Acchutanand, Narayan Guru in reclaiming the religion of the oppressed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, paved the way for a mass movement among Dalits.

Thus, the conversion movement emerged as a conscious tool for Dalits against the practice of the caste system and its prejudices and to reclaim their distinct religious identity separate from Hinduism. However, this consciousness does not come alone; it carries a danger or threat to the existing socio-political power and caste structure of Hinduism. Also, this danger is not unilinear; it functions from both sides. Dalits as transgressors, who are challenging the social stratification of the Hindu caste system by converting to other religions, are often drawn to violence. Therefore, the article argues that the prevalence of the concept of conversion as a consciously chosen path by Dalits strikes controversy among Hindu castes, or the flexibility with which Dalits approach religion becomes one of the main causes of violence. This threat can be

observed in both overt and covert forms of violence, which I call a violation of certain constitutional rights secured for religious freedom.

In order to understand the impact of Dalit religious conversion and its related violence and violations, the present article extends its study to political and cultural ethnography particularly focusing on the experience of Dalit converts, and how as converts they perceive new religion, its socio-political importance, belief system, and practice, and how they are perceived by the state and the immediate community i.e., Rajputs in this case. Anthropological concepts such as liminality and danger, which are largely used to understand symbols and cultural practices using the theory of power relations, identity, and hierarchies prevalent in existing social structures, provide a methodological approach to explore varieties of violence and violations faced by Dalit converts.

Dalit Consciousness and Religious Conversion

To articulate the relationship between Dalit consciousness and religious conversion, one needs to begin with the positioning of Dalits and their historically marginalized position in Hinduism. Due to their outcast or untouchable position in the Hindu caste system, like Africans, Dalits are also subjected to "overt and covert" collective sufferings (Bassey, 2007). Tila Kumar (2021) called this collective suffering a "cumulative domination" that Dalits have experienced for around two thousand years and to date continue to suffer discrimination and exclusion on various accounts, such as social, economic, and religious. Hence, it is argued that this collective suffering has developed into an oppressive consciousness which is largely anchored on status deprivation by "virtue of birth," which encompasses oppression brought on by inhumane material circumstances, helplessness, and ideological hegemony.

P.K. Kumar (n.d) defined consciousness as a complicated study as "it encompasses both the internal and external social world." Through consciousness, an individual or group becomes aware of their situation and experiences, hence transforms it into a reality similar to the external world in which people live and generate a collective consciousness about their shared misery and struggle.[1] Benny Shanon (1990) writes that consciousness is a process by which a person or a community not only becomes aware of themselves, their existence, and their experiences, but it also critically shapes the life, status, orientation, and future discourse of a historically oppressed and marginalized community.

P.K. Kumar (n.d.) writes that in the case of Dalit consciousness, it is the Brahmanical ideology that defines the role of each social group in a hierarchy that dictates the dominance of some social groupings over untouchable communities. These dominant and asymmetrical power structures between Dalits and non-Dalits or upper castes receive their legitimacy from the religious literature and philosophical systems

[1]Arulnathan, S. (2011, December 15–16). *Construction of Dalit consciousness.* Paper presented at the International Seminar on "Caste Out of Development," DMI House, St. Thomas Mount, Chennai, India.

dating from the Vedic period to the present day. The centrality of ascription on Dalits, according to the Brahminical canon, revolves around an uncivilized but well-designed language of purity and pollution. The legitimacy coming from Brahmanical sources has continuously hammered the minds of Dalits such that even Dalits have adopted and ascribed to this untouchable identity. In this context, Aloysius (1998) calls this situation a cycle of oppressors and oppressed in which Dalits are locked. It requires epistemological shifts to call into question various social phenomena such as caste atrocities, discrimination, and inhuman conditions, which are still accepted as neutral and given, and start appearing as an emanation of exploitative social relations.

Religious conversion among Dalits indicates an epistemological shift. This shift reveals the social reality of a particular identity—or multiple identities—that have long been oppressed. Through this new lens of subjective consciousness, Dalits begin to understand their existing socio-economic and cultural position in society. This awareness highlights the structures that keep them subjugated As a result, it fosters a strong sense of solidarity among the oppressed. (Aloysius, 1998). When Ambedkar led a mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in 1956, it was not merely a religious move but deeply political, rooted in Ambedkar's intellectual journey and quest for a rational and egalitarian spiritual path (Zelliot, 1992; Jaoul, 2018). Zelliot (1992) further adds that Ambedkar was drawn to Buddhism for two reasons, namely, its philosophical and historical roots in challenging Brahminical Hinduism. Through the ethnographic studies of Dalit conversion to Buddhism in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, Jaoul (2018) explains how the religious emancipation movement among Dalits created a sense of self-emancipation. It also highlights the limitations of liberal democratic frameworks that provide institutional and legal protection to Dalits. However, Ambedkar believed that true emancipation required a transformation of consciousness and culture, not just legal protection.

Therefore, religious conversion is seen as a tool or a bottom-up approach where a convert, without any external force, consciously chooses to adopt a new faith that justifies the moral and ethical grounds of humanity that they are not perceived as being a 'Hindu'. The consciousness of oppression in the line of religious conversion is seen as an urge, or a will, towards the change in social praxis (Aloysius, 1998).

Religious Conversion as a Liminal Process

Marry Douglas (1966) and Victor Turner (1969) were two prominent anthropologists who used the concept of liminality and danger to understand unequal power structures. Turner (1969) describes liminality[2] as an important or revolutionary phase of life to incorporate change and reinvent a new status quo. This potential change, which Turner

[2]To explain his point, Victor Turner borrowed the concept of liminality from Van Gennep's work "Rites of Passage" in written in 19. According to Gennep all the rites of passage are marked by three phases or processes: separation, margins (liminal), and, aggregation. The first phase comprises where the individual is detached from its previous social structure and cultural conditions. In the second phase the liminal period the individual is in an ambiguous position; he passes through a cultural reality that he has few or none of the attributes of the

called liminality, involves an in-between state, i.e., "betwixt and between", reshaping the status quo. He also calls this phenomenon a "bottom-up approach" to fight against the rigid structure of society. Thus, liminality involves letting go of previously held views, attitudes, and status and being prepared to reconsider and recalibrate; it means living life in a transition, in between, taking nothing for granted and recognizing oneself perpetually at a crossroads or threshold (Bigger, 2015). However, it is not just a form of cultural manifestation of *communitas*—an unstructured community sharing a strong morality among its members when they are in the threshold process—but also as a "power of the weak". In a more precise term, the sacred side of the low status or position which carries danger to those concerned about the maintenance of the structure (Turner, 1969).

Moreover, this structural order is always surrounded by prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions. While disorder has no pattern, rather it has potential for indefinite patterning that emulates both power and danger (Douglas, 1966). In this context, Douglas (1969) argues that binaries of purity and pollution, order and disorder, or form and formlessness, are maintained, and controlled by prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions. Since liminality represents disorder and formlessness, it is destructive and challenges the existing social structures and patterns. While referring to Van Gennep's rites of passage, she pointed out that the threshold of every passage contains danger, as the person is in between, does not wholly belong to any state, and may harm the existing structured reality. Thus, a transition is an undefinable state where the person is in danger and emanates danger to other definable patterns and structures. Therefore, when a Dalit changes his position in the given hierarchical social structure and attempts to cross the boundary that sets apart the sacred and profane or purity and pollution, the same unleashes danger from both sides. The one who breaks the authoritative structure is looked at as a transgressor, and the one who is part of the oppressive structure finds it a violation of the existing values and thereby attempts to protect it by any means, violent and non-violent.

Religious conversion as a transition or liminal process offers a threshold to bring change and alternation in the existing rigid structure. It aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how religious conversion functions as a space of both rupture and renewal in Dalit identity formation. It functions as a bottom-up approach for Dalits, where they go through a gradual process of change, carrying revolutionary spirits. So in this sense, Dalit conversion does not indicate a dramatic event or a sudden and radical change of personality and faith like the traditional Jacobian conversion is, rather it is a medium to mark a new beginning—a beginning of a new 'self-conscious being'—which may or may not have arrived at its final desired destination. But, if given the right direction, they may have the capacity to create an alternate path (Austin-Broos, 2003). Therefore, it indicates a transition capable of bringing change in structure or any life occurrences involving rituals. It is important to note that changes can have positive or negative impacts.

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past or the coming state. Finally, in the third phase, he reinvents and reincorporates again in a relatively stable state.

As a passage, it is an evolving and continuous process embedded in forms of social practices and experiences that provide a space for negotiations and opportunities to blur the boundaries of the existing rigid and structured categories of identities. Religious conversion can be examined as a gateway for reorientation and identification that helps to understand various nuances of any identity and its category that may represent fuzziness and fluidity. Since the term conversion itself is a fuzzy term without any clear meaning, and a sociological method of study that can grasp all variables of a converted identity (Asad, 1996; Coleman, 2003). Due to this, it often fails to articulate the syncretistic nature of 'conversion' and its political and social importance, i.e., the manner in which conversion occurs and is portrayed as a natural phenomenon of religious and cultural interactions. Therefore, J.D.Y. Peel (1977) is very critical of using the term conversion and limiting its meaning only to a "transfer of primary religious affiliation" as there can be other motives, and those motives are far more important than a mere spiritual one. However, these non-spiritual socio-political motives of conversion deal with the idea of domination and cultural hegemony, which have long been ignored (Asad, 1996).

The study of religious conversion has largely been explained in terms of radical change in the lives of converts. In this article, I argue that religious conversion may not necessarily bring radical change in the belief system and practices of converts. Rather, it calls into question the claim of religious conversion as the change of "primary of religious affiliations" and argues that it is a gradual process through which various changes can be brought into the existing social structure. Religious conversion in India also represents a gradual and fluid process of changing affiliations of religious beliefs and traditions, offering a range of possibilities that carry various modes and motives (Robinson & Clarke, 2003). Reflecting on these modes and motives, it is argued that religious conversion in India has two purposes: first, as a form of protest that the Dalits use in their fight against the caste system, and second, as a transforming agent of political demography implied for different purposes and players (Robinson & Clarke, 2003). Robinson in her work on religious conversion in Goa in the sixteenth century argues that it was not Dalits in large numbers but upper caste Brahmins who converted to Christianity. She further adds that both Dalits and Brahmins had different motives and methods; the former converted to Christianity to escape the caste system and untouchability, while the latter converted to Christianity to challenge the Islamic rule of Adil Shah.[3] It is also interesting to note those Brahmin who converted

[3]Robison's (2003) writes that the socio-political situation of Goa during the sixteenth century was exclusively divided into two categories: first, the village community which was based on agriculture or domestic crafts and administered by the *gauncari* system. *Gauncars,* who majorly consisted of Brahmans, had the administrative power to control and maintain the village and its Hindu society. Second, the city area was centered around trade and was mainly controlled by the Adil Shah dynasty (1489-1510) and its policies.

Furthermore, Adil Shah's rulers forced the villagers to serve as domestic servants and seized communal lands from them (Ibid., p. 229). Due these strained relationships between Muslim rulers and local Hindus especially with landed *gauncars Brahmins*, *gauncars Brahmins* not only welcome the Portuguese but were ready to convert to Christianity in order to dethrone

to Christianity did not change their social-cultural norms and privileges associated with their caste hierarchy (Robinson & Clarke, 2003). They also argued that religious conversion in India has been backed by both political regimes and used as a form of resistance starting from the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism in ancient times; lower caste or Dalit conversion to Sikhism, Christianity, and Islam in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and Navayana Buddhism in the post-independence period (Robinson & Clarke, 2003).

Torkel Brekke (2003) in his study of conversion to Buddhism described the process of ordinary people who joined the tradition of the Buddhist religion. He argues that conversion in Buddhism used to be, "a process of going through a life of a *gaha pati*- to life as wanderers". It depicts a slow gradual process that may take several years. In his words, conversion to Buddhism suggests a cross-cultural phenomenon wherein individuals who join a new religious sect belonging to different socio-religious backgrounds come to a point of faith after an ideal dramatic moment preceded by either a spiritual or socio-political crisis (Brekke, 2003). For instance, the emergence and the spread of Buddhism was not only a search for salvation and a true path but also a protest against the then-increasing Brahmanical power between 400-350 BCE (Aloysius, 1998, and Omvedt, 2003).[4] The socio-religious hierarchy and the ritually

Adil Shah dynasty (Ibid). Thus, the economically and politically divisive structure of Goa gave ways to the Portuguese to enter into the political domain and further made their smooth establishment. The Portuguese with the help of missionaries converted the Hindus of Goa. They initially adopted two methods for conversion: first, they targeted orphans by offering privileges. Second, they attracted adherents to converts by allocating jobs and offices. But eventually, it did not prove to be a successful measure for them as they failed to attract Hindus to convert in good numbers (Ibid., 303).

However, when Goa was lost to the Portuguese in 1910 and by 1940 they enacted certain laws against the Hindus, especially against the upper caste *gauncars* and priests who refused to convert. According to the law, those who refuse to convert will either lose their property or were forbidden to perform Hindu rituals and ceremonies. For instance, there were general councils for Hindu *gauncars* for internal matters. The new Portuguese law put restrictions on the functioning of the general council unless they include Hindu *gauncars* who had converted to Christianity. Due to this aggressive behavior of the Portuguese, Hindu *gauncars* protested the practice of conversion in 1583. Five Portuguese lost their life in this protest (Ibid, 306). After the incident, the missionaries soon realized their mistakes and changed their approach by convincing *gauncars* that they would not lose the ritual privileges that they enjoy in the Hindu caste hierarchy. To convert Dalits, they were offered to enter the church and were assigned several roles on the premises of the church which was a forbidden task for them in the Hindu religion (Ibid).

[4]The middle of the first millennium BCE period witnessed two contending cultural-religious traditions such as *Samana* and *Brahmanic* traditions. The *Samana* cult (which is *Shramanik* in *Sanksrit*) is generally translated, as "ascetic", "renouncer", "recluse", and "hermit", etc which suggests that "*Samana* were those who toiled not to produce commodities or service for survival and social development but to find the meaning of life". They distanced themselves from the norms of social life and chose a homeless life. The Brahmanic tradition, on the contrary, is derived from the Vedas and grounded in the "householder" Brahmanic elite which addressed "Brahman" as superior status characterized by intellectual knowledge and ritual performing skills (Omvedt, 2003).

legitimate varna system gave authority to control the actual power within the hands of Brahmans and simultaneously limited the access to power and opinion of others or non-Brahmans (Omvedt, 2003, and Aloysius, 1998). It is suggested that the *tribal-gana-sangha* category of *Kshtariya* origin at the time of spiritual and political domination crisis may have inclined towards a religious solution by associating themselves with the new self that was opposed to a caste-like structure that gives value to hierarchies and superior statues based on birth; a principle that was, in fact, a projection of Brahmanic philosophy and in its initial phase to develop (Omvedt, 2003).[5]

Religious conversion of Tamilakams to Buddhism during colonial times also suggests a similar kind of consciousness where Dalits assert distinct Socio-political and cultural identity with the intention of a homogeneous fight against caste oppression (Aloysius, 1998). Caste as a basis of cultural homogeneity with end-to-end encryption with the custom of endogamy is a type of prioritized domination of Brahminical supremacy that not only maintains the power hierarchy but also degrades Dalits and women (Ambedkar, 1916). In this sense, Dalit conversion to Buddhism rejects the meta-narratives of the Hindu religion that subsumes other native religious identities existing across Indian society. Therefore, it becomes essential to study conversion carefully as it manifests in multiple ways and indefinite patterns that emulate both power and resistance (Omvedt, 2003 and Robinson & Clarck, 2003).

Dalit Converts, Liminality, Danger and Caste Violence

Since conversion instigates a journey, it is seen as liminal. It provides Dalit converts a space for negotiation and changes to their existing identities as untouchables and their relations with upper-caste Hindus. These changes are non-spiritual as they invoke varieties of interpretation and meanings. For example, in Turner's (1969) words, one can call it the "power of the weak," or in Viswanathan's (1998) words, they are 'resistance' and 'dissent.' While theorising the conversion as the most profound way of manifesting dissent and resistance by the minority and marginalized sections, Viswanathan (1998) argues that Ambedkar's decision to embrace Buddhism represents a conscious socio-political move to annihilate the existing caste identity given to Dalits based on the very notion of the hierarchical structure of the Hindu caste system.

Dalit converts, as dissenters, embody an uneasy and challenging consciousness, urging the oppressed to confront this renewed awareness of their oppression. Religious conversion gives Dalits a new identity that threatens the established binary of 'purity and pollution' deeply ingrained in the Hindu caste system. So, this threat or danger, as Douglas (Douglas) has argued, "is not unilinear; it functions from both sides though".

[5]For example, a young *Brahman Vesetta* described a *Brahman* who is born seven births in a family and behaves nobly by birth (*jati*). On the contrary, the Buddhist vision of society has denied biological differences between human beings and insisted on karma alone. It was one of the first challenges registered against the caste system wherein Buddhism raised questions about *Brahman* dominance and promoted not only individual renunciation and freedom, creating a vibrant, open, and commercially developing society but also social equality by opening the gates for Dalits into *sangha*[48] (Omvedt, 2003 and Tola & Dragonetti, 2013).

As discussed earlier, there are many instances both in history and in the present times whenever Dalits have tried to raise their voice against the caste system and demand equality, either by entering the temple, emulating the lifestyle of upper castes, among other instances, they have faced both overt and covert violence. Several episodes demonstrate how conversions can escalate communal tensions and violence in their raw and physical forms, making religious identity a flashpoint in Indian politics. From 1905 to 1947, conversion was a significant factor behind communal violence in Bengal and other parts of the country (Engineer, 2004). A notable example is the 1981 mass conversion of Dalits to Islam in Meenakshipuram, Tamil Nadu, which provoked widespread anger among India's Hindus and triggered riots, revealing how caste and communal issues intersect in Indian politics. These conversions are argued to have fueled communal violence in cities like Ahmedabad, Pune, and Sholapur in 1982 (Khan, 1989, and Engineer, 2004). Further, incidents of anti-Christian violence in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh from 2006 to 2008 highlight how political and religious agendas contributed to suppress minorities (Bauman, 2008, and Ponniah, 2017).

It is important to note that the above-discussed cases reflect the physical form of violence. They also suggest that violence was seen as a reaction of communal feeling and antagonistic relations that developed during the colonial time between the two religious communities, such as Islam and Christianity on the one hand and Hinduism on the other hand. However, violence related to Dalit conversion can be observed in covert forms where it usually appears as a violation of rights and non-recognition of Dalits' distinct religious identity. This can be observed when there is conversion from Hinduism to any Indic religion or religious traditions such as Buddhism, Sikhism, or bhakti religious sects. For instance, in the case of conversion in Shabbirpur village, 180 households of Dalits converted to Buddhism after a deadly caste conflict with the Rajputs. In this case, the nature of violence before conversion was overt in nature, as both the communities in the caste-clash had witnessed violence in physical form. If one studies the nature of violence after conversion, it is covert in nature. Dalit converts in the village did not face any physical threat or violence over their decision to leave Hinduism and embrace a Buddhist identity. However their decision to denounce Hinduism after violence and humiliation, they appear as transgressors, who defy caste hierarchies and reclaim a Buddhist identity along with Ravidas' bhakti, face violation of religious rights that are guaranteed under Article 25.1 of the Indian Constitution.

Dalits' Religious Expression, its Materiality, and Contested Public Space

Dalits after conversion to Buddhism continue their previous spiritual affiliation with the Bhakti of Ravidas,[6] as they were followers of Ravidas before converting to

[6]Sant Ravidas Guru, a 15th century poet of bhakti movement, born into Chamar caste and was known for his profession as a leather worker. He emerged as a major social reformer in regions like Uttar Pradesh, Panjab, and their neigbouring areas and believed in the principle of sharing God across all divisions that society instituted, including the significant religious dissection.

Buddhism. After conversion, they neither changed their belief in Ravidas nor made a major difference in their cultural and ritual performances associated with the bhakti of Ravidas. The continued religious and spiritual affiliation with the Bhakti tradition of Ravidas can be understood through its deep connection to both the historical experiences of oppression and the ongoing quest for dignity among marginalized communities. On one hand, this affiliation serves as a means of reconnecting with their subaltern and oppressed religious heritage, reaffirming a distinct identity rooted in resistance. On the other hand, as Gail Omvedt (2008) insightfully argues, Ravidas's vision of *Begumpura*—a "city without sorrow," representing a casteless, classless, and tax-free society grounded in equality and justice—offers a powerful social imaginary. This utopian vision has resonated with anti-caste thinkers for over five centuries, presenting a radical critique of dominant socio-religious hierarchies and proposing alternative frameworks for a just and egalitarian society.

In order to make their assertion visible, Dalits in Shabbirpur village made a few symbolic changes concerning their previous Hindu identity—they stopped worshiping and celebrating Hindu idols, gods, goddesses, and festivals, they do not visit Hindu temples, recite the hymns, or invite Hindu priests to officiate auspicious ceremonies. Instead, they have developed their own semiotics and religious texts such as 'Ravidas Chalisa' around the bhakti of Ravidas. Images, symbols and teachings of Ravidas, Ambedkar, and Buddha are not just common and visible sites in their houses, but their teachings are reflected in their everyday conversation. For instance, during interviews and group discussions, a number of Dalits did not just consciously refrain from using certain words; they were very critical about their usage. They questioned the word *puja-paath* and argued that true worship requires complete understanding, rejecting traditional *puja-paath* as a practice imposed by *Manuvaad*, instead advocated to embrace Ravidas, Ambedkar, and Buddha's teachings based on rational thinking and equality. Jagpal Singh (1998), in his work on Dalit communities in Meerut and Western Uttar Pradesh, has also highlighted how Ambedkar's images, teachings, and Buddhist symbols were embraced by the community, leading to a reconfiguration of their social identities and a collective resistance against caste oppression.

The egalitarian social philosophy of Ravidas provides a strong base for Dalit consciousness in the village, which comes from the rich historical Dalit assertion in northern India, especially in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. Many Ravidas shrines and temples, which are also called *Deras*, were constructed to assert their separate religious identity. Ram Ronki (2004) also mentioned that several organizations came into existence such as "India Adi Dharam Mission" which constructed "Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Mandir (Temple of Shri Guru Ravidas's Birthplace)" at Seer Goverdhanpur, Banaras. Although the presence of this temple comes in the domain of reclaiming religious space and rituals, it marks the significance of Dalits in the silent "social revolution" in Banaras. It has acquired perhaps a place of sacred importance

Ravidas's firm perception of equality made him a revolutionary social leader among his followers, or more specifically, among Dalits (Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 1988).

among Dalits—where millions of devotees from India pay homage to Ravidas—much like any pilgrimage place of dominant religions.

Manuela Ciotti (2010) in her ethnographic research in rural Banaras highlights the importance of material culture in this identity transformation, wherein various objects, attire, and symbols through which the community expresses its new identity and asserts its presence in the socio-political landscape. Although she has not explicitly discussed religious conversion, she opens with the idea of "retro-modernity", where the Chamar community reclaims a glorious, imagined past to legitimize its modern aspirations and illustrates how economic liberalization and affirmative action have altered the material conditions and symbolic and traditional boundaries of caste practices. For instance, Ciotti refers to the phrase, " now we can touch anything," that reflects the embodied experience of caste mobility. Consumer goods and public space, school and education, factors that challengedegrading caste roles, are becoming new markers of Dalit identity as educated citizens and spiritual equals.

Ravidas *Julus* and State Surveillance

Religious processions have historically played a significant role in people's religious, social, and political lives. They act as visible public religious activities that integrate religious and secular elements by providing communities with means to celebrate their faith through various semiotics and symbols in front of a large and diverse public. It also offers spaces for marginalised groups to assert and reinforce their values and distinct religious identity. However, these kinds of public expressions often lead to tensions and conflicts between different social and religious groups.

Ravidas *Julus*, on the occasion of Ravidas Jayanti is a popular religious procession among Dalits and has been serving as an important medium to express their religiosity in secular public spaces. Such *Julus* are common sights to observe in western Uttar Pradesh, where I conducted my fieldwork for my Ph.D. It was Swami Achhutanand who first introduced the Ravidas *Julus* in Kanpur in the early twentieth century, marking a grand celebration with ward committees decorating the *Jhanki* (moving stage) featuring images and portraits of Sant Ravidas (Bellwinkel, 2007).

Sarah Beth (2005) explores three critical stages of the *Julus* starting from the spatial or temporal stage, the confrontational stage, to the civic stage, and argues how the challenges that each successive stage presents describe the socio-political process where Dalits interact with the larger society dominated by upper castes. It is a journey of Dalit socio-political claims that are navigated through Dalit localities, which enter upper-caste neighborhoods, and finally negotiate with government authorities. It represents a sense of belonging and solidarity among Dalits, which passes through various tensions and conflicts due to retaliation and resistance by upper castes, and lastly, it confronts civic engagements like obtaining permissions, dealing with state-imposed restrictions, etc. Therefore, these *Julus* act as a strategy of popular assertion

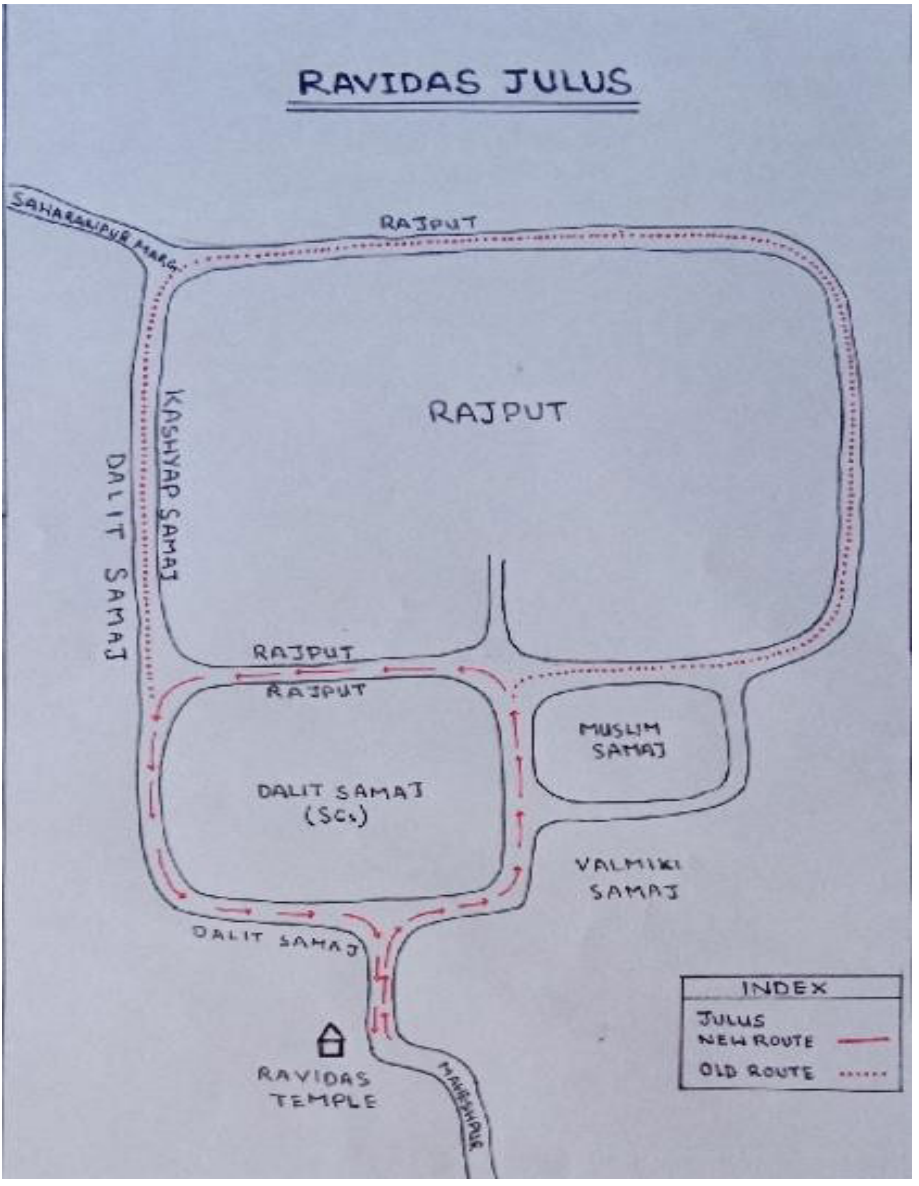
for Dalits to reclaim public spaces while allowing them to engage in religious and material practices that challenge upper-caste dominance in the public sphere (Jaoul, 2007). For instance, the emergence of a Dalit neighbourhood in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, where Dalit youths transformed a site of Hindu-Muslim violence into a bastion of Dalit political activism through the Bunyad movement including organizing public events, installing monuments, and staging disciplined performances to assert Dalit presence and authority in the neighborhood rooted in the philosophy of Ambedkar (Jaoul, 2012).

In order to claim their rights in public spaces, Dalits in Shabbirpur village celebrate Ravidas Jayanti and organize Ravidas *Julus*. As mentioned earlier, these processions are not just a celebration of faith, they also represent a symbolic assertion of Dalits living in those areas. However, after the deadly caste-clash, they could not organize such a religious procession and found their religious rights had been restricted in the name of security and surveillance.

During the fieldwork, it was informed that for the last 24 years, Dalits of Shabbirpur peacefully organised the procession without facing any opposition from Rajputs or local authorities. Before the violent incident that took place on May 5, 2017, between the Rajput and Dalit communities in Shabbirpur village, Ravidas *Julus* in the village used to be an elaborate procession featuring chariots carrying images of Dalit leaders like Ravidas, Ambedkar, Achhutanand, Kanshi Ram, and Gautam Buddha. Dalit women, men, and children would actively participate in the procession. During the *Julus*, children and youth dress up as Ravidas and perform plays depicting the life of their *guru*. They would dance, sing bhajans, and chant slogans like "Ravidas ki Jai" and "Babasaheb Ambedkar ki Jai" with pride and joy.

The situation drastically changed after the caste clash in 2017. Dalits argued that attitudes of the Rajput community toward Ravidas became hostile, and government biases against the Dalits' celebration of Jayanti became more evident. For example, the traditional route of the *Julus*, which once used to start at the Ravidas Temple and traversed the entire village—passing through all neighborhoods, including those of Dalits, Valmikis, Kashyaps, Rajputs, and Brahmins—is now limited to Dalit and Muslim neighborhoods with only a few Rajput households included. Moreover, they need permission for the procession from the office of the Additional District Magistrate (ADM) in Rampur Maniharan, Saharanpur. The permission letter states that this new route is not permanent but has been intentionally designated to ensure security and safety within the village. The newly imposed guidelines also included bans on loud music, provocative slogans, etc. But for Dalits, it is an attempt to restrict their religious expression and assertion that they will not accept.

Mahalveer Singh, a local activist who also provided relevant documents regarding the government guidelines, expressed safety concerns over the new route. He allegedly argued that it passes through those neighborhoods of Rajputs who were involved in the 2017 violence.



The Modified Route of Ravidas *Julus* (Old-New)

Source: The map is drawn with the help of Mahalveer Singh

Therefore, Dalits refrained from organizing the *Julus* that year and filed a Special Leave Petition (SLP) in the Supreme Court. Dalits also claimed that the modified route violated constitutional provisions on several grounds such as Article 25 (freedom of religion), Article 26 (management of religious affairs), and Article 38(1) (state responsibility for social justice) of the Indian Constitution. One of the respondents, Prateek said:

"We cannot accept this newly proposed route as a replacement for our traditional ones. We will not allow the government's conspiracy to succeed and incite caste-clashes and riots in the village since the new route passes through those Rajputs who were involved in the clash."

He also added that due to this Dalits of Shabbirpur celebrated Ravidas Jayanti without the *Julus* in 2019 and sought legal recourse through the Allahabad High Court. However, they were dissatisfied with the judgment of the Allahabad High Court and appealed to the Supreme Court in 2020 through the case "Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Samaj Kalyan Samity & ANR versus The State of Uttar Pradesh & ORS."

The Supreme Court, upon hearing the counsel, made the following order:

> "Since the date on which the procession was to be taken out, namely, 8 February 2020, has already elapsed, the grievance has been rendered infructuous. On this ground, we are not inclined to entertain the Special Leave Petition under Article 136 of the Constitution. The Special Leave is dismissed."
>
> "However, we clarify that should the petitioners be aggrieved at any future date, it would be open to them to pursue such remedies as are available in law."

The Supreme Court dismissed the petition on procedural grounds. The court stated that since the procession date had already passed, the grievance was rendered infructuous. However, the Court allowed the petitioners to seek legal remedies in the future if similar issues arise again. As a result, Dalits were compelled to follow the newly altered route for the Jayanti procession. Moreover, on the day of the Jayanti, a significant contingent of police forces was deployed to ensure safety and security. For Dalits, the police presence in significant numbers created an intimidating atmosphere, and due to this, they could not celebrate the Jayanti the way they wished to.

However, this kind of surveillance is not a new phenomenon. In intensified conflict situations, it is Dalits who often face state surveillance, restrictions, and institutional bias. While ostensibly upholding democratic rights, state authorities often view these gatherings with suspicion, leading to surveillance, restrictions, or even suppression (Jodhka, 2013, and Lee, 2021). Owen Lynch, in his book *Politics of Untouchability* in 1969, discusses the state's response to the then-emerging Dalit neighborhoods like Bhim Nagar in Agra and its shifting allegiance from Hindu nationalist parties to Dalit-centric movements. He argues that this shift in local power ended up facing state surveillance, which reflects the broader challenges faced by marginalized communities striving for political recognition and rights.

In the case of Shabbirpur, one can observe how a historically peaceful event, after the 2017 caste clash and subsequent government-imposed restrictions, was transformed into a contested space.

On the one hand, they had to approach the court, as they were not able to organize a *Julus* on Jayanti as was done for 24 years until 2017. Moreover, after the caste-

clash, they were asked by the Additional District Magistrate (ADM) of Saharanpur to change the traditional routes of the *Julus* and restrict it within the household of Dalits and Muslims. In response to a change in the traditional routes of the *Julus*, Dalit converts from Shabbirpur approached both the High Court and later the Supreme Court of India, where the case continues to be listed. Since then, they have faced difficulties, and could not organize a single *Julus* to celebrate the Jayanti to date. They end up compromising their religious freedom, which Article 25.1 of the Indian Constitution pledges to its religious minorities, and hence they view these restrictions as a systematic attempt to marginalise their cultural and religious identity, reinforcing the caste-based discrimination that persists in Indian society.

On the other hand, Rajputs do not observe Dalit conversion as a threat. In conversation with Rajputs, with whom Dalits clashed with in the village, it was discovered that: (a) They (Rajputs) still view them as lower caste or untouchables, (b) They do not view Hinduism and Buddhism as two different religions, (c) They do acknowledge the position of Ravidas in a Dalits's life; however, for them, Ravidas and his followers are nothing but lower caste Hindus. Hence, they do not recognize the claim of the Dalit converts whether it is the bhakti of Ravidas or Buddhism, as a distinct religious identity separate from Hinduism.

Conclusion

Violence related to Dalit conversion is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. It can be understood in different ways depending on the religious as well as socio-political dynamics of the situation of the converts. The identity of the convert, his sociopolitical position, and in which one is converting, whether Indic or non-Indic religion, not just reveals the relationship between violence and conversion but also the nature of violence. In a more precise term, what kind of violence a Dalit convert will face depends on the religion he chooses to convert to. In the case of Dalit conversions to non-Indic religions, violence tends to be overt, raw, and physical, often driven by a fear of losing cultural and social control within the Hindu fold. In contrast, conversions to Indic religions, which theoretically reject the caste system, face more covert forms of violence, i.e., legal and political obstacles. This legal and political obstacle is nothing but a politics of non-recognition where not only Dalit identity but also their efforts and protests to reclaim their distinct religious identity have been appropriated under Hindu majoritarian politics.

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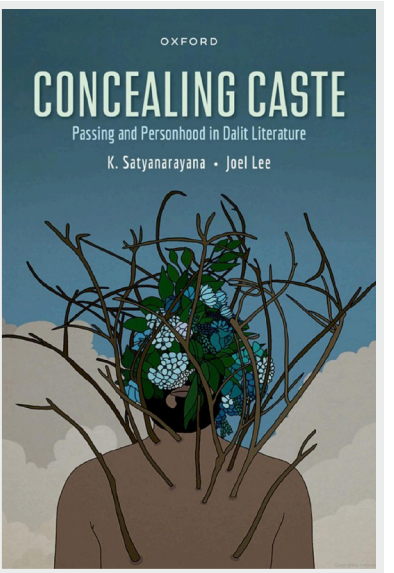
CONCEALING CASTE Passing and Personhood in Dalit Literature



Authors: *K. Satyanarayana and Joel Lee*
Publisher: *Oxford University Press*
Year: *2023*
Reviewer: *Prashant Ingole*[1]

Detected and Undetected Dalitness: The Un/Common Narratives of Caste Concealment

Caste pursues you—it follows like a shadow, or a tail, or the ghost of a murdered brahmin.

—"Raw Deal", Surajpal Chauhan, 1999 (p. 90).

Concealing Caste: Passing and Personhood in Dalit Literature (hereafter *Concealing Caste*) reminds of *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle (1992), an anthology and translations from modern Marathi Dalit Literature that brought together poetry, autobiographical excerpts, and political essays. The book gave global academic currency to the world of the Dalits (ex-untouchables). In a similar fashion but going beyond the Marathi Dalit literary context, *Concealing Caste* brings together selected short stories and excerpts from autobiographical writings. Through these genres, *Concealing Caste* spotlights the history of eight decades. The narratives that appeared in the book were originally written in Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, Hindi, Malayalam and

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Telugu, as well as in English, spanning from 1930 to 2020 (pp. 5–6). Along with an Introduction, the book is divided into two parts: Part one is titled Short Stories, that curates eleven short stories, and the second part is titled as Autobiographical Writings that brings eight autobiographical excerpts into discussion. Interestingly, the book also adds a "Glossary of Terms, People and Places" and a "Glossary of Castes and Caste Titles". K. Satyanarayana and Joel Lee, in their 'Acknowledgements,' artistically state that this book is like a garden, the cultivation of many hands and imagination, which is the heart, soul, and substance of this book.

Dalit literary expression is a conscious reflection of Phule-Ambedkar's socio-political and cultural movement. It is a reclamation of human rights and dignity. The authors of this book clearly mention that "Ambedkar famously characterized the emancipatory project… ' a battle for the reclamation of human personality'… 'Personality' in this usage denotes what is now often called personhood…the unmarked identity of the characters in the stories in this volume as nothing less than the desire to reclaim human personality" (p. 22). In the twenty-five-page Introduction, the book not only addresses the readers and scholars of caste studies in Indian academia, but also showcases a futuristic approach to advance the newly emerged field of research in American academia in particular and the academia in the West at large: Critical Caste Studies (Ayyathurai, 2021). The theoretical framework and critical themes in the book can help to mark and understand the 'difference' in reading caste and race. The co-authors of the volume hope that the book will generate a dialogue between Dalit and African American literature by reading and analysing the narratives of 'caste concealment' and 'passing' (p. 23). The main focus of the volume is on caste concealment with a discussion on passing and personhood, but along with this, the book also touches upon assertion and acknowledgement in analysing the practising of "impression management" and "subversive deconstruction" (p. 15). To understand the text and the context, Satyanarayana and Lee deploy their theories from Henry Louis Gates Jr., Elaine, Ginsberg, Sandra Harvey, and Erving Goffman's subversive deconstruction of social hierarchy that proceeds through passing (pp. 12–15), analysing through the traditions of 'descriptive sociology'(p. 14). Through Goffman's idea, Satyanarayana and Lee write, "the impression management framework reminds us that caste concealment is but one of many interrelated modes of self-fashioning in everyday life, and that its operations significantly overlap with the everyday performance of selfhood and belonging in terms of gender, class, religion, sexuality, occupation and other axes of identity" (p. 16). This seems a somewhat limited approach as Baburao Bagul could be one of many examples wherein he not only wrote short stories but also made an attempt to theorise the Dalit discourse: e.g. Bagul's *Dalit Sahitya: Aajche Krantividnyan* 1981 (*Dalit Literature: A Revolutionary Science of the Present*) is a ground-breaking work that theorises around the Dalit experience. It subsumes and invisiblises the development of Dalit theoretical tradition. Nevertheless, with the help of theories on passing and caste concealment, the book asks some pertinent questions: 'Why expose a troubling revelation that invites criticism from the world?' What insights can we gain from Dalit writing on caste concealment and vice versa from the

literature on racial passing in the United States? What can Dalit literature contribute to our understanding of hierarchy in sociology or anthropology, and how can literary studies benefit from the social scientific study of caste?

The volume is drawn through its three aims. One is to analyse the ways in which caste hierarchies operate and affect with its new angle as the narratives are subverted in stories around caste concealment. The second aim of the volume is to open a new window to have a comparative dialogue between African-American traditions of emancipatory ideas, not emphasising 'caste passing' but examining caste concealment in the stream of passing literature to understand the human condition of one another. The third aim of the volume is to bridge the gap between literary studies and social sciences in general and Dalit literature and caste, untouchability studies in particular. By bridging the gap both the disciplines can enrich and energize each other by dwelling into the lived experiences and social conditions of the depressed masses bringing into light an empirical mooring of social sciences. The book touches on three major themes, 'identitarian performance', 'distribution of fear' and 'unmarked identity'. With the deployment of these thematic categories, this book explores the narratives of "protective concealment" (p. 4) of the self against the "protected ignorance" (Alone, 2017) of the self of the dominant castes. The book explores the stigma and spectre of violence of caste and the ways in which it is attached to the social conditioning of the mindset of both the tormentor and the tormented. Thereby, it becomes important to understand the terrain on which Dalit writing is established, the lived realities of caste and everyday resistance. This volume focuses on reading and analysing Dalit short stories and autobiographical writing. The names of the narratives divided into the two sections below are only mentioned to showcase the thematic difference in the ways in which this volume refers to them, but one can also read these texts differently beyond the suggested themes.

Performance of Dalit Selfhood, Exchanging Unmarked Identities

The quote mentioned in the beginning is from Surajpal Chauhan's short story "Raw Deal." It is a symbolic illustration of caste—the ghost of the murdered Brahmin. It reflects the way caste is enforced invisibly in the hierarchical everyday social structure we live in. The narratives in this volume talk about auto-ethnographic sociological and anthropological hierarchical experiences of caste that draw critical attention towards the past and present caste portrayal. The caste acts and performs differently by maintaining the sociological positioning of a person. K. Satyanarayana and Joel Lee write, "Brahminhood is an act, Kshatriya-ness a runaway show; Dalit characters who successfully simulate these and other savarna statuses are careful observers and accomplished performers" (p. 16). In a general manner, we learn about caste experiences and fight against a hydra-headed monster called caste through Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Dalit activists, writers, and intellectuals follow his legacy to tell the stories of caste and their struggle against social discrimination and the ways in which it is performed

on an everyday basis. Relating the Dalit performance with the self, Anupama Rao, in her essay "Representing Dalit Selfhood" (2006), writes the Dalit self was performed as an artefact and, at the same time, was continuously created and destroyed. However, we do not have the same access to Ambedkar's interiority. This is not to say that Ambedkar did not write or address people about his experiences of dehumanisation and the severity of caste-based Hindu practices. Nonetheless, a collective self that is denied social recognition—a Dalit self that speaks of alienation from the nation that emerges as the basis of literary expression. For Dalit short-story writers and authors of the respective autobiographies, Ambedkar's autobiographical text, his fight against the caste becomes a prime example to resist systemic exploitation.

Baburao Bagul's 'When I Hid My Caste' (1963), Ajay Navaria's 'New Custom' and 'Tattoo' (2013), Omprakash Valmiki's 'Sandstorm' (2000), Pratiba Jeyachandran's 'In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' (1995), Jai Prakash Kardam's 'No Bar' (2003), Bhimarao Ramji Ambedkar's 'Waiting for a Visa[1]', Jai Prakash Kardam's 'My Caste' (1997), Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* (2019) and, Urmila Pawar's *Weave of My Life* (2003)—all of these mentioned narratives oscillate between the performance of the Dalit self and un/ marked identities. They creatively express the revolt against the structural violence of caste and untouchability by inhabiting the unpermitted terrain of dominant social space by concealing caste.

Spectre of Caste and the Distribution of Fear

In this caste-rigid, violent Indian society, one who belongs to a downtrodden community conceals caste because of the fear of identification that is distributed and engrained through the stigma and everyday dehumanisation of the Dalit body. All the narratives mentioned below not only talk about the fear of the spectre of caste but also expose the casteism and pervasiveness of caste contempt. The narratives which deal with the fear of caste are as follows: Omprakash Valmiki's short story 'Dread' (2000) and his autobiographical writing *Joothan* (1993), Kausalya Baisantry's autobiographical writing *Doubly Cursed* (1999), Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* (2017), Shailaja Paik's *The Flood* (2017), M.M. Vinodini, 'The Parable of the Lost Daughter: Luke 15:11-32' (2008), Surajpal Chauhan's "Raw Deal" (1999), Sharankumar Limbale's 'Friend of the Family' (1984) and, C. Ayyappan's 'Madness' (2008). The presented narratives are not fictional narratives, but they are descriptions of the realism in literary expression to show the prescription of caste the way it is written and performed that generates fear among the marginalised communities. These narratives are not an individual account of suffering and resistance, but they are the collective voice of the self.

[1]This text was written in 1935-36 and first published as a booklet by the People's Education Society in 1990. In 1993 it was included in Volume 12 of *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* published by the Education Department of the Government of Maharashtra.

Conclusion

It seems that the selection of the narratives in this volume is still mainstream drawn from the marginalised either because of the popularity of author's name or because of their written account in the form of a short stories or autobiographical writings. Many of these regional narratives are already available in the English language. There is enormous untranslated literary work of art in regional spaces, recognising and engaging with these works by bringing them into mainstream academic discourse is important. It is noteworthy that the present volume accomplishes the commitment of making Dalit literary expressions visible and accessible worldwide through its new perspective. Although the volume comparatively differentiates between caste concealment and racial passing in context to caste and race; however, it has always been the case to seek ally-ship in social movements and the dominant academic space of South Asia. How much it helps to eradicate caste at the local level remains an unresolved quest. The anthology is a significant intervention in the discussion on critical caste studies as it showcases seminal moments of past and present in Dalit writing. The book presents critically acclaimed writing produced locally and globally in the decades of resistance powerfully projected through literary expressions. It would have been a more concrete text for the field of critical caste studies if the book also would have incorporated comparative theoretical/analytical traditions of Dalits and the Blacks. Nonetheless, the book is an important addition to the anti-caste intellectual tradition to understand the lived realities of caste discrimination, the stigma and humiliation.

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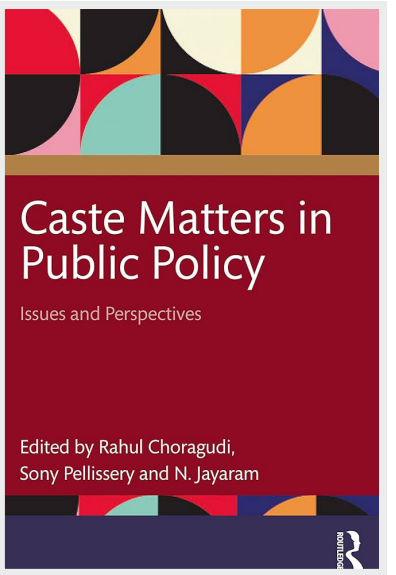
Caste Matters in Public Policy

Issues and Perspectives

Edited by: *Rahul Choragudi, Sony Pellissery and N. Jayaram*
Publisher: *Routledge South Asia Edition*
Year: *2023*
Reviewer: *Rajesh Komath*[*]



Intersection of Caste and Public Policy

Caste, as an institution, transforms with the changing lives of social groups and individuals in India. But this is not a tale confined to India alone; it has crossed oceans, taken root in faraway lands where Indians have settled. Caste, like a story, travels and changes, a riddle whispered across borders. It shifts its form, speaks in new tongues, and bends to the shape of the spaces it occupies. Yet, in some rural corners, caste reveals its cruellest face. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar once said that Indian villages are dens of ignorance, and in these places, caste can take on its most oppressive form. Despite its many disguises, one truth remains: caste denies justice, equality, and fraternity. It stands against the ideals of freedom and human dignity, as Amartya Sen explores in his reflections on justice.[1] Caste weaves itself not only into the fabric of society but also into the minds of people, forming a "caste of the mind"—a reality both social and psychological. Over time, its grip loosens, but caste persists, shaping the interests and dynamics of our society and politics.

The policy of any nation should reflect the life-worlds of its people. Yet, too often, public policy is shaped by the vision of elites, imposed from above, and far

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[1]Amartya Sen. (2009). *The Idea of Justice*. Penguin Books.

removed from everyday realities. In this process, the true experiences of the people are ignored. Private interests often steer the content of policy, raising the question: how truly "public" is public policy? Scholars frequently critique this, as policy documents reveal the mindset of those in power. In India, the influence of caste is unmistakable in how the government operates. The system and the life-worlds of certain groups have become inseparable. Ideally, policy should embrace the diverse life-worlds of various communities, addressing both structural concerns and the lived realities of those on the margins. Caste, as a defining element of the Indian experience, must be recognized as a lived truth within policy. The book under review offers a clear analysis of how caste and policy intersect in India, calling for frameworks that are more inclusive and attuned to the complexities of society. It looks closely at caste in its changing forms, unravelling the subtle ways it intersects with public policy in India. It delves into matters of social security, internal reservations, the classification of "Most Backward Classes," the presence of caste in other religions, its place in the census, its influence in markets, the role of service castes, and its mark on urban planning. The book shines a light on how caste drives policy and how, in turn, policy shapes caste. Through rich case studies and empirical stories, it explores how caste breathes and evolves across states like Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Karnataka, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and West Bengal.

There is a view that caste in India was hardened by the colonial practice of census-taking. In this view, part of the blame for caste's persistence is placed on British rule. Yet caste existed as a core part of social life long before the British arrived. What the census did was turn caste into a political calculation, shaping its role in the years to come. Efforts at protective justice, like affirmative action, have sometimes sparked resentment toward those who benefit from these policies. The debates around the Mandal Commission in the 1990s deepened this resentment, leading to unrest, anger, and division. While the representation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in jobs, education, and government has gradually improved, it has made only through the reservation policy. But, 27 per cent reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) marked a turning point. This has led to a sense of division in society—about half of the population falls under "general" categories, and the other half under "reserved" categories. As government jobs and opportunities shrink, elite caste groups have grown more concerned, fuelling their opposition to the reservation system. This situation reveals the deep intersectional dynamics of caste, politics, and public policy in India.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part addresses the national context of caste census and its enumeration, examining how caste is problematized within and outside its conventional boundaries, and its interfaces with the state, market, and culture. It traces the history of the census from colonial times to the present, highlighting how caste classifications have evolved. A notable aspect of the narrative is the fluidity of caste status: castes that were considered superior in one context were later reclaimed as inferior in post-Independence India. Similarly, certain groups

initially claimed higher caste status in early enumerations, only to assert a lower status in subsequent periods. This section underscores the strategic use and manipulation of caste for purposes of classification, segregation, and objectification. The second part presents diverse perspectives on caste from various Indian states. It discusses the implementation of the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan and the Scheduled Tribe Sub-Plan in alignment with the Planning Commission's allocation of funds aimed at improving social protection measures for marginalized communities. The impact of these plans on development indices is explored through case studies from Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Delhi, each of which reflects the distinctive dynamics of caste in India. The third part examines the existence of caste beyond Hinduism, demonstrating how caste has permeated other regions and religions, operating as a rhizomatic structure. It explores caste hierarchies among Sikhs, Christians, and Muslims, providing illustrative case studies that reveal the particularities of caste in these religious contexts within India.

The chapter "Caste in and Out of Place: State, Market, and Culture" explores how caste is strategically employed both within and outside its traditional context to pursue status and social capital. While democracy ideally presupposes individual choice that collectively shapes social decisions, the practice of caste in India positions the state as an interest group, often functioning as an executor of Varna and caste systems. An illustrative example is the Jat community, which has mythologized its hereditary origins by claiming noble status as "ancient rulers," yet has also sought recognition as an Other Backward Caste (OBC) in the formation of subsequent governments. This indicates that the behaviour of the Indian state is shaped by the dynamics of caste in each region. Rather than focusing on the self-development of individuals as citizens, governmental actions are frequently driven by group interests. Consequently, public policy in such contexts often becomes a private policy serving caste-based interests. The chapter "Enumerating Caste in the Census: Is it Useful for Public Policy?" by N. Jayaram, critiques the role of caste in public policy. Jayaram argues that the modern form of caste in India is largely a colonial construct, shaped by the enumeration of census data. The British colonial administration used caste as a tool to divert Indian resistance against colonial rule, redirecting focus towards caste-specific issues, which ultimately led to the objectification and essentialization of caste in Indian society. Jayaram contends that caste-based enumeration is not conducive to the formation of sound public policy. The chapter draws on William Bruce Cameron's (1963, p. 13) observation that "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts," suggesting the intersection of caste and public policy.

D. Rajasekhar and R. Manjula's analysis of the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan (SCSP) and Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) in Karnataka highlights the critical role of stakeholder awareness and access to various social security schemes in determining the success of these initiatives. The issue of information asymmetry is particularly significant. Although schemes aimed at the economic and social upliftment of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Karnataka existed prior

to the enactment of the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan and Tribal Sub-Plan Act of 2013, which earmarks one-fourth of the state's budget for the development of SCs and STs, the effectiveness of these schemes largely depended on how well they were communicated to the target population. The 2013 Act, however, served as a significant governmental intervention to ensure better outreach and impact. The data analysis on awareness and access to social security schemes for eligible households reveals several key findings: (a) Awareness of pension and scholarship schemes was higher among SC/ST households compared to other caste groups. (b) In the case of contributory schemes such as old-age pensions, destitute widow pensions, and scholarships (both pre-metric and post-metric), households belonging to dominant caste groups demonstrated greater awareness. However, access to social security schemes for informal workers was comparatively higher among SC/ST households. (c) On average, disadvantaged caste groups accessed 1.18 schemes, while dominant caste groups accessed 1.88 schemes. This indicates that the introduction of the 2013 state policy has significantly benefited lower sections of society compared to the situation prior to its implementation. The progress can be observed in the increased allocation for the SC/ST Sub-Plan, rising from Rs. 6,135 crores in 2013-14 to Rs. 14,339 crores in 2016-17. This demonstrates the successful flow of social security benefits to SC and ST households as a direct result of the policy. The transition from the policy as an idea to policy as practice is thus evident in these outcomes.

The chapter titled "Addressing Graded Inequality Among the Scheduled Castes: Internal Reservation as a Strategy" by Arvind Narrain and Basawa Prasad Kunale explores the social dimensions of untouchability within the Scheduled Castes and raises concerns about equitable access to opportunities. The authors emphasize the need to address disparities among the most vulnerable sections of society, advocating for attention to the "vulnerable within the vulnerable." In the context of Andhra Pradesh, the formation of the Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi (MRPS) emerged in response to the perceived disproportionate advantages enjoyed by the Mala community, who were seen as monopolizing the benefits of the state's reservation policy, to the detriment of the Madiga and other marginalized subgroups within the SC community. The demand for internal reservations within SCs is framed as part of a broader discussion on ensuring fair distribution of benefits among all segments of the Scheduled Castes, and this issue is also relevant to discussions around other backward classes. The authors, citing various court judgments, argue that judicial decisions must be grounded in the "social and economic realities" of the country. This point is especially pertinent in the context of increasing privatization, which has led to the downsizing of government departments and a decline in public sector employment—traditionally a key avenue for implementing reservation policies. However, the paper refrains from advocating for the extension of reservation policies to the private sector as a means of dismantling the entrenched social hierarchies and challenging the meritocratic framework that disproportionately favors the upper castes in India. Instead, the authors focus on the internal dynamics within the reservation system and

the need for judicial decisions to reflect the socio-economic context in which these policies operate.[2]

The chapter titled "A History of Reservation Policy," authored by R. Saravana Raja, explores the intersection of caste and politics in the context of Tamil Nadu. In addition to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), the inclusion of categories such as Backward Classes (BCs), Most Backward Classes (MBCs), denotified communities, and minorities broadens the scope of reservation in the state. The political dynamics of backward communities have driven electoral debates, and the historical conflicts between Brahmin and non-Brahmin discourses have significantly shaped Tamil Nadu's political landscape. Tamil Nadu currently implements a reservation policy that allocates 69 per cent reservation to backward communities—26.5 per cent for BCs, 3.5 per cent for BC Muslims, 20 per cent for MBCs and denotified communities, 18 per cent for SCs, and 1 per cent for STs. This policy notably deviates from the Supreme Court's judgment, which limits reservations to below 50 per cent. Such a framework would be inconceivable in most other states in India, raising the question of why Tamil Nadu is an exception. Answering this question requires an exploration of the historical trajectory of the Justice Party and the articulation of non-Brahmin concerns, the influence of Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement, and the political strategies of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK). The intense political mobilization around backwardness expanded the scope of reservation, positioning it as a crucial mechanism for addressing issues of social justice and safeguarding marginalized communities within the state's policy of welfare. Why is the politics so anti-Brahmin? The answer lays behind the data that in the competitive examinations for the Provincial Civil Service which were held between 1892 and 1904, out of 16 successful candidates, 15 were Brahmins. The social reality of dominance was so intense and deep. DMK followed the politics of anti-Brahmanical formation of the state that take into account the life-world of the backward communities while ADMK took a central position accommodating conservative as well as reforming concerns of the people. The binary of Brahmin and non-Brahmin conceptual articulation has thus, paved a political trajectory to articulate backward politics in Tamil Nadu.

Rahul Chorangudi's ethnography of a coastal village in Andhra Pradesh discusses economic prospects, protective discrimination and the changing hierarchy. It explains

[2]This discussion should be considered in the context of the recent Supreme Court of India judgment in Civil Appeal No. 2317 of 2011, which raises significant questions regarding the right to equal opportunity guaranteed by the Constitution. The central issue debated was whether the sub-classification of Scheduled Castes for the purposes of reservation is constitutionally permissible. While the state already has mechanisms in place to address the representation of various castes within the government system, such as special recruitment drives that extend opportunities specifically to certain castes within the Scheduled Castes, the judgment appears to misinterpret the concept of "graded inequality" in relation to reservations for the Scheduled Castes. By overlooking the nuanced socio-economic disparities within the SC community, the judgment fails to adequately address the need for a more equitable distribution of opportunities among the subgroups within this historically marginalized population.

lower caste migration to the Middle East for lucrative jobs as the principal factor that gave them better economic status in the village, while upper castes lose their economic advantages as landlord due to the failure of cultivation and changing nature of agriculture. Upper castes like Rajus and Kepus did not wish to migrate as the land is abundant and the patron-client relationship in the traditional *jati* order placed them above lower castes like Malas, Setti Balijas, and Goudas. Lower castes were able to get benefits from the government only when they made initial progress through the migration to Persian Gulf. This economic betterment changed the structures of caste and their relationship with other upper castes in the village. It is by becoming economically sound that lower castes like the Malas articulated their civil rights. The SCs and STs (prevention of atrocities) Act of 1989 gave them courage to respond to the caste atrocities inflicted upon them by Rajus and Kepus. This ethnography therefore brings forth a pattern of lower caste assertion that the economic base is the primary condition for the lower caste to articulate and seek benefits from government policies such as protective discrimination. This led to a change in the nature of hierarchy in the village. Understanding the civil rights and protective measures of the state towards SCs, upper castes came to terms with a dialogue to make issue with the humiliation and recognition of the SCs. The problem of SCs are evidently reflected in the electoral dividend of parties and candidates.

Three questions are primarily posed here to understand the caste and hierarchy dynamics in the village. What happens when a well-meaning ideal of equity encounters the fluidity of socio-economic hierarchy in a dynamic neo-liberal economy? What roles do material fortunes or lack of it, coupled with the rights guaranteed by the state, play in realising one's political ambitions? And what can the policy offer its intended beneficiaries in a neo-liberal economy when it is implemented in a political scape evolved to emphasise primordial *jati* identities? The neo-liberal possibility of getting out from the village and migrating to other regions and places to work as labour for the companies and corporations tremendously changed lower caste economic conditions and opened space for new kinds of aspirations and freedom to assert themselves to emerge as a new political self. Ethnography suggests that Lankapalli is a curious case where a neo-liberal economy has helped not the traditionally affluent *jatis* with superior social capital, but those lacking it.

The next chapter take us to the case of West Bengal and argues that caste and public policy never addressed the issues of the lower castes in the state policy. It is titled "Caste and Public Policy: A Case of West Bengal" by Antara Ray. A 34-year-old ministry led by Left Front in West Bengal eulogised class over the primary issue of caste because of the blindness of critical insights. The *bhadralok* politics of Congress as well as Communist parties had not seriously encountered the politics of caste in the state. Rather, their priorities were to solve the problems of refugees due to the partition of Bengal. However, upper caste refugees were given land on the southern parts of Kolkotta, and most of the poor and low caste people were sent off to far-flung places by the state. But, *badralok* politicians disregarded caste dynamics and made it invisible from public discourse. The Left, thus subverted the significance of

caste to establish its ideology of class struggle. At the same time, it is so visible in the public and private lives of Bengalis. Anthropological studies in 1980s found that, in rural areas, school feats continued to be segregated on the basis of caste. The Left undermined the intersection of caste and class in Bengal which is similar in the case of Kerala with an exception that is upper caste's concerns were well met by the state. The proliferation of government-aided institutions mostly run by upper castes and powerful religious minorities were not ready to follow the constitutionally mandatory reservation of employment in these sectors. The salaries are paid by the state but appointments are made by caste/religious-based managements. In West Bengal, a little direction in this regard is somehow visible in the policy document of the TMC (Trinamul Congress) governments since 2011 under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee. The chapter illustrated a communist case that West Bengal has always been highly influenced by Western ideologies, but these ideologies and worldview could not dismantle the entrenched institution of caste.

In the chapter "Development Policies and Marginal Groups: Case Study of Dhobis in Delhi," Subhadra Mitra Channa examines the marginalization of dhobis (traditional washer communities) within the context of urban development policies in Delhi. Dhobis, like other marginalized occupational castes in India, have historically provided essential services that cater to society's basic needs—such as scavenging, laundering, leatherworking, and basket weaving. These occupations are traditionally associated with "untouchable" castes, a classification that spans both rural and urban India, underscoring a deeply rooted socio-cultural stigma. The dhobis in Delhi, whose labour involves laundering the clothing of upper and middle-caste residents, perform tasks that include washing garments worn by individuals, as well as bed linens, towels, and clothing from menstruating women, the sick, and new mothers—items regarded as ritually impure within caste-based belief systems. This labour-intensive process results in a symbolic transfer of pollution from the upper castes to the dhobis, reinforcing their social status as "untouchable."

Channa's analysis also traces the socio-spatial positioning of dhobis in the city's development trajectory from colonial times to the present. Historically, dhobi communities were strategically situated near the residences of elites to ensure timely services, yet their social and political visibility remained severely limited. Despite the growth of the city and the expansion of markets driven by commercial and tourism sectors, which increased the demand for dhobis' services, urban planning processes have largely neglected the needs of this group. For instance, dhobi communities lack sufficient infrastructure, such as washing Ghats and water access, critical for their work. The chapter highlights that while some dhobis have adapted by becoming intermediaries with large hotels and commercial establishments, the city's planning frameworks fail to integrate their essential services, rendering them invisible within the urban landscape. Consequently, dhobis have remained a politically marginalized group with limited capacity to advocate for their rights in the civic life of Delhi. Their exclusion from urban planning reflects broader patterns of social marginalization,

where certain labour practices, despite their importance to the city's functioning, are systematically overlooked in public policy and urban development strategies.

The third part of the book explores caste dynamics beyond Hinduism, with Paramjit S. Judge's chapter, "Despite Equality: Sikhs and the Caste Issue," focusing on the complex interactions between caste and Sikhism. Judge argues that while Sikh religious doctrine theoretically rejects caste and untouchability, the social realities among Sikhs have been shaped significantly by caste-based distinctions, particularly due to historical and colonial policies. British colonial policy reinforced caste affiliations by establishing canal colonies in East and Central Punjab, where land was allocated primarily to agriculturist castes, such as Jats, Sainis, and Rajputs. These groups benefitted substantially from land allotments, which also extended to British soldiers upon their retirement. Additionally, caste-based recruitment in the British Indian Army further entrenched caste identities by officially recognizing and promoting certain groups, notably the Sikhs, as part of the "martial races". This colonial objectification of caste reified its link to public policy, casting a long shadow on the socio-political structure within Sikh communities. This caste legacy influenced the Constituent Assembly debates, in which Sardar Patel argued for the political representation of specific Sikh castes, citing social realities that contradicted Sikhism's egalitarian ideals. We could emphasize Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's assertion that untouchability in Hinduism is a stigma that persists across other religions in India, suggesting that social stigmatization based on caste transcends religious boundaries. Thus, despite Sikhism's theoretical rejection of caste, the lived experiences of lower-caste Sikhs reveal that caste-based discrimination remains a persistent challenge, carried over from socio-historical structures into the religious and social fabric of Sikh identity in India.

The second chapter of this section examines caste discrimination among Christians and Muslims in India and advocates for a reassessment of the state's policy on affirmative action. As seen in the case of Sikhs, caste identities persist among formerly "untouchable" communities even after conversion to Christianity or Islam. Studies indicate that caste structures have survived the process of religious conversion. Within Christian communities, converts from marginalized castes are often labeled as "New Christians," while those from higher castes are recognized as "upper-caste Christians." This distinction is particularly visible in practices within these groups; for example, upper-caste Christians and those from former untouchable castes are often buried in separate cemeteries, a practice that is evident in South India. In the presence of elite Syrian Christians, Dalit Christians are still expected to remove their head coverings, reflecting enduring social hierarchies. Similarly, Pulaya Christians may not be offered food in the homes of Syrian Christians or may be served on inferior dishes. Parallel to this, Muslims in India display a varna-like caste hierarchy, where groups are classified as Ashraf, Ajlaf, and Arzal. The Ashraf group includes sub-categories such as Syed, Sheikh, Mughal, and Pathan, with internal hierarchies persisting among these subgroups. The Ajlaf category is traditionally treated as "low caste," and practices like endogamy among Siddiquis in Uttar Pradesh reinforce their group identity and higher

social standing within the caste hierarchy. These patterns indicate that caste-based discrimination, traditionally associated with Hindu society, is also replicated in other religions in India. Given these persistent caste dynamics, there is a strong case for extending protective measures and affirmative action policies to marginalized groups within Indian Christian and Muslim communities.[3]

In the epilogue on the intersection of caste and public policy, Sony Pellissery proposes a framework for integrating caste considerations into policy analysis. This framework addresses four key stages of the policy process: agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making and adoption, implementation, and the feedback or evaluation loop. Recognizing the critical role caste plays at each of these stages, Pellissery emphasizes the need for caste to be adequately considered within Indian public policy frameworks. The discussion in this book, therefore, critiques public policy literature, particularly that originating from American and European contexts, for its limited capacity to account for policies within socio-culturally diverse states. The book, both empirically rigorous and analytically robust, reveals the resilience of caste in the daily lives of individuals, despite its frequent invisibility within state policy in India. This analysis underscores the importance of re-evaluating policy frameworks to reflect and address the complex realities of caste, calling for a more context-sensitive approach to public policy.

[3]It is in this context that a report by the Justice Ranganath Mishra Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (2007) recommended Scheduled Caste (SC) reservation for Dalit converts to Christianity and Islam.