

RETHINKING IDENTITY

with A Symposium on Caste in Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan Diaspora (Part II)

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with A Symposium on Caste in Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan Diaspora (Part II)

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Introduction to the Symposium on Caste in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Diaspora, Part II

Mark E. Balmforth¹, Kalinga Tudor Silva²

For this second part of the Symposium on Caste in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Diaspora, we have selected a set of four essays that continue our interest in thinking about caste on and of the island, not as something predominately relegated to history and declining in significance, but as an ongoing part of everyday life that remains understudied and in need of social and political attention. Each of these four essays challenge normative conceptions of caste on the island, from whether caste itself is determined by ethnicity, to questioning its role as a component in the careers of actors and organizations of the island's story in the twentieth century. In this collection, we have not always chosen articles containing arguments with which we agree. We have selected essays that advance our conversation in new, exciting, and sometimes surprising ways.

The first essay, by Dominic Esler, is titled "An Integrated Approach to Caste in Sri Lanka." Esler's provocative work rethinks and challenges what he describes as a fundamental presumption of most public and scholarly understandings of caste on the island: that at least two parallel and incommensurate ethnoreligious caste systems exist, one Sinhala Buddhist, the other Tamil Hindu. In the process, Esler provides an extensive appraisal of caste research on the island. As he writes: "If caste in India has, as Mosse has argued, been discursively 'enclosed' within the categories of religion and politics, in Sri Lanka it has been enclosed within ethnicity..." The consequences of this, he explains, are multiple, ranging from the partition of the research field into two camps to the development of ethnographic literature that is "theoretically disengaged" from the extensive caste literature in the region.

Our second essay, written by Bahirathy Räsānan, is titled "Perspectives on Caste and Militant Nationalism in Sri Lanka: The LTTE and Resistance Against Vellalah Hegemony." Drawing on interviews and surveys conducted during the last phases of the war and informed by years living in a world shaped by the Liberation Tigers of

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Tamil Eelam (The LTTE, or Tigers), Räsänen crafts an argument through territory replete with fierce agendas and unhealed wounds. She writes:

The LTTE's association with caste was deeply ambivalent and remains a subject of debate. On the one hand, its leader proclaimed an ambition to abolish caste differences and spoke of creating an egalitarian Tamil society free from entrenched hierarchies. On the other, their interventions often appeared to my interlocutors as less focused upon dismantling caste as a social system and more concerned with toppling the ingrained hegemony of the Vellalah elite, who had long monopolized political, social, economic, and religious power in Jaffna. This ambiguity raises the question of whether the LTTE sought to build a genuinely caste-free society or merely to reorder caste relations in ways that eroded Vellalah hegemony while consolidating its own legitimacy as the bearer of Tamil nationalism.

Räsänen's data and the claim that the Tigers were motivated by an anti-Vellala agenda is controversial and will certainly spur debate. Among other things, the evidence she offers demonstrates the central role caste has played in the lives of people wrapped up in the Tamil nationalist cause, despite the longstanding tendency to obscure and silence caste as a threat to a unified Tamil nation.

The third essay of this collection, by Bhadragee Hewage, is titled "The Caste Negotiations of Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) in Colonial Ceylon." Hewage takes as his subject arguably the most famous Sri Lankan social reformer ever to have lived, the controversial Buddhist activist and anti-colonial-cum-national leader, Anagarika Dharmapala. Sifting through his voluminous writings in Sinhala and English, Hewage seeks to read Dharmapala's nuanced relationship with caste, from his mixed parentage and critiques of the operation of caste on the island, to his admiration of caste in India. Subtle differences between Dharmapala's Sinhala writings, which Hewage describes as "more intimate and forceful than his English-language work," offer clues. "Indeed," he writes, "it is from these [Sinhala] writings that we gain our clearest understanding of Dharmapala's positionality regarding caste and his attitudes towards its practice and existence."

Mark E. Balmforth's "The Arrogation of Being Tamil and Other Campaigns Against Caste Discrimination in Jaffna, 1927-1957" is the fourth and final essay of Part II. Through this work, Balmforth draws our attention to what he describes as an oppressed caste-led, anti-untouchability and civil rights movement centered upon four claims: a common Tamil identity, the right to free education, access to public cremation space, and separate electoral representation. By framing these campaigns as part of a larger project well predating the so-called Temple Entry Movement of the late 1960s, Balmforth makes the case that caste struggle has been as significant to the

story of Sri Lankan Tamils in the twentieth century as the question of nationalism and sovereignty.

We hope that this Symposium on Caste in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Diaspora will stimulate further research on this relatively neglected terrain of social life in Sri Lanka, as well as promote development and social justice on the island. We encourage our community to interrogate the arguments made herein and to consider them while shaping future investigations, policy initiatives, and social action seeking to promote social justice, equity, equality, and democratic social values. We remain open to suggestions for future research, policy, and action, and welcome communication from our readers.

An Integrated Approach to Caste in Sri Lanka

Dominic Esler¹

Abstract

In this article I argue that Sri Lankan caste research has been inhibited by the widespread popular assumption that caste manifests in Sri Lanka in the form of parallel and incommensurate ethnoreligious caste systems. In other words, while scholars working elsewhere in South Asia approach caste per se as an important comparative topic, in Sri Lanka caste is usually enclosed and circumscribed within a framework of essentialised Tamil Hindu or Sinhala Buddhist identities that precludes similar comparative investigations. I begin with a review of Sri Lankan caste scholarship, demonstrating its post-Independence division into two ethnic streams with varying thematic foci and levels of attention to caste, before interrogating the three underlying principles of the ethnoreligious theory and their assumptions about the nature of caste, religion and ethnicity. After historicising the theory, I offer a critique that draws on empirical evidence and theoretical debates from Sri Lanka and elsewhere. In doing so, I set out the foundations of an integrated and comparative anthropology of caste in Sri Lanka, one which is not restricted by the assumption that caste is ultimately an epiphenomenon of ethnicity, but which is nevertheless attentive to the role that this popular perception plays in the relational dynamics of local identity formation and caste practice.

Keywords

Caste, Sri Lanka, Ethnicity, Tamil, Sinhalese, Religion, Discursive Enclosure, Ethnoreligious Theory of Caste

Introduction

Despite the large amount of research that has been conducted on caste in Sri Lanka, only rarely has the study of caste itself been the subject of critical reflection (Esler, 2025; Rogers, 2004; Silva, 2018). In this article I propose that the absence of such analysis, and the ways in which caste research is usually conceptualised and

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conducted, are the result of a largely implicit theory of caste that has become accepted orthodoxy among the majority of caste researchers. While this theory derives from the widespread popular view of caste as a Hindu institution, in the Sri Lankan context caste is considered to have become, via the ethnicisation of religion, an inherent property of ethnicity. The ethnoreligious theory of caste, as I will refer to it, therefore holds that caste manifests in Sri Lanka in the form of separate and independent Tamil Hindu and Sinhalese Buddhist caste systems. If caste in India has, as Mosse has argued (2020a, 2020b), been discursively ‘enclosed’ within the categories of religion and politics, in Sri Lanka it has been enclosed within ethnicity, and Sri Lanka itself is viewed as relevant only as the geographical space within which parallel but sealed ethnoreligious caste systems coexist.

While the ethnoreligious theory of caste is certainly not the only factor in the development of Sri Lankan caste research, which has also been strongly affected by changes of research foci during the war and the popular view of caste as irrelevant to contemporary Sri Lankan society—a view that will be very familiar to caste researchers across South Asia—it is my contention that the theory’s largely unrecognised and unchecked acceptance has restricted and hindered Sri Lankan caste research in vital but overlooked ways. First, it has resulted in the partitioning of research into studies of caste among either Tamils or Sinhalese, without attentive comparative analysis to justify this division, consideration of factors that cannot be reduced to ethnicity or religion, or interrogation of the categories of ethnicity and religion themselves. Second, it has resulted in an ethnographic literature that is empirically patchy and increasingly theoretically disengaged, especially from the debates that have occurred in the vast literature on caste in other parts of South Asia and beyond. Caste is considered to be already understood in its totality, even if its local specificities remain uncertain: a topic of curiosity and potential controversy, but one of little relevance to contemporary Sri Lanka. Even the resurgence of interest in caste immediately following the civil war appears to be fading, as attested by the absence of new ethnographic research projects. In other words, I contend that the ethnoreligious theory of caste is the key reason for why what is, after India and Nepal, the third largest collection of regional caste scholarship has not developed into an integrated, comparative, and self-reflexive field. Until that happens, Sri Lankan caste scholarship will remain less than the sum of its parts.

In this article I not only identify the ethnoreligious theory, its origins and consequences, but also set out a critique of the theory and suggestions for how caste in Sri Lanka might be reconceptualised in the future through an integrated approach. This does not mean trying to produce a new *theory* of caste, nor will I argue that caste is somehow the same everywhere in Sri Lanka. Neither does it mean that previous caste research has not made valuable contributions to the anthropological understanding of Sri Lanka. What it does involve, however, is rethinking the assumptions about religion and ethnicity that underpin the ethnoreligious theory, and instead treating these factors not as transhistorical essences that can only act unilaterally upon caste but as changing, historically contingent factors that only explain part of the Sri Lankan context. In order

to do this, in the following pages I provide a rereading of the work on caste in Sri Lanka, drawing out similarities, differences and connections across the boundaries of the putative ethnoreligious caste systems. This approach has two broader benefits. On the one hand, I foreground and critique the customary ethnic division that runs throughout Sri Lankan research more broadly. On the other, I open the possibility of revitalising the abandoned task of drawing Sri Lanka into discussions of caste across South Asia, one that has been made increasingly difficult by the challenge of comparing Sri Lanka's assumed ethnoreligious caste systems with the incommensurate nature of what is frequently presumed to be the national caste system of 'Hindu India'.

Sri Lankan Caste Research

Until my 2025 overview of caste research in Sri Lanka there had been no attempt to bring the Sinhalese and Tamil caste research together, and in this section I revisit and expand upon the earlier bibliography to demonstrate the role that ethnicity has played in the production of this scholarship. As in India (Fuller, 2017), British anthropologists had little interest in the topic of caste in Sri Lanka until after Independence, and during the period of British colonialism (1795-1948) caste research was similarly conducted by government officials, missionaries or Sri Lankans themselves. Unlike its Indian equivalent, however, this work received less attention from continental European scholars as described by Fuller,¹ and colonial attitudes towards caste also differed significantly between the two countries. While caste was increasingly central to statecraft in India during the second half of the nineteenth century, in Sri Lanka the colonial state took a contrary path, deciding to cease intervening in caste in the 1830s—most importantly by abolishing caste-based compulsory labour—and later discouraging discussion of caste in official spheres. I will return to this topic later, but some of the key outcomes of this divergence, and their relevance for subsequent caste scholarship, must be highlighted here. In contrast to India, there was in Sri Lanka no attempt to systemically classify castes or produce an all-Sri Lanka caste hierarchy, no collection of information about caste in Sri Lanka's national censuses when they began in 1871, and no caste-based legislation comparable to the Criminal Tribes Act or reservations. In this context, it is unsurprising that there was also no state-supported research on caste, and therefore no works comparable to those such as Risley's *People of India* (1915), Thurston and Rangachari's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909), or Ibbetson's *Panjab castes* (1916).

The research on caste that was published in colonial Sri Lanka was conducted independently and on a much smaller scale, and mainly appeared in the following formats: 1) occasional essays and journal articles, such as Koorundu (1833), Johnston (1833), Casie Chitty (1834, pp. 227–251; 1855, 1865, 1886), Hartshorne (1876), Codrington (1909, 1921), and Kapuruhami (1948, p. 2); 2) observations and numerical

¹Although it is notable that Hocart's *Caste: A Comparative Study* first appeared in a French translation in Paris in 1938, with a short preface by Marcel Mauss, twelve years before its English edition was published.

data scattered throughout a series of handbooks about individual districts and provinces written by senior officials and published between 1888 and 1921;² 3) observations in monographs on a range of other topics, such as Armour (1842), Codrington (1936), Cordiner (1807), D'Oyly (1929), Davy (1821), Denham (1912), Hayley (1923), and Tennent (1860, vol. I, pp. 421–428), a category to which we can also add earlier texts from the Dutch period (1640–1796) by Knox (1681) and Valentyn (1726); and 4), a very small number of texts dedicated specifically to caste: de Saram (1888), Casie Chitty (1992), *Caste, in the Island of Ceylon* (1853) by the American missionaries Meigs, Poor and Howland, and Hocart's *Caste: A Comparative Study* (1950). Apart from the last category, however, the discussions of caste in these publications are usually brief and rarely detailed, lacking theoretical and empirical depth in comparison with contemporary Indian scholarship.

Besides published texts, there is also a wealth of references to caste in other sources, such as the Administrative Reports (compiled for each district from the 1860s onwards) and other official records, diaries and letters (see for example Balmforth, 2025; T. Gunasekera, 1994; Meyer, 2014); newspapers (Balmforth, 2025; Pfaffenberger, 1990); the memoirs left by Dutch Governors for their successors (many of which have been translated into English, e.g. Van Rhee 1915), Dutch laws (Mutukisna, 1862; Schrikker, 2007; Wickramasinghe and Schrikker, 2019), and the population registers known as thombos (Bulten, 2023); missionary archives (Balmforth, 2020; Esler, 2020); and other local sources such as *vitti pot* (Sinhalese for 'books of events') (Obeyesekere, 2015, 2019) and the caste histories and polemics that became popular in the late nineteenth century (Dharmaratna, 1890; A.P. Kannangara, 1993; Roberts, 1982). However, as P.D. Kannangara noted in 1988, there remains much to explore. This, in conjunction with the ahistorical nature of the ethnoreligious theory, is perhaps part of the reason for why contemporary post-Independence anthropology on caste is largely disconnected from both published histories and pre-Independence sources (exceptions being Esler, 2020; T. Gunasekera, 1994; McGilvray, 2008; Pfaffenberger, 1990; Whitaker, 1999). The most notable oversight is Hocart, whose work has not had a significant impact in Sri Lanka (although see McGilvray, 2008, pp. 84, 136, 182; Stirrat, 1982, p. 31), despite becoming a central pillar of post-Dumontian caste theory in India and Nepal (Dirks, 1987; Quigley, 1993; Raheja, 1988). For example, an important 1989 article by Yalman advanced a strongly Hocartian argument about the deification of kings without referring to Hocart at all.

A small number of historians have worked on caste among Tamils in Jaffna: Arasaratnam (1981) and Pfaffenberger (1990) have written about Vellalar dominance, Balmforth (2025) about activism against caste discrimination between the 1920s and 1950s, and some scholars have also recently turned to the relationship between caste and

²The works concerned the districts of Batticaloa (Canagaratnam, 1921), Jaffna (Horsburgh, 1916), Mannar (Boake, 1888; Denham, 1906, 1916), Nuwara Eliya (Le Mesurier, 1893), Puttalam (Modder, 1908, 1917), Trincomalee (Muthukrishna, 1916) and the Vanni (Vavuniya and Mullaitivu) (Lewis, 1895; Unknown 1916), as well as Central (Lawrie, 1898), North-Central (Ievers, 1899) and Uva (White, 1893) Provinces.

slavery (Balmforth, 2021; Schrikker, 2007; Wickramasinghe, 2020; Wickramasinghe and Schrikker, 2019). However, most historical research has involved topics focused on Sinhalese. First, investigations into the influence of caste, or presence of caste-like formations, in the first millenium C.E., drawing evidence from epigraphy, the chronicles and later commentaries (P.V.B. Karunatilaka, 1983, 1988, 2001; Nicholas, 1950), and archaeology (Coningham and Young, 2007). Second, a handful of topics focused on the Kandyan Kingdom, the last part of Sri Lanka to fall under colonial rule in 1815, concerning migrant Brahmins (Obeyesekere, 2015), state ritual and labour organisation (Dewaraja, 1988; Peiris, 1956; Seneviratne, 1978). Third, the influence of caste on the institutional development of Theravada Buddhism (Kemper, 1980; Liyanagamage, 1982; Malalgoda, 1976). Fourth, the colonial impact on caste with regard to administration, official appointments and compulsory service (Arasaratnam, 1981; Bastiampillai, 1988; M.U. De Silva, 1992/1993, 1993, 2005, 2015), as well as the state's withdrawal from caste and the new forms of social classification that emerged at this time (Rogers, 2004a, 2004b). Fifth, caste formation, mobility and status claims, largely after the changes of the 1830s (Gunasekera, 1994; Jayawardena, 2000; Roberts, 1982; see Dewasiri, 2008 for a discussion of the Dutch period).

As I have previously noted (2025, p. 385), social scientific research on caste in Sri Lanka after 1948 can be divided into three broad stages, a framework that I continue to employ here. However, while my earlier essay focused on key themes in contemporary research, more pertinent to my argument here is the way in which this scholarship displays varying thematic foci and levels of attention to caste in relation to ethnicity. The first stage began with Ryan's 1953 monograph *Caste in Modern Ceylon*, which remains the standard reference for Sinhalese caste matters today. In contrast to the work on localised caste dynamics emerging from the first village ethnographies being conducted in India at the same time, Ryan's work went some way to filling the gap left by the absence of the kind of colonial glossaries of caste which were never produced in Sri Lanka (e.g. Risley, 1915), although an earlier article about Sinhalese castes by Gilbert (1945) had done something similar using secondary sources. Beginning with descriptions of individual castes, *Caste in Modern Ceylon* then turns to examples of villages in different areas of the country and broader observations about national caste dynamics, although without significant ethnographic data on caste praxis.

While later work among Sinhalese tended to move away from this kind of multicaste approach (a prominent exception being Yalman, 1971), almost all subsequent scholars followed Ryan in focusing on caste within a single ethnicity, exceptions being (again) Yalman (1971), later research by Piyaarachchi (2018, pp. 147–189) in Panama (one of Yalman's fieldsites), and two studies that consider the relationship between the Veddas, caste and Sinhalese and Tamil identity, respectively (Brow, 2011; Dart, 1985).³ However, from *Caste in Modern Ceylon* until its end in the 1980s with the

³It has usually been thought that Sri Lankan Muslims do not practice caste, even if one caste-like group, the endogamous Osta 'barber-circumcisers', exists among them (McGilvray 2008,

beginning of the civil war, the first stage of Sri Lankan caste research witnessed the greatest interest in caste, pursued through the widest range of topics. Village studies did appear, and were found mainly in Sinhalese research, although they were never as popular nor as ‘holistic’ as their counterparts in India, with the earlier ethnographers in Sri Lanka prioritising kinship and land use, and caste being a largely secondary concern. The villages studied were primarily inhabited by ‘upper-caste’ Sinhalese Govigamas (Gamburd, 2009; Leach, 1961; Obeyesekere, 1967; Robinson, 1975; Ryan, Jayasena and Wickremesinghe, 1958; Tambiah, 1954), and relatively little detail about intercaste relationships was provided (although see U.A. Gunasekara 1965; Senaratne 1970; Spencer 1990; Yalman 1961, 1962, 1971). Other Sinhalese research considered caste in relation to topics such as agrarian relations (T. Gunasekera, 1994; Gunasinghe, 2007; also see essays in Brow and Weeramunda, 1992 and Morrison and Moore, 1979), politics and the JVP (Jayantha, 1992; Jiggins, 1979; Obeyesekere, 1974), Buddhism (Gombrich, 1971; Kendrick, 1992; Kemper, 1980; Seneviratne, 1978), Catholicism (Stirrat, 1982), and ‘low-caste’ ritual and craft specialists (Raghavan, 1957; Kirk, 1992; Simpson, 1984, 1997; Winslow, 1994). There was also one longer study of a coastal caste, the Karava (Raghavan, 1971).

Tamil research in the first stage addressed a smaller number of themes but tended to foreground caste through more expansive explorations of ideology and intercaste relationships (especially Banks, 1957, 1961; David, 1973, 1977; McGilvray, 1982, 1983, 2008; Somasundram, 1954; Whitaker, 1999). It shared with the Sinhalese research an interest in kinship, but was less concerned with land ownership (although see Ishak Lebbe, 1979). In addition, there were studies of caste and Hinduism (McGilvray, 1982, 1983, 2008; Perinbanayagam, 1965, 1982; Pfaffenberger, 1982; K.S. Ryan, 1980; Whitaker, 1999), gender (Skjøsberg, 1982), language (Suseendrarajah, 1970), caste identity among the Tamils working in Hill Country tea plantations whose ancestors came from India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Hollup, 1993, 1994; Jayaraman, 1964, 1975, 1981), a detailed analysis of Paraiyar specialists (McGilvray, 1983), and a book-length study of Hindu Karaiyar fishers—a caste analogous to the Karava—unusual for its focus on Tamils living in Puttalam, a Sinhalese majority area (Tanaka, 1997). The Tamil scholarship also displayed a greater sense of cumulative focus that was related to its keener sense of regional specificity. For this reason, these studies can also be organised according to research conducted among Tamils in Jaffna, the east coast, and the Hill Country.

What is notable about the first stage, even if it remained a secondary concern, is that there was a greater interest in caste as a theoretical issue, and in related debates outside Sri Lanka, than in subsequent research (especially Leach, 1961; McGilvray, 1982; Stirrat, 1982; and Yalman, 1961a, 1961b, 1962, 1971). While Spencer commented in 1990 that ‘Early clarity [about caste] has been steadily replaced by confusion and obscurity’ (p. 187), in retrospect the 1950s–1980s produced some of

pp. 308–310). However, Faslan (2025) has recently proposed that the Muslims in southern Sri Lanka are divided into five castes, of which the Ostas are one.

the most insightful research, raising many important questions that were dropped in the second stage, which lasted from the start of the civil war to its end in 2009. During these years, caste research appeared only sporadically, addressing a much narrower range of topics, and mainly focused on Sinhalese. These changes were due to growing academic attention to ethnicity and religion in the context of the civil war, as well as the severe difficulty of conducting research in the war-affected Tamil majority areas of the north and east. There was some consideration of the relationship between caste and Sinhalese identity (M. W. A de Silva, 2009; Silva, 1999; Uyangoda, 1998), and of the 'subterranean' role of caste in politics (Uyangoda, 1998, 2000a, 2000b), but the majority of Sinhalese publications now focused on specialist castes, sometimes building on prewar research (P. de Silva, 2000; Reed, 2002; Simpson, 1997; Sykes, 2018; Winslow, 2003). This trend demonstrated a growing attention to caste inequality (especially Uyangoda, 1998, 2012; Weeratunga, 1988), including in Buddhist contexts (Samuels, 2007b), and was exemplified by Silva, Sivapragasam and Thanges's 2009 collection of four studies of caste discrimination across Sri Lanka. However, there was no research on 'upper-caste' Sinhalese Govigamas at all during this period.

Among Tamils in the north and east, caste research only began again during the 2002–2007 ceasefire (Bremner, 2013; Derges, 2013; Gaasbeek, 2010; Jeeweshwara Räsänen, 2015; Madavan, 2011), although Pfaffenberger (1990) and Hellman-Rajanayagam (1993, 1994) published investigations of the relationship between caste, politics, nationalism and Tamil identity in the early 1990s, the former drawing on prewar ethnographic research and secondary sources, the latter on local wartime publications and interviews conducted in Sri Lanka and India. Two anthropologists also considered caste in new projects in Hill Country tea plantations (Bass, 2013; Jegathesan, 2019, 2021), and the first dedicated monograph on caste for several decades (and based on several decades' work) was published (McGilvray, 2008).

The third stage, which brings us to the present day, began with the end of the war in 2009 and has been largely distinguished by new projects among Tamils in northern Sri Lanka conducted by doctoral researchers, some of which remain unpublished (Bruland, 2015; Esler, 2020, 2021; Hollenbach, et al. 2020; Kadirgamar, 2017; Kuganathan, 2022; Sanmugeswaran, 2020, 2023; Silva, 2020; Sritharan, 2025; Thanges, 2018; Thiranagama, 2018). If a key theme connects this scholarship, it is the effect of the war and its end on caste practice and ideology. The smaller body of Sinhalese research that has emerged since 2009 largely builds on topics from stages one and two: caste-identified names and identity (Heslop, 2015; M.W.A. de Silva, 2018), caste in the JVP movement (Moore, 2021) and contemporary electoral politics (Peiris, 2021), and the persistence of caste inequality in the context of normative denials of caste experienced by low-status Kinnaras (Douglas, 2017, 2019). Abeyasekera (2021) has also brought a long-overdue attention to 'upper-caste' practices, in this case through marriages in Colombo's middle class.

The Ethnoreligious Theory of Caste in Sri Lanka

The following quotations are statements of what I have called the ethnoreligious theory:

The Sinhalese and the Tamils each possess a caste system peculiar to their own nationality. The Tamils, being in a minority and sharing the social stratification of their fellow nationals in India, are not considered in this paper except where they show relationships with the Sinhalese. (Gilbert, 1945, p. 69)

Ceylon possesses two caste structures, the Tamil, no more than a regional variant within the South Indian pattern, and the Sinhalese, a self-contained emergent arising from diffuse Indian influences and historically unique situations. (Ryan, 1953, pp. 4–5).

In Ceylon, in contrast to India, there were no necessary links between the traditional status system and the traditional religious system. In India the status of each caste was evaluated in terms of brahmanical teachings; in Ceylon no such explicitly formulated standard prevailed for status evaluation. In India the caste system was maintained and consolidated by the priestly authority of the brahmins; in Ceylon no priestly caste existed. The consolidation and legitimation of caste in Ceylon, therefore, was primarily a secular function mainly in the hands of the political authority, the king. (Malalgoda, 1976, p. 46)

Sinhalese castes have many of the characteristics of the Hindu model, but with some crucial differences. They are ranked, endogamous, hereditary named groups with traditional occupations, but there is no religious sanction for the caste hierarchy, and there are no Brahmins to integrate them. They are castes without a caste system. (Peebles, 1995, pp. 44–45)

In comparison to India, the caste system in Sri Lanka is considered to be mild. Three parallel and more or less independent caste systems prevail in Sri Lanka: Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil and Indian Tamil. [...] The caste systems in Sri Lanka can be considered less rigid compared to the Hindu caste system in India because of the secular nature of the hierarchy, a critical doctrinal perspective relating to caste in Buddhism, the predominant religion in Sinhala society, a relatively weak notion of untouchability in caste systems in Sri Lanka and relatively small size of the bottom layer of society. (Silva, Sivapragasam and Thanges, 2009, pp. 1–2)

Caste in Sri Lanka is dynamic in both Sinhalese and Tamil communities, and there are even some parallels between these. For the Sinhalese, caste was not connected to religion—Buddhism is against it—as it is more socio-economic. For Tamils, the roots of caste stems from the Hindu religion where the Rig Veda classifies people according to *Varnastra dharma*, so that caste has a socio-religious base. (Jeeweshwara Räsänen, 2015, p. 65)

I have explained above that Sinhalese and Tamil caste research has been produced in two largely separate streams, and that the focal themes and attention to caste in each

has varied. The central argument of this essay is that the shape of the intellectual history of caste in Sri Lanka is one of the consequences of the fact that scholars have overwhelmingly drawn upon, and continue to reproduce, an ethnoreligious theory of caste which holds that caste manifests in Sri Lanka in the form of separate and independent Tamil Hindu and Sinhalese Buddhist caste systems. In this section I discuss the underlying theory itself, direct expressions of which—such as the examples quoted above—are rare and brief, usually appearing in introductions to the topic of caste and primarily in order to explain the existence of caste among Sinhalese Buddhists, which is assumed to be a paradox. Underpinning the ethnoreligious theory of caste, I propose, are the following principles:

1. Caste derives from Hinduism, and Buddhism is antithetical to it.
2. Caste is a characteristic of Tamil ethnicity due to the Tamil relationship with Hinduism.
3. Ethnoreligious caste systems are essentially different and are impermeable to outside influences.

As can be seen from the extracts above, it is not the case that each of these principles are expressed in every instance of the theory, and in fact they become increasingly implicit: the first principle is the most explicitly stated and elaborated, while the third is indicated by empirical and theoretical absences. It is not my argument that all caste scholars necessarily support the theory, in full or in part, and in later sections I offer some evidence to the contrary. One possible objection to my approach is that an absence of something is not necessarily evidence of the presence of something else, which is one consequence of my arguing for the increasing implicitness of the principles. However, I do think that many scholars of Sri Lanka share the presumptions described below, and if not, at the very least I hope to prompt them to express their thoughts on this subject.

Caste Derives from Hinduism, and Buddhism is Antithetical to it

The assumption that caste is a property of Hinduism is an instance of a widespread popular and academic view with which caste scholars working elsewhere will be very familiar. According to this view, caste is an enduring form of Hindu social organisation whose ancient origins are described in the myth of the sacrifice of Purusha and the creation of the four *varnas* in the *Rigveda*. Its most elaborate and influential theoretical articulation is found in the work of Louis Dumont (1980), who argued that caste derives from a Hindu ideological principle of the opposition between ritual purity and impurity, producing a hierarchy whose extremes are represented by the Brahman and the Untouchable. According to Dumont, the spiritual authority of the Brahman supersedes the temporal authority of the Kshatriya, a situation that arose from a contract that the kings made with the priests in the distant past (Dumont, 1980, pp. 287–313). With regard to members of other religions, Dumont argued that caste can only exist ‘in more or less attenuated forms’ (Dumont, 1980, p. 210), either because certain ideological features are absent even if other characteristics of caste are present,

or because the ideology of the new religion has not yet developed fully (Dumont, 1980, p. 205). Of Sri Lanka, Dumont briefly proposed that as Buddhism historically favoured the king rather than the Brahmin, the disjunction between status and power did not occur, as a consequence of which the king remained primary and the Brahmins few. Caste in Sri Lanka therefore ‘has all the characteristics of caste except its vigour’, and is ‘quasi-caste rather than caste proper’ (Dumont, 1980, p. 216).

It is either a testament to Dumont’s extensive influence, or to the fact that his theory reflected existing preconceptions about caste, that Sri Lankan caste research—particularly research that focuses on Sinhalese—has a strongly Dumontian sensibility despite rarely referring to his work outside of the abovementioned handful of scholars in the first stage of caste research who engaged with debates beyond Sri Lanka. In short, caste is presumed to derive fundamentally from Hinduism, religious and political domains are ontologically separate, and Buddhism is ideologically opposed to caste, with a slippage from Buddhist caste to that of Sri Lanka as a whole. In his famous history of Sri Lanka, for example, K.M. de Silva claims that ‘caste has no religious sanction from Buddhism’ and that Buddhism ‘may well have retarded if not arrested the growth of caste, for some time at least’ (2005, pp. 57–58), while Seneviratne proposes that Buddhism ‘is possibly the best explanation for the relatively greater social liberalism in Sri Lanka when compared with Muslim and Hindu India’, and for the ‘mild form’ of the Sri Lankan (read Sinhalese Buddhist) caste system in comparison to that of the Sri Lankan Hindu Tamils (1999, p. 18). Of course, the view that Buddhism is antithetical to caste is not confined to Sri Lanka, and can be found in Dr B. R. Ambedkar’s anti-caste neo-Buddhism (Silva 2017), as well as in the beliefs of Indian Tamil Buddhists recently discussed by Ayyathurai (2020).

Two explanations, both only weakly substantiated by historical evidence, have been given for Buddhism’s weakening of caste in Sri Lanka. The first is that the absence of ‘religious sanction’ means that caste among Buddhists can only be ‘secular’. According to Ryan (1953, 37–38), ‘the most critical factor in the secularization of Sinhalese caste was the separation of priestliness and caste’, which occurred because the *sangha* was founded as a casteless order open to all. On the other hand, in his study of the Kandyan Kingdom, Pieris proposed that while caste was secularised by being ‘uprooted from its sacrificial base’, it was ‘consolidated and legitimated through the medium of the entire apparatus of a strong central government’ (1956, p. 180; see also Malalgoda, 1976, p. 46). Similar concepts can be seen in the work of scholars who describe Sinhalese caste as ‘feudal’ (Jiggins, 1979; Leach, 1959; although cf. Roberts, 1984), as well as in descriptions of migrant communities from India being incorporated into the Sinhalese caste system for specific labour purposes (Roberts, 1982, pp. 48–49).

Second, Sinhalese Buddhist caste is held to lack three specific religious dimensions of the ‘Indian Hindu caste system’. First, the notion of *varna* is described as either absent—‘contrary to the Indian experience, what is almost wholly lacking as an accepted referent is the idea of a single encompassing, universal, and primordial hierarchy, conceptualised in *varna*’ (Jiggins, 1979, p. 19)—or incomplete, specifically

missing Brahmans and Kshatriyas (Gombrich, 1971, p. 296; Pieris, 1956, p. 171). Second, the absence of an equivalent caste to the Brahmans among Sinhalese means that ‘there are no Brahmins to integrate them’ (Peebles, 1995, p. 45). Although unexplored empirically, the relatively small number of Hindu Brahmans among Tamils, and their lack of authority, is thought to have a similar weakening effect (Rogers, 2004, p. 52). Third, the notion of ‘ritual pollution’ is either diminished or non-existent among the Sinhalese, as a result of which untouchability either does not exist, or – usually in reference to the stigmatised Kinnara and Rodi castes – exists solely as a secular rather than a religious condition (Gombrich, 1971, p. 296; Mahroof, 2000, p. 43; Ryan, 1953, pp. 16–17).

It is important to note here that these arguments exist in parallel to the recognition that caste *has* played a role in the institutional structure of Buddhism—for example, in recruitment for the main *nikāyas*, or monastic lineages (Kemper, 1980)—as well as in theological interpretation, as seen in the legitimization of caste inequality on the basis of *karma* (Silva, 2017, pp. 9–10). While many scholars have viewed religion as a force that acts unidirectionally on caste, a smaller number have made the more nuanced argument that the existence of caste among Sinhalese Buddhists, even in weakened form, is due to Buddhism itself changing to accommodate caste. For example, Buddhism ‘adapted to the secular structure’ (Jiggins, 1979, pp. 19–20) or ‘transformed itself to legitimise the caste system’ (Dewasiri, 2008, p. 218). Nevertheless, these perspectives tend to support the view that ‘authentic’ Buddhism is anti-caste, as can be seen in the following comment by Gombrich (1971, p. 310): ‘In no other respect has Buddhism in Ceylon come so far from its original state as in the invasion of the Order by caste, yet another testimony to the remarkable strength of that insidious institution.’

Caste is a Characteristic of Tamil Ethnicity Due to the Tamil Relationship with Hinduism

While the presumed relationship between Hinduism and caste is a familiar one, it is complexified in the Sri Lankan context by the enclosure of religion, and therefore caste, within ethnicity. According to Rogers (1994, pp. 14–15), within Sri Lanka’s ‘modern sociology of knowledge’ ethnicity is considered to be the primary and outermost layer, while religion and caste are considered to be subcategories of ethnicity. However, Rogers’ point that religion is considered optional and caste inherent sidesteps the fact that Hindu and Buddhist identities are in fact highly constrained within emic assumptions about ethnicity, as demonstrated, for example, by the apparent incongruity of a ‘Tamil Buddhist’ (McKinley, 2022). Similarly, despite the existence of large numbers of Tamil and Sinhalese Christians, even conversion to Christianity—particularly more recent denominations—may be considered a threat to ethnic identity. A notable way in which such an association between religion and ethnicity appears in academic scholarship can be seen in occasional claims that all Jaffna Tamils are Hindus (e.g., David, 1973, 1977; Perinbanayagam, 1965 and 1982; Skjønberg, 1982, p. 15), to the surprise of those who have observed the many Christian churches in the region.

In other words, religion is considered to be a significant characteristic of ethnic identity per se, and continues to have an ongoing influence on ethnicity after conversion

to Christianity. Caste, therefore, is ultimately enclosed not within religion but within ethnicity. Caste is not enacted by Hindus or Buddhists, but by Tamils and Sinhalese as a result of their relationship with Hinduism and Buddhism, respectively. Tamils and Sinhalese are thus considered as a whole to reproduce a certain kind of caste system as an essentialised ethnic characteristic, and as caste is viewed negatively in the public sphere, this differentiated ethnic characteristic also has a strongly ethical connotation. In other words, Tamils are more hierarchical and discriminatory than Sinhalese. For example, Ryan (1953, p. 17) wrote that 'The absence of the Hindu concept [of untouchability] has rendered the Sinhalese caste system mild and humanitarian when judged by Indian standards'. This conceptualisation of caste in ethical terms existed long before recent research on caste as a form of stigmatisation and subordination. As a normative attitude connected to ethnic categories, such an understanding of caste has a broader political valence, as we will see later. Finally, due to the Tamil relationship with Hinduism caste is only an authentic property of Tamil ethnicity, and its presence among Sinhalese must necessarily be anomalous and attenuated.

Ethnoreligious Caste Systems are Essentially Different and are Impermeable to Outside Influences

In the literature on caste, the term 'caste system' is used in three main ways: 1) as a synonym for caste itself; 2) as a way of conceptualising caste as a phenomenon with systemic properties; and 3) to identify localised instances of type 2, usually highlighting a particular systemic property as the limiting factor (e.g. a regional caste system, a religious caste system). It is in the third sense that caste system is used in Sri Lanka, always in the plural, with the limiting factor being ethnicity. However, the precise nature of the differences between the caste systems is largely overlooked, or rather assumed. In fact, in structural terms, similarities have been highlighted more often than differences, as many castes are considered to be analogous to each other, such as the landowning Tamil Vellalars and Sinhalese Govigamas who are numerically and socio-economically dominant in many parts of Sri Lanka (De Silva, 1965, p. 187; Gaasbeek, 2010, p. 86; Ryan, 1953, p. 4; Yalman, 1989, p. 144). Moreover, the visual metaphor of an 'inverted pyramid' has been used to represent both Sinhalese (Pieris, 1952, p. 410; Ryan, 1953, p. 95) and Tamil (Jayawardena, 2000, p. 165) caste systems. What differences are emphasised relate primarily to the presence or absence of the Hindu properties of caste mentioned above, as well as to the *strength* of caste, a rather nebulous concept that refers to varying levels of commitment to hierarchical intercaste boundaries.

This mix of similarities and differences does not include 'non-religious' factors such as the role of the colonial or postcolonial state: there is no 'national context' within which caste can be situated without the discourse being immediately channeled into the parallel systems framework. Nor is there any consideration of how these caste systems might interact with or influence each other. In fact, caste systems are treated as if they are impermeable to outside influence, the only relevant factor being that of religion today or in the past. Statements about caste being weaker at the level of

the nation than India rely on presumptions about caste *within* the systems and the demographic majority of Sinhalese Buddhists; significantly, the ‘milder’ form of Sinhalese Buddhist caste is not described as having an effect on the Tamil system. A good example of this tendency is Winslow’s important 2023 attempt to theorise Sinhalese caste, which has much to say about influences from India but nothing on how Tamils and Sinhalese may have influenced each other within Sri Lanka.

There is one caveat to make here. Although two caste systems are usually identified in Sri Lanka, the ‘national’ Tamil caste system fragments at higher levels of detail. For example, Silva, Sivapragasam and Thanges (2009, p. 1) write that ‘Three parallel and more or less independent caste systems prevail in Sri Lanka: Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil and Indian Tamil’, while Mahroof (2000, p. 40) identifies four: the Northern Tamil (Jaffna) system, the Eastern Province system, the Plantation (Estate) system, and a ‘fugitive’ system of a ‘narrow segment of urban scavenging workers’. However, in common with the projected model of ‘Hindu India’, only one caste system is identified among the Sinhalese, although some scholars propose that there were once two, one among Sinhalese of the low country and another among the Sinhalese of the Kandyan region (Mahroof, 2000, p. 40). While the multiplicity of contemporary Tamil caste systems is due ostensibly to regional and intra-ethnic difference, I suggest that it is primarily a result of the more cumulative nature of Tamil caste research and the greater attention that it has paid to intercaste relationships and historical contexts.

Historicising the Ethnoreligious Theory

Rather than emerging from evidence-based analysis, the ethnoreligious theory of caste is the contemporary expression of a discourse that became prominent under particular historical conditions in the 1830s, as has been most clearly demonstrated by Rogers (1994, 2004a, 2004b) in his attempt to draw Sri Lanka into broader postcolonial debates about the colonial influence on caste. As is now well known, the historical turn in Indian caste scholarship from the 1960s onwards foregrounded the late nineteenth century as the crucial period for the formation of caste in its modern form through the manifold effects of British colonial knowledge production and governance, such as classification and enumeration (Appadurai, 1993; Cohn, 1987; Pinney, 1990). More recent research has offered a strong riposte to the more extreme claims of epistemic rupture made in this scholarship by being more attentive to Indian actors and precolonial history (e.g. Peabody, 2001, Piliavsky, 2015), but the debate nevertheless continues to reflect a marked ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002) in its disinterest in relevant comparative examples from Nepal (see Guneratne, 2023) and Sri Lanka. As I emphasise later, however, Sri Lankan caste scholarship has also largely ignored its Indian counterpart. Of the three groups, only scholars of Nepal demonstrate a strong cross-border scholarly awareness due to their engagement with Indian work.

Colonial state intervention in caste in Sri Lanka differed from India in being, on the one hand, more formalised and sustained over a longer period than in India, and

on the other, in turning in a starkly different direction in the 1830s. I will address these in turn. From the Portuguese onwards, the colonial states in Sri Lanka drew upon precolonial practices that utilised caste as a key source of labour and taxation. Caste-based labour, which was known by the British as ‘compulsory service’, sometimes but not always drew upon ‘traditional’ caste occupations, although the labour assigned to individual castes could change depending on the needs of the state in the district in question. In a similar manner to that described in the Indian scholarship, the colonial states also privileged specific castes for powerful headmen positions, and, especially under the Dutch, passed laws that bound certain castes to their assigned labour. Additionally, the *Thesawalamai*, a Dutch collection of ordinances applying to Jaffna that was passed in 1707, established the legal ownership of members of four castes as slaves. While we do not yet have a good sense of the intellectual history of colonial ideas about caste in Sri Lanka, especially for the Dutch and the Portuguese periods, the long duration of specialised caste-based labour and its organisation, as seen for example in Governor van Rhee’s detailed list of caste duties in Jaffna in 1697, suggest that it would be a mistake to presume that caste identities only ‘solidified’ in the nineteenth century, more so as the British decided to withdraw from intervening in caste in the 1830s.

When the British took over the Dutch territories in 1796 they were divided in their view of compulsory service, with some in government strongly opposed to it and the way in which it reinforced caste identities. Between 1796 and 1832, the British made a number of changes to its operation (Mendis, 1956, vol. 1, p. 234, and vol. 2, p. 289; Samaraweera, 1969, p. 220), and in 1832 the Commission of Eastern Inquiry, conducted by W.M.G. Colebrooke and C.H. Cameron, emphasised local hostility towards it and recommended its abolition (Casinader et al., 2018; Mendis, 1956; Samaraweera, 1969)—although this decision did not apply to royal villages, villages granted to an individual, and temple villages in the Hill Country (Kendrick, 1992, pp. 194–195). Criticisms of compulsory service, from both native Sri Lankans and colonial officials, drew on economic and ethical arguments, as well as a set of views about social identification that prefigured the ethnoreligious theory. As Colebrooke wrote:

The civil institutions of the Cingalese, who profess the religion of Bhood [Buddha] are obviously derived from Hindu origin. The possession of their lands on tenures of service, and the division of people into classes, according to their various trades or occupations, subsist also among the Malabars [Tamils], and probably prevailed throughout the continent of India before the Mahomedan conquests; but the abolition of the religious distinctions of caste has constituted a marked peculiarity of the Bhoodists, which drew on them the hostility of the Brahmins, and produced the religious wars which depopulated the country and led to the settlement of the Malabars in the northern district of the island. The civil distinctions of caste have doubtless originated in an attempt to introduce a division of labour, and these distinctions have been

rendered hereditary from the privileges acquired by particular castes, and by the practice of assigning lands for the conditional performance of labour or service. (Mendis, 1956, p. 25)

Changing views of caste in Sri Lanka also reflected a growing conceptual ‘partitioning’ of Sri Lanka from India (Sivasundaram, 2023). Rogers (1994) has argued that caste was not seen as subsidiary to ethnicity prior to this time, that British perceptions of caste in India and Sri Lanka were similar until the 1830s (2004a, pp. 76–77), and that the abolition of compulsory service was accompanied by a perception that caste ‘was not a legitimate form of social identification’ (Rogers, 2004a, p. 53), leading to little official discussion of, or collection of data about, caste. This situation continued after Independence, an important consequence of which has been the absence of official caste categories like those of India. (These points should not be taken to mean that the colonial and postcolonial states ceased to have any relationship with caste, although it is not possible to address this here.) Also worth noting is that this different course was partly motivated by ideas from India itself, as the notion of caste as a Hindu phenomenon was circulating widely by the mid nineteenth century (e.g. Meigs, Poor and Howland, 1853; Tennent, 1860, vol 1, pp. 425, 530).

However, even by the early twentieth century the concept of entirely different and incommensurate caste systems had not yet become habitualised, as shown by two key pieces of evidence. The first is the fact that the British continued to view certain castes as analogues of each other across the ethnic divide. In a short booklet submitted to Governor Robert Wilmot-Horton in 1832, at the time of the commission, a headman named A. de Saram wrote that ‘The distinction of Castes among the Malabars in the Island is similar to that of the L. [lowland?] Singhalese almost in every respect’ (1832, p. 7).⁴ Moreover, Tamil caste names were used to refer to their perceived Sinhalese counterparts into the twentieth century. Various scholars have noted the use of forms of the word ‘Vellalar’ to refer to Govigamas, as seen in Colebrooke’s report on the administration of Ceylon: ‘The highest and most esteemed caste is that of Vellales or Goyas’ (Mendis, 1956, p. 26; see also Peebles, 1995, p. 45; Rogers, 2004, pp. 75–76; Tennent, vol. I, p. 426). Less noted is the fact that ‘Chandos’—a Dutch derivation of the Tamil Sandar, a caste associated with toddy tapping—was used for the Sinhalese Durawas, who were similarly associated with that occupation, or that the Tamil Karaiyars and Sinhalese Karavas were also viewed as equivalent (Rogers, 2004, pp. 75–76). With regard to the use of ‘Vellalar’ in particular, Meyer has noted that although this practice has not been investigated, it has important implications for the development of caste and ethnicity: ‘A systematic study of the occurrence of the term could shed light on the consolidation of the caste, and on the affirmation of Sinhala consciousness versus the Tamil’ (2014, pp. 25–26). Meyer suggests that it may have been due to the British following the earlier Dutch practice ‘which

⁴Although the title of this document states it was submitted in 1832, a reference (p. 8) to the abolition of compulsory service in 1833 suggests that it was later than this, or edited subsequently.

underlined similarities between Tamil and Sinhala caste structure' (Meyer, 2014; see also Dewasiri, 2008, p. 189), or that 'the Kandyans were already using the term at the time of the Nayakkar dynasty' (Meyer, 2014, pp. 25–26). However, there is some evidence that the Portuguese also did the same (Queyroz, 1992, vol. 3, p. 1089, cited in Peebles, 1995, p. 45).

The second piece of evidence is the fact that the most significant caste work to emerge from Sri Lanka during this period paid little attention to the ethnoreligious theory at all. Hocart (1950) placed the king at the centre of a sacrificial system in which all other castes, rather than only the Brahman, are treated as priests with the responsibility to conduct rituals to remove pollution. While Hocart, like Dumont, traced the origins of caste to the Vedas (Hocart, 1950, pp. 22–23), he also drew upon Hindu and Buddhist texts without discrimination and noted that the 'The Tamils of the North of Ceylon have much the same castes [as the Sinhalese]: the kings are extinct, the brahmans and merchants imported, so that the farmers again are the highest indigenous caste; then come the low castes' (p. 4). Although Hocart was responding directly to the prominent racial and occupational theories of caste during the late colonial period, his work has had its greatest impact in critiques of Dumont's subsequent theory of caste as an ideological Hindu phenomenon. Ironically, those who have made the most use of Hocart's work (e.g. Dirks, 1987; Quigley, 1993) have overlooked the Sri Lankan context from which his evidence was drawn, while few scholars in Sri Lanka itself have engaged with it.

A Critique of the Ethnoreligious Theory

In this section I argue that the ethnoreligious theory is flawed in a number of ways, the result of which has been to direct attention away from, first, the available Sri Lankan evidence (and recognition of its lacunae), and second, from other highly relevant bodies of research, particularly caste research from outside Sri Lanka in which many of the issues raised by the Sri Lankan context have already been debated. The ethnoreligious theory and the research that has been conducted in Sri Lanka exist in a recursive relationship that has produced a closed system with no apparent questions remaining to answer. As I deconstruct the principles of the theory, however, it will become apparent that they point outwards, away from caste and towards other strongly held assumptions about religion, ethnicity and the nation. To move beyond the ethnoreligious theory of caste it is also therefore necessary to rethink these categories, and I have tried to suggest ways in which we can do this.

Religion

An informed reader may perhaps by this point be bemused that I have yet to mention the voluminous work on caste and religion from elsewhere. On the one hand, this literature has produced many nuanced discussions of the relationship between caste and Hinduism (e.g. Fuller, 1988), including non- or anti-caste movements (Lorenzen, 1987) and critical investigations into the historical processes by which caste became

seen as Hindu (Viswanath, 2015). On the other hand, it has explored the apparent tension between caste and other religions such as Christianity (e.g. Mosse, 2012), Islam (Ahmad, 1978; Levesque, 2023), Sikhism (Jodhka, 2024), and Jainism (Cort, 2004), all of which are popularly understood to be, like Buddhism, opposed to caste due to an ideology of egalitarianism. Winslow (2003–2004) has argued that anthropologists have often misrecognised the particularities of Sri Lankan villages due to the influence of Indian village studies. When it comes to caste, however, views of India are largely divorced from empirical evidence—the ‘book view’ without the book. Thus, we find replicated a frustratingly outdated and static concept of the ‘Indian Hindu model’ of caste which has little bearing on what has been written on this topic over the past several decades.

Two examples of this will be sufficient. First, in contrast to its depiction in the ethnoreligious theory, the ‘classical’ four-fold *varna* scheme is not held identically and universally by Hindus throughout India, but is rather a set of ideas and practices that, where found at all, are held in varying ways and are often the subject of much disagreement. Meanwhile, concepts of *varna* have in fact played a role in Sri Lanka, as seen in the association between Govigamas and the Vaishyas (Gombrich, 1971, p. 297), between Vellalars and Sudras (Pfaffenberger, 1982), and between Karavas and Kshatriyas (Roberts, 1982). Second, the assumption that Brahmans are always the ‘highest’ caste is not the case (Quigley, 1993, pp. 54–86), and, as in Sri Lanka, there are Indian regions in which Brahmins are a relatively small population. The historical presence of Brahmans in different parts of Sri Lanka among both Tamils and Sinhalese (McGilvray, 2008, p. 84; Obeyesekere, 2015) also demonstrates that their contemporary absence is historically contingent and should not be treated merely as an essential characteristic of Sinhalese or Tamils. Rather than approaching these topics as examples of the ‘incomplete’ (and thus anomalous) nature of caste in Sri Lanka, there are more relevant (and interesting) questions to ask about how these ideas and practices have been transmitted, who has adopted them, and how they have been locally interpreted.

Besides demonstrating a lack of familiarity with the ethnographic evidence from Sri Lanka and elsewhere, the ethnoreligious theory also employs a restrictive concept of religions as static, transcultural and transhistorical essences—to borrow the terminology of Asad’s famous critique (1993, p. 28)—with transparent theologies that have a unidirectional effect on human behaviour. What is striking about this is that there is a strong thread of scholarship on religious pluralism within Sri Lanka itself, most prominently concerning the interface between Buddhism and Hinduism (de Alwis, 2018; Goonasekera, 2007; Pfaffenberger, 1979; Obeyesekere, 1984; Whitaker, Rajasingham-Senanayake and Pathmanesan, 2022). Furthermore, the focus on theological correctness, which posits any caste practices of Buddhists as inauthentic, imposes an emic normative judgement as an analytical category while overlooking a wider literature on the complex relationship between caste and Buddhism (e.g. Samuels, 2007a; Silva, 2017). The notion of anti-caste Buddhism also needs to be related to the modern development of the notion that Buddhism is an inherently pacifistic religion

that has, in the words of the Buddhist reformer Angarika Dharmapala, ‘made Asia mild’ (Frydenlund, 2017).

What is more relevant from an anthropological perspective is not simply whether and how Buddhists practice caste—and there is sufficient evidence of this not to doubt it—but how Buddhists understand caste in relation to Buddhism. For example, Weeratunga (2002, pp. 24–26) argues that discrimination against Rodis cannot solely be understood as secular, because it is justified on the basis that they not only take animal life by hunting but allegedly conducted human sacrifices to their deity in the past, practices that were anathematised on the basis of Buddhist morality. Elsewhere, Silva (2017, pp. 9–10) has noted that the concept of karma is used to explain and even legitimise caste and other inequalities. A comparative example of the need to move beyond assumptions of the consequences of egalitarianism is particularly evident in the work on caste and Islam. Initially preoccupied with the ‘paradox’ of the practice of caste despite an apparent lack of ideological justification (which was considered to be solely Hindu), early researchers argued that among Muslims caste was instead connected to secular matters of wealth, prestige, and honour (Ahmad, 1978). Breaking out of this framework, more recent work has highlighted ways in which South Asian Muslims understand caste and caste identities through concepts other than egalitarianism but which are also understood as Islamic (e.g. Bellamy, 2021; Rathore, 2023). In Pakistan, an association between stigmatising sanitation work and ‘low-caste’ Christians (see Butt, 2023) is justified on the grounds that Christianity, unlike Islam, does not require its adherents to be ‘pure’ for ritual contexts (Aqeel and Gill, 2021, pp. 21–22). Mosse’s work on caste and Christianity, which comprises one of the most astute critiques of these issues, applies across the so-called egalitarian and anti-caste religions:

Rather than framing the issue in terms of the nature of caste among Indian Christians, it is often more fruitful to ask about the Christian influence on the experience of caste; or instead of asking whether or how Christianity in India has accommodated caste (a missiological question), to ask how caste has accommodated Christianity as part of its particular cultural politics (an ethnographic question). (Mosse, 2012, p. 59)

Ethnicity

Another step towards moving beyond the ethnoreligious theory would be to undertake an actively comparative analysis of the putative caste systems while simultaneously identifying empirical gaps. As noted above, several scholars have identified similarities between Tamil Hindu and Sinhalese Buddhist caste systems in the existence of analogous castes and a roughly tripartite structure of numerically and socioeconomically dominant landholding Govigamas and Vellalars, mid-status fishing and artisan castes, and low-status service castes (as well as Rodis). Although remaining within the ethnoreligious framework, there are benefits to this approach, which raises

a range of comparative issues such as intercaste service relationships, historically known as *kuḍimakkal* in Tamil and *tōvil* in Sinhala. Such an approach would also shine light on the large gaps in the ethnographic record; for example, almost nothing has been written on *tōvil* beyond a short 1965 article by U.A. Gunasekera.

However, this approach remains restricted by its conceptualisation of ethnicity. Here it is necessary to note that ethnicity and religion have not been treated analogously in Sri Lankan scholarship, because the element of plural interaction present in religious research is largely absent from that on ethnicity. Given the large amount of attention paid to ethnicity since the start of the civil war—and historical critiques of primordialist nationalist arguments about the antiquity of contemporary ethnic identities (e.g. Nissan and Stirrat, 1990; Rogers, 1994, 2004a, 2004b)—this might appear to be a counterintuitive claim, but a closer look at the ethnographic record will demonstrate, as Spencer noted almost two decades ago, the lack of research on the ‘everyday work of ethnicity... the working through of issues of similarity and difference in work and the economy, kinship, or religious practice’ (2007, pp. 163–164). The post-Barthian debate around ethnicity as a relational production that has led to nuanced studies such as Baumann (1996) has had, with few exceptions (most notably Davis’s 2020 of language ideologies in Kandyan schools; also see Gaasbeek 2010; Sykes 2018), relatively little influence on the persistent division of Sri Lankan research along ethnic lines, of which caste is perhaps only the most prominent (and rationalised) example. When ethnic interaction *is* the focus, it is most often conceptualised as a property produced in areas where ethnic ‘culture zones’ (Sykes, 2018, pp. 119–162) meet, leading to what Yalman (1962) termed ‘shatter zones’, rather than in the everyday forms of contact that occur throughout Sri Lanka.

If a straightforward comparison of assumed caste systems would reproduce this conceptualisation of ethnicity, other evidence (although slim) makes the systems approach problematic by demonstrating that the putative caste systems are *not* impermeable to each other, as the ethnoreligious theory presupposes. Although Ryan (1953, p. 139) suggested that in Colombo Sinhalese would ‘choose to remain ignorant of [a Tamil’s caste], probably assuming it to be Vellāla unless the contrary were known’, other evidence shows that Sinhalese and Tamils do sometimes interact with each other on the basis of caste, either by employing service castes across the ethnic divide (McGilvray, 1974; Piyaarathne, 2018, pp. 157–160; Ryan, 1953, p. 141), or by propagating a shared view of caste hierarchy, as demonstrated by the double minoritisation briefly noted by Silva, Thanges and Sivapragasam (2009, p. 105) in their chapter on a community of largely Tamil Paraiyar and Chakkiliyar sanitation workers in majority-Sinhalese Kandy. Here it would appear that Tamils and Sinhalese share a notion of pollution. Even more significantly, there is also evidence that some ‘analogous’ castes have viewed each other as part of the same caste group, complicating the notion of a hard ethnic boundary between them. Until at least the 1980s, for example, there existed an organisation called the All-Ceylon Kshatriya Maha Sabai whose members included both Tamil Karaiyars and Sinhalese Karavas (Esler, 2021, p. 238). Similarly, an organisation called the Ceylon Vishvakarma Union, which was

still active during McGilvray's fieldwork (2008, p. 212), encompassed not only Tamil artisan castes (Kollar blacksmiths, Tattar goldsmiths, and Tatchar carpenters), but also the Sinhalese Navandanna, all of whom were considered to be descendants of the god Vishvakarma (Ratnawira, 1909).

Although it is evident that all of these issues need to be researched in greater detail, they immediately show that the notion of impermeable ethnoreligious caste systems is unfeasible. What difference *does* ethnicity make, then? Placing caste within a relational concept of ethnicity helps to think about this, and draws attention to the ethnicisation of caste from the 1830s onwards. On a national level, there is a shared public denial and rejection of caste as an undesirable phenomenon. While this public discourse can be found across South Asia, the Sri Lankan state pays relatively little official attention to caste. Sri Lanka's 1978 constitution proscribes discrimination on the basis of caste, but the only legislation addressing this is the 1957 Prevention of Social Disabilities Act, which has rarely been implemented. Neither is caste very visible in public politics (Uyangoda, 2000, p. 18), although it is occasionally mobilised as an electoral asset (Jayanntha, 1992, Jiggins, 1979, Peiris, 2021) and appears to have played a role in the formation of both the JVP and the LTTE (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 1993; Obeyesekere, 1974; Moore, 2021). This shared public antipathy towards caste has been incorporated into the production of ethnic identity and difference, and both Sinhalese and Tamils have denied or suppressed caste (Silva, 1999).

Among Tamils, the extension of Tamilness to 'lower' castes was a process that was still incomplete in the 1970s (Pfaffenberger, 1990, pp. 82–83; Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 1993, p. 256), and was ultimately catalysed by a 'politics of defensive unity' (Pfaffenberger 1990) that suppressed anti-caste activism. This process appears to parallel the extension of Hinduism to Indian Dalits in the first half of the twentieth century (Lee, 2021), and in fact during my own research in Mannar I have heard Tamil Hindus occasionally refer to themselves as 'Tamil people' (*tamilākkaḷ*) in contrast to Christians and others, a practice previously noted by Suseendrarajah in Jaffna (1980, p. 347). Public discussion of caste was later discouraged by fear of the LTTE and on the grounds that it would undermine Tamil solidarity and the cause of independence. Among the Sinhalese, a discourse of modernity that privileges social, democratic egalitarianism—linked to Buddhism—has downplayed and deferred caste (Abeyasekera, 2021, pp. 11, 30; Douglas, 2017; Silva, 1999; Uyangoda, 2000a, 2000b). On the one hand, elements of a 'national' ethnic culture have been divorced from their earlier categorisation as low-status caste traditions (Douglas, 2017, 2019; Reed, 2010). On the other hand, caste is treated as a property of 'low' castes, resulting in an 'upper-caste' 'casteless subjectivity' in much the same way as has been described in India (Douglas, 2017; Deshpande, 2013; Subramanian, 2015). This is reflected in W.M.A. De Silva's 2018 article on the phenomenon of Sinhalese replacing 'low-caste' names with those that have either 'a-caste' or 'upper-caste' connotations. Although De Silva notes that this decision is made to avoid caste stigma, he does not directly identify the source of that stigma as coming from members of other castes. Caste is also externalised as a property of Tamils, in a manner that resonates with Harrison's

argument that cultural ‘differences’ may be denied resemblances, specifically the configuration which he calls ‘difference-as-inferiority’, in which ‘the cultural Other is made to represent censored and disclaimed attributes of the Self’ (2001, p. 357). In this regard, caste was used by Sinhalese politicians in the 1950s and 1960s as a reason to refuse Tamils regional autonomy (Bastin, 1997, p. 426; Pfaffenberger, 1990, pp. 86–87), and it continues to emerge as criticism of Tamils in newspapers, as seen in H.L.P. Mahindapala’s series of articles on Jaffna in the *Sunday Observer* from 2020 to 2022, such as ‘Bad news: Vellalars are back in Jaffna’ (2020).

Beyond the Enclosure

While the two preceding sections argued against the presumption of enclosed caste systems by highlighting flaws in the theory’s conceptualisations of religion and ethnicity, I now turn briefly to the absences in the theory to suggest two further factors that continue to weaken the notion of ethnoreligious enclosure, both of which demand a stronger connection to historical evidence and arguments. First, the similarities noted between the putative systems suggest the need for greater consideration of the way in which caste concepts and practices have travelled from India to Sri Lanka and from Sri Lanka to India—as demonstrated by the financial support sent in the first half of the twentieth century by Jaffna Tamils to the Indian scholar Maraimalai Adigal, who proposed that Tamil civilisation was based on Vellalar rather than Brahmin custom and identity (Vaithees, 2015)—and throughout Sri Lanka itself. Second, there is an even stronger need to examine the material dimensions of caste, broadly defined. Although one of these dimensions—the fact that caste status is often associated with landownership—is clearly visible in the caste scholarship, the economic dimensions of caste in agrarian relations have been little interrogated (see Gunesinghe 2007), even less the relationship between caste and the market economy (cf. Mosse, 2020b). In contrast, much historical work on the role of the state (at least from the Dutch period onwards) exists, and topics such as compulsory service and caste-based slavery shine light on the thinness of the notion of caste as an essentialised property of ethnicity (see Pfaffenberger, 1990). These issues will also help to reconnect Sri Lankan caste studies to its Indian counterpart, where the role of the state has been of preeminent importance. In comparison with India, the contemporary Sri Lankan context is defined by the apparent absence of state intervention, an absence that is shared across the ethnoreligious caste systems.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that an integrated approach to caste in Sri Lanka—a field of caste research that does not collapse ceaselessly into the framework of parallel ethnoreligious caste systems that I have identified above—is only possible if Sri Lankanist scholars recognise and reflect upon the assumptions that underlie this theory. Similar assumptions about the nature of caste have played a key role in the larger Indian scholarship, although they have been critiqued more sharply and extensively in ways that have been highly productive. I hope to have demonstrated that

this can also be the case in Sri Lanka, as the interrogation of ideas about caste lead to further interrogation of other concepts that are central to how Sri Lankan research has conceptualised its subjects.

The work of an integrated approach to caste might beneficially begin not with differences but with similarities and connections, such as the existence of analogous castes, a notion of caste status invested in land ownership, the withdrawal of the state following the abolition of compulsory service, a public sphere within which caste is largely suppressed, and so on. More broadly, this approach to caste in Sri Lanka would be attentive to local and national contexts, contemporary and historical. It would treat religion and ethnicity not as enclosures but as complexes of concepts, discourses and practices that are continuously produced, transformed, shared and rejected, not only between self-identified ethnic groups in Sri Lanka but also between people throughout South Asia and beyond. Indeed, the Sri Lankan evidence suggests that one way of rejuvenating the comparative study of caste across the subcontinent might be to extend Mosse's work (2020a, 2020b) to consider how caste is perceived and produced in relation to a network of discursive enclosures that must be understood in relation to each other and to the secondary categories enclosed within each.

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Perspectives on Caste and Militant Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka: The LTTE and Resistance Against Vellalah Hegemony

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Abstract

By analyzing the intersection of caste and militant Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka, this article considers whether the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was a transformative force that disrupted the caste order, including the hegemony of the Vellalah caste. Tamil political leadership in the early twentieth century was dominated by Vellalah elites who carefully upheld caste privileges. The emergence of the LTTE in the late 1970s, led largely by non-Vellalah militants, disrupted this order and asserted a revolutionary Tamil identity transcending caste. Drawing on Vellalah-centered ethnographic fieldwork and testimonies, as well as media accounts and LTTE documents, the study scrutinizes how caste was both repressed and reconstituted within the militant nationalist project. The findings of this study suggest that the LTTE pursued radical measures to dismantle caste hierarchies via outlawing discrimination, imposing egalitarian discipline, valorizing martyrdom, and encouraging inter-caste marriage. These interventions were perceived by Vellalahs as having destabilized their hegemony and enabled wider social and political participation of intermediate and depressed castes. Yet caste has persisted subtly through private practices, silent discourses and enduring social divisions. The study maintains that while the LTTE's actions destabilized Tamil caste structures, they failed in permanently altering the underlying logic of the caste system, leaving a legacy marked by both disruption and the resilience of caste.

Keywords

Caste, Sri Lankan Tamil, Militant Nationalism, LTTE, Vellalah Hegemony, Depressed castes/Marginalized castes

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Introduction

In Tamil nationalist discourse, caste has often been silenced by elites who regard its discussion as divisive, if not altogether treacherous (Cheran, 2001; Thiranagama, 2011; Jeyaraj, 2015; Fuglerud, 2024).¹ Southern² and Western³ scholars, on the other hand, have emphasized its intersection with nationalism,⁴ unsettling Tamil elites who fear this interpretation weakens an imagined unity. Both these positions, however, overlook the lived and shifting dynamics of caste within Tamil society.

This article attempts to nuance these arguments by examining perspectives regarding how and why the LTTE—predominantly led by members of intermediate, non-dominant castes⁵ and whose ranks were disproportionately filled by depressed castes⁶—officially rejected caste, while at the same time mobilizing it for their own purposes. It sheds light on the interplay between LTTE-led militant nationalism and Tamil caste dynamics by focusing on Vellalah interpretations of the movement's efforts to overturn caste, and how this project was perceived to be a deliberate deconstruction of longstanding Vellalah hegemony.⁷ By focusing on Vellalah interpretations of this phenomenon, the work draws attention to an understudied dynamic within Tamil nationalist debates: resistance to the hegemonic position of the Vellalah. In doing so, the article treats caste as both a silenced contradiction and a structural force.

The nearly three-decade-long civil war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE lasted from 1983 to 2009. While the early years of the conflict involved more than one Tamil nationalist group, the LTTE largely consolidated its dominance

¹Elites are defined here either as national elites who hold political power or local elites (Roberts, 1974: 550) with cultural, social, and caste-based influence positioning their own identity as the prescriptive model of nationhood. See Michael Roberts, "Problems of Social Stratification and the Demarcation of National and Local Elites in British Ceylon," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 33, no. 4 (1974): 549–577.

²Roberts, 1986, 1995, 1998, Mahindapala, 2009, Silva, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2020.

³Russell, 1982, Pfaffenberger, 1981, 1892, 1990, 1994, Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1986, 1990, 1994a, 1994b, 2004, Stokke, 1998, 2006, Schalk 1997, Fuglerud, 1999, 2001, 2004, Bizouras, 2012.

⁴Nationalism, conceived here as a homogenizing, differentiating, and classifying discourse, is unsettled by the internal divisions (class, caste, ethnicity, region, and religion) it seeks to erase (Verdery, 1996, p. 227; Eller, 1999, p. 46, Brass, 1991, p. 46; Chatterjee, 1996, p. 210).

⁵According to Kenneth David, intermediate castes (*Thachar* or carpenters, *Kollar* or blacksmiths, *Thattar* or goldsmiths, *Asari* or masons/stone workers, *Kusavar* or potters, *Karaiyar* and *Mukkuvar* or fishing castes also involved in coastal trade, and other skilled workers such as the *Chaandar* or oil makers) were positioned between the dominant Vellalah caste and the depressed castes, and played a crucial role in maintaining social and ritual order in Jaffna. See Kenneth David, "Hierarchy and Equivalence in Ceylon: Normative Code as Mediator," in *The New Wind: Changing Identities in South Asia*, ed. Kenneth David (Moutan, 1976).

⁶The term "depressed castes" here refers to the so-called *Panchamar* (lit. "the fifth people"), which include the *Vannar* (washers of clothes and cloth), the *Ampatter* (barbers), the *Pallar* (agricultural labourers), the *Nalavar* (toddy tappers) and the *Paraiyar* (drummers). This article uses the terms peripheral castes and marginalized castes interchangeably with depressed castes.

⁷Due to both complexities arising from the author's own subject position and war-time restraints on the discussion and research of caste, the majority of informants interviewed for this work were Vellalah.

from 1986 onwards, through internecine rivalry and the elimination or assimilation of competing militant groups. From 1990 to 1995, the LTTE exercised significant political authority in the Jaffna peninsula, where it established a parallel state structure (Stokke, 1998, 2006). Between 2002 and 2009, key years of the civil war in Sri Lanka, the LTTE positioned itself as the sole representative of Sri Lankan Tamils. The Sri Lankan government's defeat of the LTTE in 2009 prompted a profound reassessment of militant Tamil nationalism.

I collected the data for this study in the Jaffna Peninsula, which is widely regarded as the cultural heartland and intellectual cradle of Sri Lankan Tamils. Jaffna was the birthplace of most elite Tamil political leaders of the twentieth century and the site where all Tamil militant movements first emerged. Crucially, it has also been the arena of numerous caste-related clashes. This study adopts a constructivist and critical qualitative approach to examine caste, situating Vellalah identity within the project of LTTE militant nationalism. Given the political sensitivities of this subject and other field constraints, I was required to take a flexible, pragmatic approach, relying on snowball and convenience sampling across ten sub-regions of Jaffna.⁸ Data collection included semi-structured interviews, non-participant and participant observation, casual conversations, a written student survey, and the use of myself as an informant. In total, thirty-eight interviews and ninety-three student surveys were conducted between 2003 and 2007, supported by extensive informal dialogues and documentary analysis.⁹ Textual sources—both historical and contemporary—were analyzed alongside oral narratives to trace hegemonic and subversive constructions of caste and identity. As a Vellalah researcher, my subject position played a central role in this research, resulting in my constant need to negotiate various insider-outsider dynamics. Consequences of this subject position included ease of access to Vellalah interlocutors and obstacles to interviewing other caste communities. Thematic organization of the data was informed by eight themes—politics, leadership, lifestyle, education, land ownership, temple affiliation, intra-Vellalah divides, and inter-caste relations—which emerged inductively from field narratives and literature. Analysis followed a narrative and interpretive-constructivist method, incorporating both the intersubjective and cognitive dimensions of caste identity.

In the first section, I trace the shift from a Vellalah-led nationalist project in the early twentieth-century to the turn to militancy among alienated youth, including those from oppressed castes, in the late 1970s. Next, I show how, by the mid-1980s, the LTTE consolidated its ascendancy by eliminating rival groups and reconfiguring leadership

⁸The research covered samples from the ten sub-regions in Jaffna, as Sivathamby recommended based on dominance and different caste relationships: 1) Vadamarachy, 2) Tenmarachy, 3) The islands, 4) Jaffna town, 5) Nallur-Kopay, 6) Manipay, 7) Tellippalai-Chunnakam, 8) Chulipuram-Pannakam, 9) Kankesanthurai-Pallali, 10) Vaddukkoddai-Araly. See Karthigesu Sivathamby, "Tamil Militants," in *The Challenge in South Asia: Development, Democracy, and Regional Cooperation*, eds. Ponna Wignaraja and Akmal Hussain (Sage Publications, 1989).

⁹This article draws on empirical findings from my doctoral research, completed in 2015. While the core analysis remains grounded in the original PhD study, subsequent updates and revisions have been incorporated only to a limited extent.

along non-Vellalah lines. Then, I examine the LTTE's de facto administration in the Jaffna Peninsula between 1990 and 1995, detailing the group's radical measures instituted to curb caste discrimination and reorder social hierarchies. The article then turns to the LTTE's internal organizational practices, where, according to my informants, a performed egalitarianism coexisted with subtle continuities of rank and habitus. Finally, I analyze Vellalah responses in this period—ranging from outward compliance to criticism, emigration, and selective alignment with LTTE authority—and assess how, after 2009, elements of Vellalah influence reasserted themselves within a reconfigured post-war field.

Historical Background

Caste abolition has been a platform for all Tamil political entities in modern Sri Lanka, with consensus at the official level that caste should be eliminated. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Jaffna Youth Congress (JYC) became the first organized Tamil movement to address caste-based discrimination, inspired by Indian nationalist politics and ideas from leading English newspapers (Russell, 1982; Hoole, Somasundaram, Kopalasingham, and Thiranaganama, 1992; Kadirgamar, 2004). These youth were deeply influenced by developments in India due to cultural ties and proximity.¹⁰ The leaders of the JYC, who came primarily from Vellalah and Protestant Christian backgrounds, advocated liberal and progressive views on caste, yet their reformist stance exposed the paradox of elite-led nationalism, where calls for equality are articulated from within privileged identities, thereby reproducing the very hierarchies they sought to dismantle.

By the 1950s and 1960s, the Communist Party (CP) also advocated caste eradication, though with limited immediate effect in caste-conscious Jaffna (Senthilvel and Raveendran, 1988; Senthilvel, 2003).¹¹ In its effort to gain a foothold in northern Sri Lanka, the CP mobilised the resistance of the depressed castes. The Peking Branch, in particular spearheaded significant temple-entry struggles in the 1970s, directly confronting caste-based exclusion in religious life.¹² Although often celebrated as a radical grassroots victory against Vellalah supremacy, this mobilization was short-lived, curtailed by entrenched elite resistance and the absence of sustained organizational structures to translate symbolic gains into long-term social transformation.¹³

¹⁰For more detail on the Jaffna Youth Congress, see Silan Kadirgamar, "Jaffna Youth Radicalism: The 1920s and 30s," paper presented at the International Center for Ethnic Studies (ICES), Colombo, Sri Lanka. And Noolaham: https://www.noolaham.org/wiki/index.php/Handy_Perinbanayagam

¹¹It was named as a 'low caste party'. See S.K. Senthilvel, *Pothuvudamai Iyakkamum Tholar Karthigesanum* (Puthiya Poomi Publication 2003). The CP further divided into two in 1964 to form the Peking wing and the Moscow wing.

¹²According to Pfaffenberger, in 1967 only 17 per cent of the 1,309 Hindu temples in Jaffna were open to depressed castes. See "Introduction: The Sri Lankan Tamils," in *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and identity*, eds. Chelvadurai Manogaran and Bryan Pfaffenberger (Westview Press, 1994), 144.

¹³Ironically, in the new alignment of caste politics between South and North, the SLFP supported depressed castes while the UNP allied with Vellalah elites. This paradox led critics to note that

In the post-independence era, the Federal Party (FP), dominated by Vellalah leaders, incorporated caste abolition into its program, though again often more as a rhetorical commitment than a transformative practice. In 1976, the Vellalah-led Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) signed the Vaddukoddai Resolution, which explicitly asserted the abolition of caste in a future Tamil Eelam and declared untouchability or caste-based inequality punishable by law, a stance that was subsequently adopted by the LTTE.¹⁴ Although the TULF made tentative efforts toward promoting caste equality, genuine engagement was obstructed by anxieties about losing Vellalah support and by the elite's desire to preserve caste-based privileges. At that time, members of depressed castes were often not even regarded by elites as authentic "Tamils" due to widespread illiteracy and notions of impurity (Pfaffenberger, 1994). From the late 1970s onward, caste became further entangled with Tamil militant nationalism.

Emergence of Tamil Militancy (Late 1970s)

The scholarship on Tamil nationalism has been criticized for its limited attention to the emergence of militancy yet a notable number of studies by Sri Lankan and overseas studies have attempted to fill this gap.¹⁵ Fear of militant gun culture and the difficulty of obtaining reliable information about the LTTE contributed to the paucity of early research. Nationalist portrayals often suppressed internal Tamil contradictions of region, gender, caste, or religion, producing an overly simplistic binary of Sinhalese versus Tamils. The elitist, Vellalah-led nationalist project was increasingly perceived by both some Vellalahs and non-Vellalah youth as an opportunistic collaboration with the Sinhala-led government (Wilson, 2000; Hoole et al., 1992; Thangarajah, 2000, 2003). As a result, in the late 1970s the Tamil nationalist stage began shifting away from educated Vellalah elites, mostly lawyers and businessmen in their fifties and sixties, and towards militant youth (Thambiah, 1986).

Two distinct social groups entered politics during this period. At Jaffna University, math and science students from predominantly Vellalah families, frustrated by government standardization policies and unemployment, radicalized in opposition to both the state and their elders (Wilson, 2000; Thangarajah, 2003; Wickramasinghe, 2006; Thiranagama, 2011; Räsänen, 2015). In contrast, youth from Valvettithurai, an

the struggle against caste oppression was partly sustained by actors aligned with the very elites who upheld it. See Sivasegaram, 2008.

¹⁴"C. that in the state of Tamil Eelam caste shall be abolished and the observance of the pernicious practice of untouchability or inequality of any type based on birth shall be totally eradicated and its observance in any form punished by law." See https://www.sangam.org/FB_HIST_DOCS/vaddukod.htm

¹⁵For scholarship criticized by its lack of attention to militancy, see Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1990, 1994, p. 32, Wilson, 2000, Sumathy, 2001, p. 15, Thangarajah, 2003; Ravindran, 2004; Hoole, 1997; Daniel, 1996. For scholarship that does attend to militancy, see Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1994, 1998; Bose, 1994; Daniel, 1996; Silva, 1999; Cheran, 2001; Sumathy, 2001; Ravindran, 2004; Swamy, 2003; Hoole, 1992, 2001; Thiranagama, 2011; Balasooriya, 2013; Bizziouras, 2012.

area dominated by the Karaiyar caste who were less formally educated, were deeply angered by the caste injustices perpetuated by Vellalah elites (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 1986, 1994a, 1994b; Stokke, 2000; Fuglerud 2004). While both groups opposed the older Vellalah elite, their divergent paths soon collided. Violent clashes elevated the Karaiyar-dominated Valvettithurai faction, displacing the university-based moderate youth and asserting prominence through radicalism, vernacular leadership, and militant violence (Ravindran, 2004; Wickramasinghe, 2006). This marked a paradigm shift, bringing new actors and strategies onto the Tamil nationalist stage, thus profoundly reshaping Jaffna society and destabilizing traditional hierarchies of caste and age (Stokke, 2000, p. 294; Thiranagama, 2011, pp. 216, 226).

Proliferation of Militant Groups (Early 1980s)

Among the militant organizations that proliferated by the early 1980s, many arose from the youth wings of the Vellalah-dominated TULF. In total, nearly forty groups emerged, though estimates vary.¹⁶ Caste was understood to be a factor in membership. Many members of the LTTE were Karaiyar or Mukkuvar. From its inception, the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) declared a commitment to transcending caste boundaries and actively recruited members from depressed castes (Thiranagama, 2011, p. 195). On the other hand, groups like People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) were primarily composed of Vellalah youth. Even geography reflected caste influence. The EPRLF and PLOTE maintained offices in Vellalah-majority localities, while the LTTE focused operations in Karaiyar- and Mukkuvar-dominated areas (Sumathy, 2001; Ravindran, 2004; Thiranagama, 2011). The LTTE's reliance on informal caste-based networks provided an organizational advantage (Stokke, 2000, p. 299). Each movement became locally associated with the caste group that predominated in the organization (Sumathy, 2001; Ravindran, 2004; Thiranagama, 2011).

Interneine clashes were frequent in these years, and the LTTE often targeted rival groups, many of which were Vellalah-led. Informants noted that the LTTE initially resisted caste distinctions but later actively recruited oppressed caste members, some of whom sought to retaliate against Vellalahs for perceived historical harm. In response, some Vellalah elites and militants fled Jaffna, accelerating the erosion of Vellalah dominance. Many middle- and upper-caste youth fled abroad, leaving poorer and depressed caste youth to fill the militant ranks (Daniel, 1996; Fuglerud, 2004, 2024; Stokke, 2000; Ravikumar, 2002; Ravindran, 2004).

From Vellalah Hegemony to LTTE Ascendancy (Mid-1980s Onward)

Through these violent rivalries, the LTTE consolidated power from 1986 onward, wiping out or absorbing groups such as TELO, PLOTE, EPRLF, and later the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS). By the mid-1980s, the LTTE emerged

¹⁶Wilson records thirty-seven militant groups among Tamils (Wilson, 2000, p. 126) and Hellmann Rajanayagam records around forty-two (1998, p. 42).

as the most powerful and dominant group. With a cadre base disproportionately drawn from non-Vellalabs, the LTTE overturned Vellalah dominance in militant politics. In so doing, the movement projected an image of Tamil unity by rejecting caste publicly and incorporating depressed caste cadres. Yet this egalitarianism was only partial—Vellalah influence persisted in civilian politics, temples, and education, even within LTTE-administered areas. In other words, LTTE-led nationalism both challenged and reproduced caste hierarchy by undermining Vellalah hegemony in militant leadership while leaving its social and cultural legacies largely intact.

Deconstructing Caste: The LTTE's Vision of Equality and Justice

The LTTE's association with caste was deeply ambivalent and remains a subject of debate. On the one hand, its leader proclaimed an ambition to abolish caste differences and spoke of creating an egalitarian Tamil society free from entrenched hierarchies. On the other, their interventions often appeared to my interlocutors as less focused upon dismantling caste as a social system and more concerned with toppling the ingrained hegemony of the Vellalah elite, who had long monopolized political, social, economic, and religious power in Jaffna. This ambiguity raises the question of whether the LTTE sought to build a genuinely caste-free society or merely to reorder caste relations in ways that eroded Vellalah hegemony while consolidating its own legitimacy as the bearer of Tamil nationalism.

Evidence suggests that the LTTE aimed to abolish caste-based social injustices, instituting social liberation through both explicit and implicit actions. For nearly three decades, the LTTE was the most powerful militant group to address caste issues in Jaffna. Their approach was often violent, challenging assumptions in Sri Lankan Tamil society (Sivathamby, 1989; Bose, 1994; Thiranagama, 2011). Swamy (1995, p. 69) offers first-hand insights into the ideological tension within the Tamil militant project—when asked how one might lead a “Socialist Eelam” without deep ideological foundations, Swamy reports that Prabhakaran underlined his resolve to eliminate caste differences. The LTTE's political program, designed by Anton Balasingham, articulated a commitment to abolishing all forms of social oppression, including caste. He stated that the LTTE “must fight not only for the political liberation of our oppressed nation, but also for the prosperity of the oppressed classes and our people who are exploited in the name of caste.”¹⁷ Although the LTTE did not have a formal program to reorganize caste, the group implemented laws to punish caste-based offences. Scholars have also noted the LTTE's “silent campaign” against caste, which included penalties for caste assertion, bans on caste-based exclusion in public spaces, and positive discrimination in land allocation (Stokke, 2000; Thiranagama, 2011; Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 1994). The LTTE's Penal Code of 1994 established punishments for caste-based offences.¹⁸

¹⁷For an early articulation of this, see: *Towards a Socialist Tamil Eelam* (1979). <https://www.marxists.org/subject/tamil-eelam/1979/toward-socialist-tamil-eelam.htm>.

¹⁸Interview with an LTTE area leader in Jaffna, 2005. For more on the LTTE's court system, see <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/050227/news/20.html>.

Following the fall of Jaffna to Sri Lankan forces in 1995, the LTTE was forced to retreat to Kilinochchi district, which became its de facto capital. Although my visit to their stronghold in Kilinochchi to study the LTTE court system was thwarted by war-related challenges, the survey I conducted in 2005 among the undergraduates at the University of Jaffna revealed that the LTTE's 'Oruppu law,' or the Penal Code of No. 4 of 1994, emphasized punishment for caste crimes and provided the right to legal recourse for caste discrimination. Section 4 thus reads:

432) a) All are equal by birth; it is a crime and should be punished if they are dishonored by the name of the caste they were born into. Discriminating against someone based on caste or an act against his/her dignity, or by indicating his/her caste and hurting him/her are wrong according to caste abolition.

433) Penalty - If someone has committed the above-mentioned crimes, he/she can be either punished by imprisonment or a fine, for a term up to five years.

434) It is an offense to try to disrupt a love marriage between different castes. The penalty for this offense is imprisonment for up to seven years or a fine.¹⁹

Field testimony confirms that these laws were enforced. In response to an interviewer's question as to whether the struggle had produced lasting reforms to deep-rooted ills like casteism and dowry, Thamilini, head of the LTTE Women's Political Wing, stated: "Now the curse of caste. Within our movement there is no room for caste. We will take strict actions against caste discrimination. We equip our women, through women's groups in every village, with fresh thinking. We develop self-help programs."²⁰

The de facto rule of the LTTE, especially during 1990–1995 period, also had tangible effects on everyday caste practices and interactions in Jaffna society. Community members describe a climate of fear that discouraged any public expression of caste prejudice. A former village headman in an LTTE-administered area recalled even avoiding the word "caste" (*saathi* in Tamil), instead replacing it with words like "race" (*inam*), out of fear of reprisal.²¹ I also observed that caste names disappeared from public use under LTTE rule and were replaced with code terms linked to caste duties.²² Stories abound of immediate punishments for those who violated the LTTE's norms. For instance, there were rumors that individuals who mistreated members of depressed castes were forced to eat in those victims' homes or were detained in underground bunkers as punishment. Such tales, whether invented or true, had a

¹⁹Translation by the author.

²⁰Selected Writings-Chandiravarman Sinnathurai-Eelam Encounters

²¹Interview by author, 26 December 2004.

²²Maramerum akkal, or tree climbing people for the *Pallar* caste, melam adikum akkal or drumming people for the *Nadduvar* caste, Malai kaddum akkal or garland making people for the *Pandaram* caste, ennai ooththum akkal or oil making people for *Sandaar* caste, and meenpidy akkal or fishing people for *Karaiyar*, *Mukkuvar* and *Pattamkaddi* castes. In some cases, more than one coded word was used for the same caste depending on the context; for example, the chemical symbol Na (sodium) was used to denote *Nalavar*, while K (potassium) stood for *Koviar*.

chilling effect on public discourse around caste. Anthropologist Fuglerud described an LTTE-run detention camp in Jaffna, which he called a “concentration camp,” where harsh re-education allegedly took place (1999, p. 53). He argued that LTTE rule reshaped Vellalah identity, as many depressed-caste individuals quietly welcomed its curbs on caste discrimination, while educated, land-owning Vellalahs remained critical but silent out of fear. My 2005 survey similarly indicated that students were aware of LTTE regulations against caste discrimination.²³ This evidence proves that, despite societal silences around caste during this period, caste endured through a coded continuity that re-inscribed inequality even in the name of equality.

The LTTE closely monitored domains of society that embodied Vellalah hegemony, such as leadership, politics, land ownership, education, and religious rituals, and thus directly targeted key aspects of Vellalah identity and its power (Räsänen, 2015; Kuganathan, 2022). The LTTE’s organizational principles also challenged Vellalah hegemony on multiple fronts. First, it empowered depressed castes by actively involving them in the nationalist struggle, thereby dismantling the notion that leadership was an exclusive reservation for the Vellalah. Second, it elevated the concept of martyrdom to the highest status in society, transcending caste, and thus subtly diminishing the social prestige of the traditional Vellalah elite and projecting a reconfigured social hierarchy based on sacrifice rather than birth. Third, the LTTE promoted social programs aimed at breaking mono-caste hegemony, addressing caste injustice, such as the promotion of inter-caste marriages within LTTE cadres and in society. These combined efforts gave the temporary appearance of a repositioned caste order in LTTE-controlled areas.

Marginalized Vellalah Elite

One of the significant transitions in caste dynamics under the LTTE concerned Tamil political leadership. As the local Vellalah elite struggled to maintain its power in the face of militant domination, non-militant Tamil politics faced a leadership vacuum. Throughout the war years, Colombo-based Vellalah intellectuals and cultural nationalists continued to contribute to Tamil political thought through writings and seminars. They were influential in shaping Tamil political discourse and were even viewed with suspicion by Sinhalese observers, who worried about the resurgence of Tamil nationalism via these educated circles. Yet, groups like the LTTE were not receptive to their input; the rebels criticized the English-educated Vellalah for being out of touch with the reality of the struggle and for failing to support the vulnerable in the north. An older Vellalah generation of was criticized for practicing “responsive cooperation” with moderate Sinhalese leaders after independence, instead of fully backing Tamil separatism (Wilson, 2000; Jeyaraj, 2015). The LTTE went so far as to label some Vellalah politicians as *traitors* if they cooperated with Sinhalese-led governments against Tamil militant interests (Trawick, 2007; Tobias & Thiranagama,

²³Field interviews in Jaffna (2005–2007). See also LTTE’s Tamil Eelam Penal Code (1994) which criminalized caste discrimination (Oruppu Law No. 4 of 1994).

2011; Jeyaraj, 2015).²⁴ In such an atmosphere, many Vellalah felt politically orphaned, alienated by the LTTE and its supporters for their caste privilege and perceived disloyalty, and not fully embraced by the Sri Lankan state either.

Many prominent Vellalah politicians in Parliament were marginalized or silenced. Assassinations of Vellalah TULF politicians by the LTTE, with notable killings occurring between 1975 and 2006, left many Vellalahs feeling resentful.²⁵ The dominance of the LTTE suppressed emerging factions among the Vellalahs and exacerbated divisions based on their positions toward militancy. Some Vellalahs saw their roles diminished and their lives threatened, and so chose to emigrate during this period. Those who remained in Jaffna felt isolated and often avoided involvement in LTTE-led activities. In the process, they became spectators viewing the struggle from a distance rather than as key participants. Some consented to become figureheads under LTTE influence. Although a few continued to support the LTTE ideologically from afar, their enthusiasm eventually waned. While some Vellalahs agreed that violent struggle was necessary, many did not welcome the ascendancy of Karaiyar leadership within the nationalist movement and framed that frustration as alternative concerns. One of my informants, a 50-year-old Vellalah, described this issue as, fundamentally, a generational clash.²⁶ Another, a 61-year-old member of the same community, expressed disdain that the younger, less-educated LTTE leaders had displaced the old guard.²⁷ The sudden shift in power under the LTTE deeply shook Vellalah sensibilities.

Reengineering Residential Patterns and Property Ownership

Another striking aspect of the LTTE-led reengineering of caste was its effect on residential patterns and property ownership. Traditionally, Vellalah families occupied the center of the village or the heart of urban centers, whereas depressed castes lived in more peripheral or less developed areas. The war and LTTE policies disrupted this arrangement. A commonly cited story in Jaffna is that the LTTE confiscated houses abandoned by emigrated Vellalahs and allocated them to the families of LTTE martyrs. Whether by policy or circumstance, many Vellalah houses in Jaffna ended up occupied by non-Vellalah groups during the 1990s (Fuglerud, 2024). For many families, living in sturdy, centrally located houses, or “cemented houses,” was a first. Another informant, a 50-year-old Vellalah woman and a diaspora returnee, explained to me that she was dismayed to find her family home occupied by another family

²⁴Postwar usage of the term extends beyond caste boundaries, functioning as a label for Tamils perceived to be aligned with the Sinhala-dominated state.

²⁵In 1975, the ex-mayor of Jaffna, Alfred Duraiappah, was killed by the LTTE. Then in 1989, TULF Member of Parliament (MP) A. Amirthalingam was killed, followed by the killings of ex-TULF MP V. Yogeswaran in 1989, ex-TULF Mayor Sarojini Yogeswaran in 1998, ex-TULF Mayor Pon Sivapalan in 1998, ex-TULF leader Dr. Neelan Thiruchelvam in 1999, and TNA/TULF MP Raviraj in 2006. For more complete assassinations see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_assassinations_of_the_Sri_Lankan_Civil_War

²⁶Interview by author, 05 April 2006

²⁷Interview by author, 19 September 2006

who refused to leave, claiming an LTTE leader had given them the key.²⁸ Such cases were common after massive displacement events. The expulsion of Muslims from Jaffna in 1990 and the capture of Jaffna by the Sri Lankan Army in 1995 both led to waves of population movement. Properties were frequently entrusted to the LTTE when owners fled, especially since the Vellalah middle class was heavily tapped to finance the LTTE's war efforts (Fugleurd, 2024; Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 1994). In some instances, Vellalah families hired intermediate and depressed-caste individuals informally to look after their property in their absence, a practice cynically described by some Vellalah locals as "letting the thieves guard the bank." Vellalahs who remained in Jaffna largely disapproved of these new living arrangements and of the LTTE's enforced social mixing, as it conflicted with deeply internalized norms of social privilege and the status quo.

Professionalization of Caste-based Occupations

The LTTE's rule also accelerated changes that had begun modestly under earlier communist movements. One area was the professionalization of caste-based occupations. Traditionally, certain jobs in Jaffna were tied to specific intermediate castes who provided personal services within Vellalah homes, such as barbers and washermen, and were compensated in kind or with small wages, reinforcing a patron-client dependency. During the late 1960s, leftist movements and communist activists had started to push these service providers to operate from independent shops and be paid in cash, thereby breaking the personalized bondage of caste service (Senthilvel & Raveendran, 1988; Senthilvel, 2003). The LTTE solidified this trend. Barbers opened salons and washermen set up laundry businesses, serving clients of all castes as paying customers. By institutionalizing these roles through formal wage labor, the LTTE aimed to reduce caste-based stigmas, hierarchies and dependency upon Vellalah clients. Vellalahs grudgingly acknowledged that this approach lifted the dignity of those service castes, but they also noted economic disruptions. In addition, some older-generation service providers resisted the change. For example, a washerman explained to me that working in the traditional way ensured a steady income, since "people are less likely to take clothes to a laundry than to hand them to a familiar visiting *dhoby*." While many Tamils adapted to the changes enforced by the LTTE, those who valued the old social arrangements did not.

Importantly, the psychological disposition towards caste stratification was never fully addressed by either the LTTE or the prior Vellalah-dominated political parties or entities. Many existing inter-caste relationships had been paternalistic and caste-centered, and even after their formal end they left behind animosities and prejudices. Despite its efforts, the LTTE could only enforce behavioral changes, which could not immediately rewrite deeply internalized cultural attitudes. Thus, even as certain social practices evolved, like paying a barber instead of treating him as an obliged serf, the *habitus* of caste, based on superiority and inferiority, persisted in subtler forms (Bourdieu, 1977).

²⁸Interview by author, 18 September 2006

Promoting Mixed-Caste Marriages

One of the LTTE's most radical social interventions was its campaign to encourage mixed-caste marriages, thereby directly challenging an age-old pillar of caste segregation: endogamy. An informant, a 68-year-old Vellalah man, described a meeting in the late 1970s where senior LTTE members vowed to dismantle Vellalah hegemony in part by facilitating inter-caste unions.²⁹ Top LTTE leaders set the example: Velupillai Prabhakaran and S. P. Tamilchelvan, the leader of the group's political wing, both from non-Vellalah backgrounds, married women from Vellalah families. Some speculate these marriages were partly strategic, intended to symbolically erode the purity of caste lines and bind the communities together. Others suggest these marriages were intended to enhance the caste status of both the couple and their offspring. In areas under LTTE control, mixed-caste marriages became more common than before. Many of my informants, as well as young people who responded to my surveys, recounted cases of marriages across caste lines that took place under LTTE auspices. The "Tamil Eelam" courts established by the LTTE could officiate and legitimize such unions, bypassing the traditional authorities, often parents or clergy, who might oppose them. Vellalah parents, who would normally fiercely resist their children marrying someone of perceived "inferior caste," often remained silent out of fear of LTTE repercussions. Under LTTE oversight, a privileged caste spouse could no longer exploit or mistreat a non-privileged caste partner without consequence, which also provided marginalized caste individuals with a new form of protection.

However, these marriages were not always viewed as organic or positive. A 60-year-old Vellalah informant characterized the high-profile marriage of a Karaiyar LTTE leader to a Vellalah woman as "coercive," implying that such a union could only happen due to the power imbalance. In many instances, Vellalah families reacted to a son or daughter marrying outside their caste by disowning the couple or socially isolating themselves out of shame. It was common for mixed-caste couples to flee their home villages and resettle elsewhere, often in LTTE-controlled territories or even in nearby districts, to avoid continuous exclusion. Families whose adult children eloped with a marginalized caste partner often lived almost in hiding, as the contempt of the local community could be relentless. One Vellalah woman known to this author, who married a non-Vellalah man, did not see her parents for seven years after her elopement. When the family finally reconnected, her husband remained unwelcome and she effectively led two separate lives to conciliate her family's honor. Under the customary *Thesawalamai* law of the Tamils, as the sole heir she should have inherited her parents' property in full; however, the stigma attached to marrying a man from a less privileged caste rendered this legal right socially contested.

Before the militant era, any attempt at an inter-caste marriage involving a Vellalah (or even intermediate castes) could provoke violent reprisals from dominant castes. During the LTTE's de facto rule, that violence appears to have stopped. The fear of the LTTE's punishment reportedly served as a deterrent against attacking couples

²⁹Interview by author, 8 October 2005.

or their families. However, despite the LTTE's widespread efforts to eradicate caste discrimination, including through the abolition of the public use of caste titles, the enforcement of punitive measures, and the promotion of such marriages, caste consciousness persisted beneath the surface. One informant noted that even some LTTE cadres privately adhered to caste norms and were anxious about the societal reactions if they themselves entered a mixed marriage.³⁰ This was especially true among Vellalabs and intermediate castes, who often reverted to their old prejudices once LTTE pressure was gone. A young woman whose two sisters served in the LTTE shared that despite their militant background, when it came to marriage her sisters admitted being afraid to marry without knowing the groom's caste.³¹ This anecdote highlights how deeply entrenched caste considerations were, even among the LTTE cadres. While the LTTE's encouragement of mixed-caste marriages was a bold approach to blurring caste lines, the idea faced significant passive resistance and never fully took root in people's minds, illustrating the complexity of trying to compel cultural transformation through force.

Organizational Reforms within the LTTE

It is crucial to understand how the LTTE institutionalized caste equality within its own ranks as part of its militant nationalist project. My interviews with an LTTE leader, discussions with ex-combatants, and survey responses all confirm that the LTTE deliberately engineered practices towards caste equality.³² To enforce and sustain such an equality, the LTTE employed several notable practices: all cadres were made to abandon their birth names and adopt new noms de guerre; those who died in battle were all honored uniformly as "martyrs"; everyone wore identical uniforms, received the same food rations, and was buried in common cemeteries irrespective of caste. These methods created a strong sense of unity and uniformity known beyond just LTTE ranks (Schalk, 1997). When asked about the LTTE's stance on caste as a social injustice, for instance, the undergraduates I surveyed highlighted these practices, indicating their symbolic importance.

Testimonies by ex-combatants, including from Vellalabs who held high ranks in the LTTE before leaving the movement, provide further insight into internal dynamics. Despite the LTTE's formal egalitarian philosophy and the absence of overt caste discrimination within the organization, subtle inequalities persisted in different forms. The LTTE did have a hierarchy and division of labor, for example, intelligence and medical units had slightly different uniforms from the regular fighting cadres or the cultural wing. One ex-combatant noted that educational disparity sometimes influenced roles; Vellalabs and other traditionally privileged caste recruits—often better educated due to socio-economic advantages—tended to perform better in initial

³⁰Interview by author, 11 February 2004.

³¹Interview by author, 21 May 2005.

³²Interview by author, 22 April 2006 with an area leader, and on 15 November 2006 with two ex-combatants.

training tests and were assigned more technically demanding tasks. A Vellalah ex-combatant observed that even with equal treatment, friendships within the LTTE often formed along lines of caste or shared educational background, reflecting social habits formed before joining.³³ One Vellalah martyr's family explained to me that he privately identified other LTTE members by caste, illustrating how labels resurfaced even in the apparently caste-blind environment of the LTTE. While the LTTE's internal reforms largely eliminated overt caste markers and created a strong narrative of equality among castes, preexisting social divisions and personal habits ensured that caste consciousness could endure beneath the surface.

Deconstructing the Power and Status of Vellalahs

The intersection of caste and daily power dynamics also surfaced in more subtle forms during LTTE rule. When the LTTE positioned itself as the guardian of Tamil rights and regulator of social justice, it inherently challenged Vellalah privilege, which led to friction and sometimes quiet resistance. Intra-caste loyalties occasionally flared up during local political contests. For example, one of my informants, a 58-year-old school principal, recounted that during the 1998 local elections, conducted under government control after the LTTE's temporary ouster from Jaffna, campaign posters with the picture and the name of the candidate were defaced with caste labels that particularly targeted non-Vellalah candidates. My informant described this as an act of defamation and symbolic 'mud-casting'. Coming just a few years after the LTTE's 1990–1995 administration, this episode underscores that caste consciousness did not vanish. Rather, it intersected with ethnicity and nationalism and complicated the experience of belonging.

Importantly, the psychological disposition towards caste stratification was never fully addressed by either the LTTE or the prior Vellalah-dominated political parties.³⁴ Many of my Vellalah informants noted that the high honor given to LTTE martyrs and their families implicitly threatened the traditional status order. One interviewee remarked: "Although we don't attend LTTE meetings, we hear *athukal* are the ones in front and respected".³⁵ This response revealed a deep resentment. By referring to intermediate and depressed caste people as objects, the speaker highlighted his refusal to accept the new status quo.

During the war, many displaced depressed-caste families were housed in camps situated in village centers, forcing Vellalahs to encounter them in public spaces daily. This proximity led to frequent social frictions. One Vellalah man expressed his contempt through a local proverb: "Even if a dog barks at the moon, the moon is still the moon, and the dog is still a dog".³⁶ By this, he meant that no matter what the depressed castes

³³Interview by author, 5 August 2006.

³⁴Interview by author, 16 October 2005.

³⁵Interview by author, 15 July 2005. The use of *athukal* here is derogatory, as it generally refers to animals or people only in circumstances when the speaker seeks to be disrespectful or superior in some way, such as with regards to age or caste.

³⁶Interview by author, 17 June 2005.

did (the “barking dogs”), they would remain inferior and the Vellalabs (the “moon”) would remain superior. In other words, my Vellalah respondents felt that while the respect they once received had been eroded under LTTE rule, the social order had not truly changed at its core. Indeed, according to Wilson, Vellalabs tended to believe that the dominance of the Karaiyar under the LTTE was a temporary irregularity, sustainable only under war conditions. As one of my informants put it, “The changes in caste are due to fear of the LTTE, and are not permanent. The status of depressed castes without relatives abroad remains unchanged.”³⁷ This perspective suggests that any leveling of caste was seen as superficial. It was assumed that, once peace returned, the old hierarchy would reassert itself (Wilson, 2000, p. 112). Only those marginalized caste individuals who had the advantage of relatives sending remittances from abroad improved their lot.

Vellalah Perspectives on Caste and the LTTE

Education and wealth sometimes mediated how different Vellalabs responded to the LTTE. In some cases, being economically or educationally marginal within the Vellalah caste meant one might choose to align with the LTTE in order to gain power or protection. The boundaries of Vellalah identity with the LTTE proved flexible when survival or advantage was at stake (Barth, 1998). Poor or less-educated Vellalabs sometimes had close ties to the LTTE as a vehicle to gain influence they were denied within their own intra-stratified community. In contrast, middle-class, well-educated Vellalabs were more likely to resist the LTTE. For example, one poor Vellalah family that had three children join the LTTE moved to the rebel-held Vanni region and attained status as a “Martyrs’ family.”³⁸ The father, despite losing his children, gained local prestige by organizing public commemorations for dead heroes. Conversely, another, wealthy Vellalah family in Jaffna refused to relocate to LTTE territory even after one son died fighting for them.³⁹ These contrasting stories illustrate that Vellalah relations with the LTTE were influenced by lifestyle, education, and economic class as much as by caste.

One Vellalah school teacher bitterly recounted being detained by the LTTE, ostensibly for failing to repay a 3,000-rupee debt when in fact the punishment was for his refusal to teach in LTTE-run schools.⁴⁰ Another Vellalah man faced escalating monetary “donations” demanded by the LTTE as punishment for not offering any of his children to the movement.⁴¹ During the height of LTTE control, there was an expectation that each family would contribute at least one child as a combatant. Those without children of fighting age were often made to pay more money than those who “gave” a son or daughter.

³⁷Interview by author, 18 April 2004.

³⁸Interview by author, 11 March 2003.

³⁹Interview by author, 8 November 2006.

⁴⁰Interview by author, 21 November 2004.

⁴¹Interview by author, 26 August 2004.

When the LTTE engaged in peace talks with the government in 2002, many previously antagonistic Vellalabs suddenly became supportive, seeing an opportunity to regain influence in peacetime. Yet, those same individuals stiffened when, visiting LTTE-held areas in the Vanni, they were subject to security checks by teenage LTTE *kaavalthurai* (police) from non-Vellalah backgrounds. Such encounters offended their ingrained sense of social hierarchy. Historically, a Vellalah would not expect to be interrogated by someone from a “non-Vellalah” caste. Ultimately, some Vellalabs who shifted to support the LTTE did so without a deep change of heart regarding caste. Their loyalties often followed the changing fortunes of the LTTE, and sympathy emerged only after the eventual defeat of the LTTE, when they retroactively admired the sacrifices made by the militants.

Despite the LTTE’s attempt at social revolution, many Vellalabs sought to distance themselves from what they saw as the “egalitarian” social engineering of the LTTE. They harbored a desire to return to a more familiar social order. As one Vellalah interviewee summarized, national unity was important, yes, but caste status still mattered most in their personal spheres. Anderson’s (1983) concept of the nation as an “imagined community” is instructive here: the LTTE tried to foster a version of a singular Tamil national identity that would subsume internal divisions like caste (Chatterjee, 1996). However, caste, being a sensitive and deeply rooted cultural collective, required careful handling.

According to Hellmann-Rajanayagam, the LTTE specifically targeted the pillars of Vellalah power, education and property to dismantle their dominance (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 1994). It has been claimed that the LTTE saw social liberation as a means to achieve national liberation (Fuglerud, 1999). According to this perspective, they saw the caste system as another oppressive structure to overthrow in the quest for an independent Tamil Eelam. Some older Vellalabs, including temple trustees and community leaders, privately conceded that the Tamil militant struggle had indeed united different strata of society under a common Tamil identity in the face of Sinhala oppression, at least temporarily transcending caste divisions (Kuganathan, 2022). Yet even these individuals, conditioned by a lifetime of cultural norms, struggled internally with the anti-caste measures the LTTE orchestrated.

Conclusion

When the war finally ended in May 2009 with the defeat of the LTTE, the social order in Jaffna underwent yet another dramatic shift. The vacuum left by the eradication of the LTTE was quickly filled by the reassertion of the old elites. Dominant Vellalah families and politicians, some of whom had spent years in Colombo or abroad during the fighting, stepped back into public life. In the Northern Provincial Council elections of 2013, the first major post-war Tamil democratic exercise, voters overwhelmingly chose candidates from traditional Vellalah backgrounds.⁴² This post-LTTE resurgence

⁴²See P. Thanges, “Will It Disappear, If You Stop Talking About It?”; A Question On Caste And Ethnicity In Jaffna - Colombo Telegraph, 21 June 2014.

of Vellalah leadership reflected the resilience of caste habitus, but it unfolded within a reconfigured political field. Rather than a simple return to pre-militancy hierarchies, the prominence of Vellalabs was recalibrated through the participation of intermediate and depressed castes, producing a hegemonic order that appeared altered in form but unequal in substance (Hashmi & Kuganathan, 2017; Kuganathan, 2022).

This is not to say that nothing changed in those tumultuous decades. The collective experience of militancy and war did leave an enduring impact on all Tamils, Vellalah and non-Vellalah alike. The social fabric had been stretched and tested in unprecedented ways. The fact that caste could even be discussed in the public sphere and in academic discourse owes much to the disruptions of the war. A younger generation of Tamils has grown up with more exposure to the idea of caste equality, even if practice lags behind. The steady flow of diaspora funding, channelled through village networks into community events, house constructions, and the erection or renovation of temples, has also shifted caste dynamics. The traditional elements of caste identity, such as the Vellalah-centred interdependencies, the rigid hierarchies of economic and ritual ranking, and the strict continuum of purity and pollution in public and ritual spaces, have effectively collapsed. This does not amount to the eradication of caste but rather to its persistence in an altered state that continues to shape social life in subtle and reconfigured ways.

As we have seen, various early attempts by high-caste Tamil elites to eliminate caste in Jaffna, from 1920s youth activism to 1970s temple-entry agitations and political pledges by TULF, were largely rhetorical and short-lived. They championed equality in principle but, led by privileged Vellalah, only made symbolic cracks in the caste order while leaving its foundations intact. A more profound challenge to Vellalah dominance emerged in the late 1970s with militant youth from oppressed castes, culminating in the LTTE's rise in the 1980s under a non-Vellalah leadership. The LTTE enacted bold anti-caste measures, including banning caste slurs and discrimination, redistributing lands and homes, professionalizing roles once bound by servitude, and openly encouraging inter-caste marriages. These strictly enforced policies disrupted age-old customs and opened new social space for marginalized groups. By the mid-1990s, Jaffna's public life was transformed; overt caste markers vanished, oppressed-caste youths held military and civic authority, and the once-dominant Vellalah saw their customary privileges curtailed by a rebel regime that valued sacrifice and loyalty over birth. In doing so, the LTTE briefly achieved what earlier Tamil nationalists could not, an enforced unity that loosened caste's grip on society. Tamil identity was recast around common struggle instead of inherited status, implying that a united Tamil nation required overturning the caste hierarchy.

Yet this revolution revealed the resilience of caste. The LTTE enforced a façade of casteless equality, but it could not wholly change private attitudes or ingrained habits. According to my interlocutors, many Vellalah families outwardly complied out of fear while quietly feeling superior and expecting the old order's return after the war. Within the LTTE, caste was never acknowledged openly, but subtle patterns persisted: better-educated cadres filled technical and administrative roles, and informal social bonds still

followed familiar caste lines. Common uniforms, shared rations, and equal honour in death fostered a myth of unity, yet ex-combatants recalled how some fighters hesitated at mixed-caste marriages or reverted to caste-conscious behaviour when outside strict supervision. When the civil war ended in 2009, suppressed attitudes quickly resurfaced. Traditional Vellalah elites regained their influence through elections, filling the void left by the LTTE. However, this occurred in a changed landscape. Years of conflict had weakened the open practice of caste norms and emboldened marginalised caste groups to assert themselves, even as economic disparities remained.

In sum, the LTTE era demonstrated both the potential for and limits of caste-blind nationalism. It showed that a determined movement can temporarily challenge entrenched hierarchies and enforce the practice of equality for a time, but deeply embedded social structures adapt rather than vanish. The Sri Lankan Tamil experience highlights a paradox: forging a unified “Tamil nation” required banishing caste from public speech, yet this quest often introduced new hierarchies or quietly preserved old ones. In the end, militant nationalism temporarily reshuffled social status and made public caste discrimination taboo, but it did not extinguish caste consciousness. Genuine equality demands more than battlefield victories or legal decrees; it needs long-term changes in cultural attitudes and material conditions, a challenge that has outlived the war and persists today.

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The Caste Negotiations of Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) in Colonial Ceylon

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Abstract

Analyses involving Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) and his relationship to caste—rare enough as they are—often mirror conversations on the position of caste in Sri Lanka more generally. Despite the presence of caste and its previous significance in the island’s history, these discussions hold that caste no longer maintains a critical social purpose. Dharmapala’s formulation of Buddhism as an ethnocentric and hegemonic ideology that concealed rather than addressed social inequality within the island’s majority Sinhalese community perhaps also best summarises these narratives. Yet what is lost in these discourses is that caste remained an ever-present feature of Dharmapala’s social vocabulary and for his visions for both the Sinhalese ethnicity and for Buddhism more generally.

This article tracks Dharmapala’s caste engagements and the wider societal implications of his understanding of the phenomenon for Sri Lanka today through analyses of his writings and speeches both in English and in Sinhalese. As this article demonstrates, caste became an important instrument for Dharmapala to distinguish that which was good for society from that which was bad. Of mixed-caste parentage himself, Dharmapala remained exceedingly critical of Sri Lankan caste structures yet curiously respected—if not admired—those in neighboring India. As perhaps the most high-profile Buddhist anywhere in South Asia during his time, Dharmapala had an incomparable influence on publics across the wider region. While dismissing the significance of caste in religious practice, Dharmapala nonetheless accepted its traditional social function with caste reform rather than abolition at the core of his wider societal plans.

Keywords

Anagarika Dharmapala, Buddhism and caste, colonial Ceylon, Govigama, Karava, Sri Lankan castes

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Introduction

In the Sinhalese language, just as in many other Indic languages, the term *jāti*—and the various words derived from it—connotes not just caste but also ideas concerning ethnicity, nationality, citizenship, and race (de Silva, 1981, p. 512; Uyangoda, 1994, p.13). Semantically ambiguous, the term’s opacity allows its association with various forms of exclusion and difference along the lines listed previously. Just as the word *jāti* masks identities which often compete with rather than complement each other, caste, too, often finds itself concealed by ethnocentric biases in historical and sociological analyses of Sri Lankan society. Yet as one of the identifying—if not defining—features of subcontinental societies, caste remains an ever-present fixture of island life despite the paucity of studies exploring its role in social settings.

When compared to those in neighbouring India, caste relationships in Sri Lanka remain comparatively understudied and under-theorised. This remains true for each of the caste structures in operation for the island’s Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamil, and Indian Tamil populations (Silva, Thanges & Sivapragasam, 2009, p. 1). Indeed, while there remains an ever-expanding body of literature elsewhere across the subcontinent, caste as an institution in Sri Lankan society continues to receive little attention in contemporary academic circles, social initiatives, and governmental policies. Furthermore, with the Sri Lankan state neglecting to collect caste information in official records, the specific role of caste as a force for discrimination and oppression remains difficult to discern (Silva & Balmforth, 2025, pp. 1–2). Given caste’s exclusion as a category in the island’s censuses since 1871, even estimating the numbers of those who belong to the various castes traditionally ascribed to Sri Lanka remains a notoriously difficult endeavour (Simpson & de Silva, 2025, p. 36).

What is clear, however, is that a system of caste practice developed there independently and largely without the structuralising influence and power of the *varṇa*-based Hindu system with its ritualised divisions into Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra found in neighbouring India. While similar cultural practices undoubtedly present themselves across both the mainland and the island, “local customization” rather than “wholesale adoption” became the norm (Winslow, 2024, p. 110). Sri Lanka’s “wider geography”, with its external linkages extending beyond the subcontinent to the Mediterranean World, coastal Africa, Arabia, and Indochina, perhaps provides us with further answers as to how this local customisation occurred (Winslow, 2024, p. 110). Furthermore, the lack of a strong religious sanction for caste from Buddhism—the predominant religion among the island’s majority Sinhalese community—also created the conditions for the emergence of a caste system often described as “mild” in terms of its injunctions when compared to those found in other religious systems across the mainland (Gombrich, 1971, pp. 294–317; Silva, Kotikabadda & Abeywickrama, 2009, p. 29). Moreover, the general absence of caste and its effects in Buddhist societies outside of South Asia further complicates studies of the practice of caste amongst Sinhalese Buddhists, given the difficulty in finding

suitable comparisons from within the wider Buddhist fold.¹ The Buddha himself, of course, neither explicitly condoned nor denounced caste as an institution and chose instead to preach against the discrimination and stigma associated with its practice.

Published shortly after the island's independence in 1948, Bryce Ryan's *Caste in Modern Ceylon* opened the way for scholarly analyses of caste in Sri Lankan society with his view that caste in Sinhalese culture was "a self-contained emergent arising from diffuse Indian influences and historically unique situations" (1953, pp. 4–5). Ryan and the generation of scholars who followed him remained fixated on "village minutiae" to find a "correct" or "authentic" form of caste in the island, which could be reconciled within a wider Indic civilisational understanding of caste (Jiggins, 1979, p. 19). Yet, as John Rogers (2004) convincingly argues, present-day conceptions of caste find their origins in the consequences of the social, economic, and political decisions the British took during the early nineteenth century. While caste may appear "dormant" in Sri Lankan public life today, one needs only to refer to matrimonial advertisements in local newspapers or scrutinise the selection of candidates in electoral processes to conclude that caste remains "ubiquitous" in everyday life (Silva & Balmforth, 2025, p. 1).

The tendency to diminish the place and effect of caste and treat Sinhalese society as unified and culturally homogenous also remains a feature of commentaries on the career of Anagarika Dharmapala, which either neglect the role of caste in his life or lessen its importance. Indeed, it is difficult to write about cultural and social developments in modern Sri Lanka without reference to Dharmapala and his activities (Hewage, 2022). During his funerary procession in Colombo in 1933, the procession of mourners that followed Dharmapala's casket stretched over half the distance of the two-mile route. Dozens of his statues have been erected across the island, and today several city streets bear his name in places such as Anuradhapura, Kandy, and Galle (Kemper, 2015, p. 3). Remembered variously within Sri Lanka today as an anti-colonial hero or as a nativist bigot (Senanayake, 1965, p. v; Sarvan, 2017), Dharmapala arguably became the most prominent commentator on Sinhalese affairs during the island's late colonial period. As one of the "founding contributors" (Mukherjee, 2015, p. 19) of what is often termed Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism today, Dharmapala—through his writings and speeches in the English and Sinhalese languages—provides us with unique insights into the place of caste across both ethnic and religious axes.

Dharmapala, however, remains an exceedingly complicated character to portray in clear and concise terms. Ananda Guruge's (1965) published collection of his writings and speeches—along with, more recently, his personal diaries—in the English language features extensively in Dharmapala's wider historiography. Written primarily for Western audiences unfamiliar with its everyday trappings, Dharmapala's English-language writings naturally do not dwell at length on the phenomenon of caste. Furthermore, the colonial state closely followed these publications, with police

¹Nevertheless, scholarship exists which examines so-called "hidden" or "latent" caste systems amongst Buddhists in polities such as Thailand and Japan. See, for instance, Aaronson, Gaines & Abouharb (2016) and Gordon (2017).

across the subcontinent keeping track of Dharmapala's statements throughout his career (Guruge, 1965, pp. 1-11). This article, however, capitalises on his Sinhalese-language output, which remains glaringly absent in Western scholarship.² Often more intimate and forceful than his English-language work, likely because Dharmapala was aware it would largely escape the scrutiny of the state, his Sinhalese writings frequently provide more comprehensive analyses of his thinking and visions regarding his native island and its affairs. Indeed, it is from these writings that we gain our clearest understanding of Dharmapala's positionality regarding caste and his attitudes towards its practice and existence.

Though a complete biography of Dharmapala and an extended account of his many activities are beyond the scope of this article, any cursory overview of his life reveals two interconnected objectives that he continually referred to throughout his life.³ Namely, a personal mission to become the next Buddha, which accompanied his vow to serve humanity through Buddhist welfare work—of which the campaign to reclaim Buddhist ownership of the Mahabodhi temple complex at Bodhi Gaya dominated.⁴ Furthermore, in how he presented Buddhism to others, Dharmapala focused primarily on both tradition and modernity (Hewage, 2025). For his fellow Sinhalese Buddhists, he emphasised how Ceylonese antiquity and precolonial times created a benevolent Buddhist society with harmony and prosperity for everyone. The introduction of “Western abominations”, from weapons to whiskey, and an adherence to “heathenish diabolisms” resulted in a move away from the “ethical purity” Buddhism provided for Ceylonese society (Dharmapala, 1965f, p. 105). As he repeatedly insisted throughout his career in both his English-language and Sinhalese writings and speeches, Buddhism's value for the Sinhalese was as a traditional religion that greatly enriched their lives and defined their society.

Whereas tradition perhaps best characterised Dharmapala's appeals to his Sinhalese kin, Dharmapala preferred instead to present Buddhism as a religion of modernity for Western audiences. For Dharmapala, modernity represented morality and scientific progress, which he believed perfectly described the Buddhism he wished to propagate. In his earliest public speeches to non-Buddhist audiences in the West, Dharmapala (1965j, pp. 18–20) maintained that Buddhism made people “gentler and milder” and was a “scientific religion” that was “tantamount to a knowledge of other sciences.” Indeed, morality and science appeared to represent the best way for Dharmapala to encourage Western audiences to warm to and accept Buddhism, and discourses on

²Only H.L. Seneviratne (1999) has made extensive use of Dharmapala's Sinhalese writings in English-language scholarship. Yet even his usage of these documents is largely limited to an examination of Dharmapala's views on the Buddhist monkhood. Sarath Amunugama (2016) also references Dharmapala's Sinhalese-language writings but does not make wide use of them in his extended biography on Dharmapala's life and career.

³For extended biographies of Dharmapala, see Karunaratna (1965); Kemper (2015); and Amunugama (2016).

⁴The Mahabodhi complex is traditionally associated with the site where Siddhartha Gautama achieved Buddhahood. For an overview of Dharmapala's activities involving the Mahabodhi complex, see Trevithick (2006).

modernity became a constant refrain in Dharmapala's engagement with non-Buddhist audiences—especially those in Europe and North America. What is important here, however, is not Dharmapala's specific appeals to tradition and modernity—important as they are in evaluations of his life and career—given the inherent contradictions between them. Rather, Dharmapala's tendency to emphasise and dwell on different aspects of the same issues for different audiences is of greater significance for us here when we consider his engagement with caste.

As an emblem of tradition and as a barrier to modernity, where then, if at all, did caste fit in with Dharmapala's dual objectives and representations of Buddhism? Despite his efforts to personally distance himself from its practice and reach, caste surprisingly remained a critical component in Dharmapala's various social calculations and engagements. Born in 1864, Dharmapala emerged during the mid-nineteenth century into a Sinhalese society witnessing a new awareness regarding the importance of caste in a colonial Ceylonese setting. Yet the goal here is not to pass judgement on his positioning and views on caste but instead to understand Dharmapala's reasoning and its significance in later developments affecting both his native Sinhalese community and Sri Lanka more generally.

Critiquing the Sinhalese Caste System

Dharmapala formed part of the first generation of Ceylonese to experience the effects of a new kind of socioeconomic order hitherto unseen on the island. Establishing the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission in 1831, Britain charted its island colony on a course away from quasi-feudalism and indigenous economic practices to create a free labour model oriented towards export markets. This spelled the end for the traditional Sinhalese *rājākariya* system of personal service through which the monarch provided land tenure in return for service provision from various occupation-based castes. In its place, a network of plantations developed with tea, rubber, and coconut estates emerged throughout the island. Demand boomed for agents and contractors to supply labour for this new economic system, and ambitious locals quickly reaped the benefits from the entrepreneurial culture that accompanied the plantations. These pioneering entrepreneurs who moved into newly created contract industries, such as cooeping and transport provision, however, did not emerge from the ranks of the Sinhalese aristocracy. Rather, this new class of businessmen was formed from across the Sinhalese caste spectrum, with no one caste grouping able to claim dominance over these new trades (Amunugama, 2016, p. 354; Obeyesekere, 2018, p. 278).

Overtime, the numerically superior *Govigama* caste—to which Dharmapala's father, Don Carolis, belonged—found its position under attack from rival caste groupings. The “farmer-aristocracy” as Ralph Pieris (1956, p. 171) first described them, the Govigama were traditionally engaged as land-holding cultivators, and “to all intents and purposes”, he argues, “constituted the chief caste” in terms of influence and power during Ceylon's pre-colonial period.⁵ Many new entrepreneurs, such as

⁵As mentioned, the exact figures of each caste community on the island are difficult to validate.

The Govigama community, however, is believed to constitute around 50 per cent of the wider

Don Carolis, emerged from the middle and lower ranks of the Govigama. Yet they faced commercial competition from rivals in the *Durāva* caste, traditionally associated with toddy-tapping and to which Dharmapala's mother—Dona Mallika—belonged, the Karāva caste historically engaged in maritime activities, and the Salāgama caste associated with cinnamon cultivation (Amunugama, 2016, p. 354).

Competition among these castes took different forms, and the early nineteenth century witnessed various “caste propagandists” from various backgrounds attempting to influence and shape government policy and the allocation of public employment (Rogers, 2004, p. 61). Economic competition also extended into other arenas, and the latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed the publication of polemical caste accounts and histories where various castes attempted to elevate themselves and downgrade the status of others (Blackburn, 2010, pp. 79–90). Although some of these polemics appeared in the colony's English-language press, most of the writing on caste was in Sinhalese (Rogers, 2004, p. 69). The *Itihāsa* (“History”), a pro-Govigama caste narrative, and the *Kevaṭṭa Vamsaya* (“The Fishers’ Chronicle”), a rejoinder to the *Itihāsa* from the Karāva community, perhaps represent the best examples from the period.⁶ Earlier scholarship suggests that these caste accounts reflected the concerns only of a narrow social class of elites who employed caste to compete over social prestige (Peebles, 1995, pp. 166–168; Kannangara, 1993, p. 113). Yet, as Rogers argues, the tone of several of these exchanges indicates that far deeper issues of status and worth were at stake for all members of the different caste groupings (2004, p. 69). A voracious reader throughout his youth and beyond (Kemper, 2019, p. 228), Dharmapala undoubtedly became intimately familiar with the arguments of these revisionist texts with their references to geographical, historical, and religious subject matter.

It is from Dharmapala's Sinhalese letters, addressed primarily to one of his closest disciples Devapriya Valisinha, that we get the best insights into how this commentary functioned in practice. Discussing the fate of Ceylon's leading Buddhist school, Ananda College in Colombo, from Bombay in 1922, Dharmapala (2014e, p. 331) firmly connected educational attainment and achievement with various Sinhalese caste groupings. While he suggested Karāva students *igeṇagānimaṭa dukgannavā* (strive hard to learn), he claimed to Valisinha that Govigama schoolchildren instead *igeṇaganta molē naeta* (do not have the brains to learn). In the coastal towns where the Karāva dominated, Dharmapala (2014e, p. 331) argued that the community together uplifted themselves through education, while the Govigama community bickered amongst themselves and *asamagiyeṇ siṭiti* (could not find consensus). He further questioned Valisinha about the number of Govigama students enrolled at Ananda and lamented what he believed was the tendency of Govigama elites to Christian schools over Buddhist ones. Curiously, he also noted the caste background of Ananda's

Sinhalese population in Sri Lanka. The Govigama caste is itself, of course, divided into several sub-castes. For a dated but valuable, detailed description of these sub-castes along with other Sinhalese castes, see Pieris, 1956.

⁶All translations provided in this article are my own.

headmaster P.S. de Silva Kularatne—who belonged to neither the Govigama nor Karāva castes—and doubted his ability to command the support of both castes.

Dharmapala's criticism here of the Govigama caste—the caste to which his own father belonged—exemplified how caste controversies remained a periodic feature of Ceylonese public discourse well into the twentieth century. Indeed, the rivalry between the Govigama and Karāva castes remained the central feature of these polemics, though several other caste groups also involved themselves (Blackburn, 2010, pp. 79–90; Rogers, 2004, p. 69). Yet Dharmapala proved unique in his involvement in the central rivalry between the two castes as he readily criticised both. Indeed, while he praised the educational achievements of the Karāva, he considered their religious devotion suspect. As mentioned, Dharmapala's career ambition was to recover Buddhist ownership over the Mahabodhi temple complex in northern India. In diary entries from 1925, again written in Sinhalese, Dharmapala (2014e, p. 384) lamented how the Karāva people *Buḍagayāwa sambandha dēṭa udav naē* (give no help in affairs relating to Bodh Gaya). Curiously, he proceeded to describe the Karāva as a people who *buḍagayāwaṭa waḍā jātiya salakana* (cared more about their caste than Bodh Gaya) and then compared their piety unfavourably to that of the Govigama. As was typical of Dharmapala, however, he took the opportunity here to criticise the Govigama again. The prosperous among them, he (2014e, p. 384) claimed, *śraddhava naē* (have no faith). Those Govigama who did have faith, he claimed, *dhanaya naēta* (had no riches). When they accumulated wealth, he lamented, *lōbhayen kriyā karati* (they acted stingy).

The fate of the Mahabodhi site proved especially pressing in Dharmapala's caste polemics. While existing scholarship has captured his involvement in tensions between Buddhists and Hindus over the site (Kemper, 2015; Trevithick, 2006), Dharmapala's engagement with caste concerns regarding the complex remains less well known. When a Sinhalese monastic specifically suggested in 1925 that stewardship of the complex be given to the Karāva rather than the Govigama, Dharmapala (2014b, pp. 242–243) commented that it was an *ajñāna kamaki* (unwise act). The Govigama community, as he explained in a Sinhalese-language article, had historically provided for all monastic sects and was central to Buddhism's survival in Ceylon for over 2,000 years *jāti gōtra nosalakā* (irrespective of ethnicity and caste). Yet he took care here again to avoid the implication that the piety of the Govigama elevated them over others. Should monks from other Sinhalese caste communities travel to reside at the Mahabodhi complex, Dharmapala (2014b, p. 243) insisted that he would personally provide for their maintenance there.

It was not just the Buddhist laity that Dharmapala targeted along the lines of caste. The Ceylonese monkhood also attracted fierce criticism from Dharmapala for its caste-based composition. Indeed, he repeatedly slammed the island's monastics for what he believed was their defeatist and unprincipled position in Ceylonese society. "The Bhikkhus [monks] in Ceylon are indolent and ignorant", Dharmapala (1965a, p. 520) noted in 1920 while in Calcutta, "they keep up their position by a smattering of Pali Grammar and Sanskrit prosody." Yet, from his Sinhalese writings, Dharmapala

specifically chooses caste to explain how he believed the monkhood went astray. Complaining about bad monastics in a note from 1923, he singled out the Siyam Nikāya (“Siam Sect”)—which drew its membership exclusively from the Govigama community—to highlight his point. The Siyam Nikāya monks, Dharmapala (2014e, p. 339) explained, were preoccupied with accumulating *dhana* (wealth) rather than religious concerns. The following year, however, Dharmapala turned his attention to the island’s other monastic fraternities.

He attacked the Amarapura Nikāya (“Amarapura Sect”), composed primarily of non-Govigama monks, for following the Siyam Nikāya in chasing wealth. In a diary entry from 1921, Dharmapala (2014e, pp. 359–60) lambasted senior Amarapura monastics for striving to enrich themselves while having *anukampawak nēta* (no sympathy) towards *asaraṇa bauḍayō* (helpless Buddhists). The Rāmañña Nikāya (“Lower Burma Sect”), originally founded by low-country Govigama who claimed that the Siyam Nikāya privileged only the Govigama who hailed from the Kandyan highlands, also found its way into his wrath. Dharmapala (2014e, pp. 359–360) insisted that the *wæḍi koṭasa* (majority) of Rāmañña Nikāya monastics *goṭu atu pāvichchi karati* (used palmyra leaves), implying that they cared more about distinguishing themselves from other monastic sects than working for the benefit of other Buddhists. All three major Buddhist orders in Ceylon, he believed, failed in their mission to serve the wider Sinhalese Buddhist community. For Dharmapala, competition based on caste status ravaged the Ceylonese monkhood and rendered its members useless.

From his analyses of Dharmapala’s English-language writings, Steven Kemper (2015, p. 419) highlights Dharmapala’s tendency to criticise virtually everyone he encountered. From his Sinhalese-language documents, a similar pattern again emerges. Despite his criticisms of Sinhalese caste communities, Dharmapala nonetheless clarified that these specific criticisms reflected his rejection of the Sinhalese caste system *as it then existed* during his lifetime. Key to the present degradation of the Sinhalese caste system, he argued, were the caste-based monastic fraternities themselves. In a Sinhalese-language article from 1922, Dharmapala (2014f, p. 105) explained that Buddhism had flourished in Ceylon for two millennia because of its focus on *maitrī dharmaya* (philosophy of loving kindness). The problems that he felt later emerged in Ceylonese Buddhism, he suggested, emerged following the foundation of the Siyam Nikāya in the eighteenth century. With higher monastic ordination restricted only to the Govigama, Dharmapala wrote that these circumstances gave rise to both the Amarapura Nikāya and Rāmañña Nikāya to democratise the pursuit of higher ordination.⁷ Clerical cleavages thus emerged, he implied, when caste communities avoided participating in the religious activities of other caste groups, which, in turn, created divisions amongst the wider Sinhalese laity and so ultimately weakened Ceylonese Buddhism.⁸ When castes gained economic clout, Dharmapala (2014f, p. 105) concluded, they discarded

⁷For a comprehensive account of the origins of the Rāmañña Nikāya and of its difference from both the Siyam Nikāya and Amarapura Nikāya, see Malalgoda (1976), pp. 161–172.

⁸For detailed analysis on the foundation of Ceylonese monastic sects, their practices, and their organisational structures, see Malalgoda (1976), pp. 106–172.

samyakdr̥uṣṭiya (true vision) for *mithyādr̥uṣṭiya* (improper vision) and thus worsened caste divides.

Dharmapala, therefore, criticised the wider current Sinhalese caste system for its perceived role in creating divisions that diminished Ceylonese Buddhism. These developments, he believed (2014f, p. 105), served only to consolidate the status of other ethnic and religious Ceylonese communities at the expense of the Sinhalese. Yet he did not urge the Sinhalese to eradicate or discard caste altogether. Rogers (2004, p. 65) notes how the British, fearful of any action that could lead to unrest, concluded during the early nineteenth century that Buddhism did not preach caste and thus chose not to directly interfere or engage with the workings of caste. Dharmapala, though he did not cite Britain's influence, took a similar approach. In an educational booklet addressed to "every English-speaking person throughout the World" published in 1917, he (1965c, pp. 155–169) maintained how even the Buddha stressed the necessity of "observing [pre-existing] caste rules" and of abiding by the "laws laid down by ancestors." Despite this serving as one of the few examples of Dharmapala referencing caste to foreign audiences, it is again in his Sinhalese writings where he provides more detail on his visions for the practice of caste.

Indeed, in the same 1922 article where he blamed the Ceylonese monastic sects for fostering caste division, Dharmapala curiously rebuked those whom he believed plotted to eliminate the Govigama caste. He (2014f, p. 106) wrote how it was *dukkhadayakayi* (quite sad) that there existed those who plotted to destroy the Govigama and offered his own reasoning as to why this was an extremely concerning development. Dharmapala (2014f, p. 106) declared that *siṃhala jātiya naetivē* (the Sinhalese race will be lost) should the tactics used to destroy the Govigama succeed. He did not, unfortunately, elaborate on what precisely he meant here, and we do not know what specific tactics and schemes Dharmapala had in mind, nor how exactly the elimination of the Govigama would serve to annihilate the Sinhalese race itself. Nevertheless, the remainder of the article provides us with a deeper insight into how exactly he valued caste and its wider purpose in society.

The crux of Dharmapala's message here was that the various castes which existed among the Sinhalese all had functions and were therefore all a critical component of Sinhalese society. The fishing folk who cast their nets and caught fish for a living possessed a different *śarīrika dhātu* (bodily makeup) from those whose livelihoods consisted of climbing palm trees and tapping toddy (2014f, p. 107). Disregarding Dharmapala's questionable biological calculus here, we see instead his belief that there was no need to rank which activities were more beneficial or valuable than others. Rather, Dharmapala wanted the Sinhalese to concede that they had always participated in different industries and trades. As Sinhalese castes were traditionally occupation-based, all castes therefore had their part to play in the everyday functioning of society. Moreover, his followers did not need to rely on him alone to accept the truth of his claims. The Buddha, Dharmapala (2014f) argued, explained the very same thing in the Pali Canon's *Samyutta Nikāya*. As Dharmapala insisted to his supporters, it was Buddhist practice itself that was of value and not the elevation of one caste group at the expense of others.

Brahmin-ising Buddhism

Despite these sentiments, however, Dharmapala himself *did* elevate one caste over all others. Yet this was a caste which was not then present in Sinhalese society. “The most significant factor for an understanding of Sinhalese caste structure”, Ryan (1953, p. 8) emphasises to his readers, “is not...that the Sinhalese preserved Buddhism, but that the Sinhalese did not preserve the Brahmin.” Different Sinhalese caste communities had begun referencing their supposedly Brahmin lineages long before the colonial period. Yet it was only from the mid-nineteenth century that the supposed *varṇa* status of the various castes became used to produce “relative rankings” (Rogers, 2004, p. 69; Kannangara, 1993, pp. 118–126). Born in 1864, Dharmapala thus emerged into a Sinhalese society where connections to Brahmin-ness and, by extension, social prestige were becoming commonplace. Indeed, Dharmapala deeply respected—if not idolised—the status that Brahmins held both during Buddhist antiquity and also during his own lifetime.

Spending most of his adult life based in India, Dharmapala was keenly aware of the reach and influence of Brahmins across the mainland. Indeed, his admiration for the Brahmin community largely emerges not from his Sinhalese output but instead from his writings and speeches to audiences beyond the island. Dharmapala repeatedly described what he labelled as a “pure” Brahminism which existed alongside and complemented early Buddhism. This pure Brahminism he separated from what he termed “degenerate” Brahminism, which he firmly connected with contemporary Hindu practice. In 1904, Dharmapala (Diary, 26 July 1904) clarified how “Brahmanism pure is renunciation of passions and ascetic life”, while “Brahmanism degenerate is abnormal sensuality”, which resulted in “intellectual degeneracy and sensual development.” A decade later, he insisted further that “[t]he Aryan people of India had a most spiritualizing code of ethics for several thousands of years.” Dharmapala (1965g, p. 261) noted how the “philosophers of ancient India had penetrated into the heights of the Brahmaloḥa [and found] an impetus for higher thought” but conceded that this period had ended long ago.

Hinduism split into an idealised past and a polluted present, Dharmapala further highlighted what he believed were the commonalities between Buddhism and the uncorrupted Hinduism as it existed during Buddhist antiquity. Describing the Buddha’s life and his teachings, he maintained, “[t]he Buddhism of the people of India was of native origin, the gods of the Buddhist were the gods of the Brahman.” Dharmapala (1965f, p. 85) insisted, “[s]o far, history is silent as to a war between Buddhists and Brahmans but of persecutions to annihilate each other, we find no signs in contemporary history.” This untainted Brahminism diverged from Buddhism and gave way to the debased Hinduism of the present “after the religion of the Buddha Kasyapa had disappeared.” As Dharmapala (1965g, p. 259) emphasised again to his supporters, “[t]he pure Brahman philosophy untainted by the doctrine of egohood is in no way antagonistic to the Dhamma of the Tathagata.”

⁹According to the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, Kāśyapa Buddha is believed to have been the third Buddha of the present *kalpa* (“aeon”) before the arrival of Gautama Buddha.

Dharmapala therefore aimed to equate Buddhism with a form of Hinduism, though moral and ethical, no longer existed and threatened the Buddhism he championed throughout his career. Indeed, his objective in his discussions and analyses of Hinduism was to convince Hindus that Buddhism's teachings formed a compelling alternative to the vices he believed pervaded their contemporary religious practice. As Dharmapala (1965i, p. 41) proclaimed in 1918, the Buddha "appeared in Middle India at a spiritual crisis to lead man from the slough of ignorance and ignoble sensualism to the loftier heights where love and an infinite happiness reign supreme." He did not, however, suggest here that Buddhism was merely a reformulation of the no longer extant pure Brahminism. To say that the Buddha "borrowed His religion" from ancient Brahminical beliefs, Dharmapala (1965f, p. 106) retorted, "would be like saying that Darwin borrowed his philosophy from the Christian Bible and the Aristotilean [sic] ethics, and that Herbert Spencer got his philosophy from the treatises of medieval theologians."

An extended analysis of Dharmapala's interpretation of the historical development of Hinduism is, of course, beyond the scope of this article. That this analysis emerges almost exclusively in his English-language material also should come as little surprise. As the subcontinent's dominant religion, and as an obstacle to both the reclamation of the Mahabodhi site and enticing conversions to Buddhism, Hinduism greatly preoccupied Dharmapala throughout his career. While Hinduism, of course, remained an influential minority religion in Ceylon during his lifetime, Dharmapala felt no immediate threat to his wider Buddhist mission from Ceylonese Hindus who corresponded in Tamil and largely avoided involving themselves in the affairs of Ceylonese Buddhists. Ever since his appearance alongside Swami Vivekananda at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Dharmapala, however, faced constant opposition from Indian Hindus. From discourses on Buddhism's degradation aimed at diminishing Buddhism's appeal to Westerners to the legal wrangling over the Mahabodhi complex involving the colonial judicial system, Dharmapala debated Indian Hindu opponents throughout his career (Harris, 2024; Kemper, 2015; Trevithick, 2006; Amunugama, 1991). Without proficiency in the Indian languages of his antagonists, and battling them to win over Western publics, Dharmapala resorted to the English language to present his arguments. What *is* of special importance here, however, is Dharmapala's near exclusive focus on the Brahmin caste as representative of the wider Hindu religious system.

Indeed, in his discussion of degenerate Brahminism, it was the activities of the Brahmins themselves that came in for the greatest criticism. Its entire structure, Dharmapala (1965m, p. 578) claimed, revolved around "arrogant Brahmans" who sacrificed animals, consumed alcohol, and cursed the gods when grievances arose. The system became so corrupt, social uplift was possible only for a select few. As Dharmapala (1965h, p. 221) reminded his Bengali audience during a lecture at Calcutta in 1911, the "Brahmanical laws of social polity" excluded all those who were not "twice-born" from meaningful participation in Hindu religious life. To the many millions who fell into the excluded category, he argued, "the Buddha's law of love, and

the Discipline which He had in his mercy inculcated and called the Aryan discipline were meant.” For the very first time, Dharmapala continued, “the[se] teeming millions of India received a Religion” (1965h, p. 221). Hinduism, because of the machinations of the Brahmins, thus only catered towards specific categories of people. Buddhism, Dharmapala insisted, was for everyone.

Nevertheless, Dharmapala often looked past the harmful role Brahmins played in corrupting Hinduism and preferred instead to focus on the aspects of Brahmin-ness themselves that he considered exemplary and deserving of emulation. In a Sinhalese-language article from 1894, Dharmapala (2014c, p. 206) explained how the Sinhalese should follow *āryya* (noble) customs concerning filial piety, hospitality, and propriety. According to Dharmapala, during the Buddha’s lifetime, Brahmins had a duty *āryya sirit kaḍa nokara* (not to disregard noble decorum). If the Brahmins of antiquity followed these noble practices, he reasoned that the Buddhists of his day should copy them. Around this same time, Dharmapala emphasised again to other Buddhists the similarities between their religion and that of the Brahmins. Buddhism, as Dharmapala (1965e, p. 791) declared in one of his earliest English-language journal pieces, “is Brahminism without caste.” A decade later, he again implied that the social status accorded to Brahmins in the *varṇa* system was compatible with Buddhist teaching. “He who does good kamma, he is the Brahm[i]n”, Dharmapala (1965k, p. 144) noted in 1909, “he who does evil, he is the menial.” For Dharmapala, Buddhism therefore taught that karmic merit decided one’s profession and thus—by extension—the caste to which one belonged.

As mentioned earlier, Dharmapala curiously associated the fate of the broader Sinhalese ethnicity with the prosperity of the Govigama caste. He similarly connected the fate of the Buddhist religion to the continued existence of the Brahmin caste. The “next Buddha will be born in the Brahman caste...and only righteousness will reign” Dharmapala (1965f, p. 113) proclaimed to his readers in 1917 in a booklet published in Madras. He did not, however, explicitly mention or reference how he came to what was—and remains—an unorthodox and controversial view among Buddhists themselves. To those who “now” engaged in good conduct and deferred “to holy men and good Brahmans”, he further promised an ideal future rebirth (1965f, p. 113). That the Buddha himself would choose rebirth into a society that still clung to caste allegiances was not a source of shame. As Dharmapala (1965l, p. 65) insisted the following year, the Buddha merely “spiritualized the idea of Brahm[i]nhood” for all regardless of caste background. The Buddha, he continued, “upheld the social policy of caste differentiations among the laity” but ensured that the “low caste man” always found value and a meaningful place within the broader Buddhist fold.

Any cursory overview of Dharmapala’s writings and speeches, whether in English or Sinhalese, reveals his tendency to compare himself to the Buddha and his resolve to work towards Buddhahood. He, therefore, naturally maintained a vested interest in ensuring that caste, as an established institution of subcontinental society, survived the attacks of those who sought to do away with it in its entirety. The future Buddha, as Dharmapala mentioned, was destined to find rebirth in the Brahmin community. If

he were to become the Buddha, Dharmapala, too, required rebirth into the Brahmin caste. Indeed, his dying words in 1933 expressed something to this very effect. As Dharmapala (2014a, p. 250) fervently proclaimed, *magē adhiṣṭhānaya maraṇin matu indiyawē brāhmaṇa pavulaka ipida śasanika kaṭayutu yaḷit karagena yēmaṭayi* (my desire after death is to be born into a Brahmin family in India to again continue Buddhist activities). Dharmapala's truly sensational declaration here appears only as a footnote—if it even features at all—across most biographical analyses of his life. In Guruge's introduction to the collection of Dharmapala's English-language writings and speeches, he also transcribes Dharmapala's dying wish. Yet, strangely, Guruge (1965, p. xliii) uses ellipsis in the introduction to hide Dharmapala's references to rebirth as a Brahmin in India.

Dharmapala's parting wishes are, of course, difficult to stomach for those who remember and idolise him as a Sinhalese patriot who cared as much about Ceylon as he did its traditional Buddhist faith. Dharmapala rejected and became alienated from the new political class that emerged on the island during the later years of his life (Amunugama, 2016, pp. 524–527). His dying words perhaps represent his wish to distance himself from a Ceylon where nationalist and Marxist ideologies were beginning to capture attention away from his Buddhist messaging. Yet these final words—when taken with Dharmapala's idolisation of the Brahmin community throughout his career—perhaps also demonstrate to others his insistence that caste, for all its criticisms, continued to have a function in Buddhist circles. For Dharmapala, noble conduct and adherence to that considered *samyakdrusṭiya*, guaranteed rebirth into what he considered a superior caste. As *the* supreme caste, which he believed even the Buddha conceded, Brahmins—with their spiritually sanctified status in both Buddhism and pure Brahmanism—were the community every Buddhist needed to emulate. As the Sinhalese had not “preserved” the Brahmin in Ceylon, Dharmapala's wish for a Brahmin rebirth in India thus appears more comprehensible.

The valorisation of the Brahmin community on the island, of course, did not begin or end with Dharmapala. Gananath Obeyesekere (2015) writes about how earlier Brahmin migrants to the island, primarily from South India, seemingly transitioned into the upper echelons of the Govigama caste as elites. Yet to this day, other Sinhalese caste groups such as the Beravā—traditionally associated with drumming, maintain memories of poems and songs linking *them* with ancient Brahmin lineages who seemingly passed down ritual knowledge and novel forms of religiosity during the island's precolonial period (Simpson & de Silva, 2025, pp. 45–53). Nevertheless, as Praveen Tilakaratne (2025) illustrates, references to and identifications with the Brahmin community were not always positive—especially in postcolonial Ceylon, where ideas of Brahmin-ness became associated with unequal epistemic hierarchies and structural injustices. While Dharmapala himself did not directly link Brahmins with any specific Sinhalese caste grouping, association with Brahmin-ness was a definite source of honour and not shame.

Dharmapala further connected the Brahmin caste to his beliefs regarding the existence of “higher” castes and correspondingly “lower” castes. This terminology of

“high” and “low” groups, of course, had existed in Ceylon long before Dharmapala’s emergence, with chronicle authors from the island referring to the “simple bifurcation” of Sinhalese society into two groups based on various characteristics by the fourth century CE (Winslow, 2024, pp. 107–108). Nevertheless, Dharmapala’s understanding of what constituted this elevation proved unique. For him, good social conduct resulted in rebirth into a higher status. Poor social conduct instead led to rebirth into a lower status. He, however, specifically connected *samyakdrusṭiya* practices with the Brahmin community, while *mithyādrusṭiya* acts he firmly linked with Abrahamic religion, especially Christianity and Islam. In turn, these Abrahamic religions he associated with what he deemed lower caste communities, though he curiously declined to name them. In 1922, Dharmapala (2014d, p. 139) penned a piece titled “*Kalisam Kristiyāniya*” (“Trouser Christianity”) in which he mocked those he considered the Sinhalese of lower status who flocked to Christianity and aped Westerners in their dining and sartorial practices. Christianity, he claimed, was *sāradharmayak nēti* (of no useful teaching) and for three hundred years in Ceylon prevailed among *hīna jātika manuṣyayan* (lower caste peoples).

Islam, too, did not escape association with low caste status. In a 1923 article aimed at providing advice to Sinhalese Buddhist children, Dharmapala (2014g, p. 66) explained how in Ceylon, *gavamās kēma hīna kulavalaṭa ayiti dharmayaki* (the lower castes are accustomed to eating beef). In India, he continued, *gavamāṃśa sataravarṇayaṭa ayiti aya allannē nēta* (those from the four *varṇas* refrain from beef). Only Indian Muslims, Dharmapala insisted (2014g, p. 66), *gavamāṃśa anubhava karat* (consume beef). Disgusted at what he felt was the growing trend of meat consumption among Sinhalese Buddhists, Dharmapala (2014e, p. 362) commented in a diary entry during the following year that *apē bauddhayanget hamba mahamat kārayanget venasak nē* (there is no difference between our Buddhists and treacherous Muslims). Lamenting that Buddhists *anubala deti* (give support) to animal slaughter, he (2014e, p. 362) noted further that there was also *væḍi venasak nēta* (not much difference) between Ceylonese Christians and Buddhists. In a 1925 letter addressed to a Western supporter, he further noted the attempts of both Christians and Muslims to convert Indians who languished beyond the caste system. Implying that these Dalits who converted to both religions were “barbarians”, Dharmapala (1965d, p. 778) concluded that they were “satisfied with the low-caste gods and the fetish priests.” Moreover, he (1965b, p. 571) presumed in 1932 that it was “only the very low-castes” that became Muslim during the Islamic conquest of India, thus demonstrating again how characterisations like these continued throughout his career.

Caste, as Dharmapala understood it, therefore had its functions. These functions, for Dharmapala, primarily emerged from his own binary assessment of the phenomenon. There were meritorious acts that all could engage in and discreditable acts from which everyone should refrain. Conduct associated with the former resulted in rebirth into a higher social standing while practices connected to the latter augured rebirth into a comparatively lower social status. While Brahmins—in what he considered was their historical and traditional role—exemplified the zenith of this broader system, Christians and Muslims, given the caste backgrounds of those whom he presumed formed the

bulk of their communal numbers, represented the nadir. Nevertheless, Dharmapala continually stressed that it was not all doom for those who found themselves at the lower ends of this social spectrum.

Indeed, in his landmark address at the 1893 World's Parliament, Dharmapala emphasised that the value and worth of caste lost all religious significance when one became Buddhist. "Virtue was the passport," Dharmapala (1965j, p.19) claimed to the audience, "not wealth and rank." All Buddhists, as Dharmapala (1965m, p. 580) urged in an English-language article much later in 1924, should actively promote Buddhism to those who toiled at the bottom of the caste pyramid so that they, too, could discard the social stigma which arose from the ritual status accorded to their caste position. Righteous Buddhist conduct, he claimed, was that which formed the foundations of the social prestige and ritual superiority which Brahmins enjoyed. Karmic demerit explained the lowly position of some segments of subcontinental society. Yet Buddhism promised these groups an escape from social disadvantage—provided they engaged in *samyakdrusṭiya* behaviour—even if this did not actually remove these communities from their caste status or practically elevate them to the standing of Brahmins. For Dharmapala, caste therefore mattered in the organisation and functioning of society. However, that which was associated with caste was not necessarily absolute or final. Crucially, from his own interpretation of the phenomenon, caste had no ultimate bearing on soteriological progress under Buddhist teaching.

Conclusion

Caste status, for Dharmapala, therefore emerged from karmic merit and possessed social value but held no religious reward. The various components that formed his understanding and acceptance of caste, of course, appear contradictory. In a Ceylonese context, he maintained that caste cleavages caused splits among Buddhists and so weakened the overall position of the religion. Yet he maintained that these same cleavages, based around inherent differences in traditional and historical occupations, were justified given their centrality to the functioning of Sinhalese society. In a wider subcontinental context, he looked to the Brahmins as a community from whom all should model their social conduct and targeted Christian and Muslim communities for what he considered unconscionable social behaviours, which he keenly attributed to the caste backgrounds of their members. Nevertheless, he insisted that everyone, regardless of background, could escape from whatever social disadvantage caste brought them by embracing Buddhism. How then can we make sense of these contradictions?

In her description of the social structure of Ceylon's Kandyan region, Deborah Winslow (2024, p. 115) calls for a visualisation that includes "not only high and low, but also center and periphery, more cartwheel than ladder." In categorising Dharmapala's own visualisation of caste specifically, Winslow's "cartwheel" imagery seems especially apt. At its centre lay Buddhism, Dharmapala's primary focus and concern throughout his life and career, and the chief lens through which he negotiated

its trappings. On the periphery lay the claims of various castes regarding origins, status, and functions, of which Dharmapala remained keenly aware but largely disinterested. The spokes connecting the centre to these peripheries were the different avenues—the various monastic fraternities, specific social behaviours, and religious commitment, among others—that linked these claims to Buddhism. This cartwheel was, of course, highly adaptable in Dharmapala's case, as those who were considered high and low could alter their status by embracing and adhering to Buddhist teaching, even if they could not shed the specific labels themselves of the castes to which they belonged. The contradictions themselves are not essential in helping us understand how Dharmapala considered caste. Instead, Buddhism's role in mediating them is what is more significant. As mentioned earlier, and according to Dharmapala's interpretation, caste had no final bearing on one's soteriological progress provided one engaged in appropriate Buddhist conduct.

Despite Dharmapala's musings on the matter, especially in his lesser-studied Sinhalese writings, caste did not form a fundamental pillar of Dharmapala's dual objectives of achieving Buddhahood by serving humanity through Buddhist welfare work. His positioning on caste here, therefore, distinguished him from later generations of Buddhist activists who centralised caste reform and abolition in their career trajectories (Hewage, 2025). BR Ambedkar, who worked not just to fight caste discrimination but also to abolish the institution in its entirety for the harm it caused to subcontinental society more generally, perhaps remains the greatest exemplar of these later activists. Indeed, beyond offering encouragement to convert to Buddhism, Dharmapala did not prioritise participation in any meaningful social, legal, or political campaign—either in Ceylon or India—specifically aimed at uplifting those who faced caste disadvantages and social stigma because of their caste status. With Dharmapala still best remembered in Sri Lanka today for his countless appeals to the wider Sinhalese public, it thus remains apt to characterise his consideration of Buddhism on the island as an “ethnocentric hegemonic ideology” which concealed rather than addressed social inequalities (Silva, 2017, p. 230).

Indeed, it was this influence Dharmapala held over the wider Sinhalese populace that later generations of Sinhalese leaders manipulated to secure their own positions through pushing policies which were ostensibly pro-Sinhalese and pro-Buddhist (Karunaratna, 1965, p. 135; Jiggins, 1979, pp. 8–16; Rambukwella, 2018, pp. 73–101). While Dharmapala did not cater his appeals in Ceylon towards specific caste groups, he undoubtedly attracted the strongest support from those who did not belong to the upper echelons of Sinhalese caste communities—hence his alienation from political elites discussed earlier (Hewage, 2025, pp. 121–26). Ever since SWRD Bandaranaike's electoral success in 1956, political aspirants recognised the effectiveness of the language of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism to make those from non-elite caste backgrounds believe that they had a meaningful role to play in Sri Lankan life. Just as the Colebrooke-Cameron reforms exactly a century earlier opened new opportunities for those from the middle and lower rungs of the Govigama caste and from other Sinhalese caste communities, universal franchise from 1931 again provided new

avenues for these caste groups. When these groups protested that their voices were not being heard, and when those from excluded minority communities similarly protested about their own positions in society, conflict emerged. Indeed, conflicts—such as the Marxist-Leninist uprisings of the JVP in 1971 and from 1987 to 1989 and the civil war with Tamil militants from 1983 to 2009—can all find their origins in the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism of which Dharmapala is so often considered a founding figure (Jiggins, 1979, pp. 5–7; DeVotta, 2007; Rambukwella, 2018, pp. 102–136).

In sum, while Dharmapala primarily tended to treat the Sinhalese as a uniform ethnic community and privileged the ethnoreligious over all other forms of belonging and association, caste nonetheless remained a factor in his wider social calculus. The significance of caste for Dharmapala remains difficult to ascertain from his voluminous English-language writings, addressed primarily to those beyond the island and focused more on Buddhist propagation than social reform. Yet in his Sinhalese-language material, specifically targeted towards addressing all aspects of the lives of his Sinhalese kin, caste remained an ever-present aspect. Indeed, caste proved a useful instrument for Dharmapala to distinguish, more generally, that which was good in society from that which was bad. Though Dharmapala largely addressed both the Sinhalese ethnicity and Buddhist religion in singular terms throughout his career, he was forced to negotiate and could not ignore the various caste-based components that lay within.

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The Arrogation of Being Tamil and Other Campaigns Against Caste Discrimination in Jaffna, 1927–1957

Mark E. Balmforth¹

Abstract

For decades, scholars have interpreted twentieth-century Sri Lankan Tamil history through the prism of sovereignty. From calls for communal representation in the early decades of the century, to the attempt to establish Tamil Eelam at its close, the Sri Lankan Tamil effort to chart a self-directed political destiny is often considered a defining feature of the community's twentieth century story. Less discussed is another question that consumed Ceylon Tamil politicians, activists, and the island's reading public between the 1920s and the 1950s: should the so-called "depressed classes," or roughly a quarter of Tamil-speakers in the island's north and east, enjoy the same rights and privileges of their neighbors? Focusing on four campaigns that shaped these debates—equality of Tamil identity, equality in schools, equality in death, and equality in political representation—I argue that a multi-faceted and, at times, internally divided movement against caste discrimination operated over the four decades preceding the well-known Marxist-led temple and cafe entry protests of the late 1960s. Based on the family archives of key activists, police and other colonial records, and both oral and published accounts in Tamil and English, this article considers the larger circumstances that made landmark civil rights accomplishments possible, including the appointment of the island's first Minority Tamil legislator in 1947 and the passing of anti-caste discrimination legislation in 1957. Drawing insights from new work in Critical Caste Studies, the article reveals how a diverse, multi-caste, and multi-national coalition of Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists united to disrupt widespread discrimination decades before the rise of Tamil militancy. In so doing, this article suggests the addition of a second century-defining theme in twentieth-century Sri Lankan Tamil history: caste struggle.

Keywords

Tamil, Jaffna, Sri Lanka, Caste Discrimination, Civil Rights, 20th Century.

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Introduction¹

For decades, twentieth-century Sri Lankan Tamil history has been interpreted through the prism of sovereignty (Wilson, 1994; Manogaran and Pfaffenberger, 1995; Gunasingam, 2008; Cheran, 2009; Wickramasinghe, 2014). From calls for communal representation in the early decades of the century to the attempt to establish Tamil Eelam at its close, Sri Lankan Tamil efforts to chart a self-directed political destiny are often considered the defining feature of the community's twentieth-century story. Less discussed in historical writing, especially in the English language, is another question that consumed Ceylon Tamil politicians, activists, and the island's reading public between the 1920s and the 1950s: should the so-called "depressed classes," roughly a quarter of Tamil-speakers in Ceylon's north and east, enjoy the same rights and privileges of their neighbors?

In this work, I track a decades-long and little-known series of oppressed-caste campaigns that fought for and won long-denied rights, privileges, and public services, including something that today might seem obvious to an outside observer: public recognition as Tamil. Through their creative use of collective action, civil disobedience, political violence, the mobilization of print media, petitions to government, and public meetings, campaigners for oppressed-caste civil rights convinced people across the island that they deserved the same rights and privileges afforded to all citizens in British and, later, independent Ceylon. These rights included electoral representation, protections from education and workplace discrimination, the right to wear clothing of their choice, and equal access to public space, temples, restaurants, water facilities, transportation, and mortuary spaces. While examples of these forms of discrimination continue to this day and are currently the targets of social justice activists in Jaffna, twentieth-century campaigners should be credited with comprehensively challenging the ubiquitous and systematic deployment of these discriminatory activities that operated at the heart of Ceylonese Tamil public life up until the early 1970s. Over

¹Thanks are due to a host of institutions and individuals who made this work possible. Much of the research was conducted under the auspices of postdoctoral fellowships from the University of Toronto's Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the Government of Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, kindly supervised by Srilata Raman and Bhavani Raman. The American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies supported the operation of the Lanka Critical Caste Studies Working Group that Ponni Arasu and I co-convened in Jaffna between 2022 and 2023. Thanks are due to Ponni, R. Hibakaran, and V. Rupesh for the many lessons they taught me about allyship during this period and since. Ongoing conversations with D. Samuel, M. Thiruvarangan, and Father Sam Ponniah have all helped uncover the contemporary stakes of this story. Archivists at the National Archives in Colombo and Kandy were particularly helpful, and special thanks are due to Dr. Nadeera Rupesinghe and Mrs. Himali Weerakoon. Thank you also to the numerous readers who helped sharpen the work—some of whom must remain anonymous—including Rachel McDermott, Shamara Wettimuny, Dominic Esler, and Senthujan Senkaiahliyan. Family members connected to the story I discuss below have gone to extraordinary lengths to support this project. To the Paul and Jacob families—especially Daisy Paul and Vimala Amma—I offer my sincere thanks for the trust you have placed in me. Stephan Kanagalingam and Henria Aton have both provided critical support and encouragement for this project from its inception; few have done more to help bring this work into being.

the course of the thirty years of work I describe below, oppressed-caste leaders built the institutional foundations necessary to secure legislation that overturned the two-hundred-and-fifty-year legal basis for dominant-caste privilege.

This article focuses on four campaigns that helped shape the larger debate around caste inequality in twentieth-century Ceylon: equality of Tamil identity, equality in schools, equality in death, and equality in political representation. Here, I argue that a multi-faceted and, at times, internally divided movement against caste discrimination operated over the four decades preceding the well-known Marxist-led temple and café entry protests of the late 1960s. In so doing, this article suggests the addition of a second century-defining theme for twentieth-century Sri Lankan Tamil history: caste struggle.

Though the war between 1983 and 2009 can partly explain why sovereignty has often been considered the defining feature of twentieth century Sri Lankan Tamil history, the clarity of this portrayal depends on the language in which one is working. In English, the search for Tamil self-determination on the island is ubiquitous, whereas references to oppressed-caste activism are few and far between. Up until the past few years, many have relied predominantly upon a single article published in 1990. In two more recent contributions, Selvy Thiruchandran's and Bahirathy Rāsānan's interest in exploring Vellālar supremacy is commendable (Thiruchandran, 2021; Rāsānan, 2015). The article, written by Bryan Pfaffenberger, drew on the 1968 clash at Māviṭṭapuram² to partially explain the formation of Eelam Tamil nationalism, or what he describes as "Defensive Nationalism." In his compelling portrayal, the Eelam Tamil national project grew out of a defensive reaction to Sinhala nationalism. While this may very well be the case, this description has also come to be the definitive interpretation of oppressed-caste activism on the island in English. Here, I offer an alternative that considers oppressed-caste anti-discrimination work as the result of oppressed-caste interests, rather than as an adjunct to nationalism, something to which Tamil oppressed-caste communities have long had an ambivalent relationship.³

In Tamil, the situation is more complicated. First-hand accounts of Jaffna-based social justice and anti-caste discrimination work have been published frequently, if irregularly, throughout the twentieth century. For instance, Cū. E. Cīṇṇappu's *Cuvāmi Nāṇappirakācarin Cuvīṣēcat Toṇṭu 1901–1926* [*Fr. Gnanapragasar and His*

²Tamil words have been transliterated using the conventions of the Madras Lexicon. All translations are my own, and have been produced in consultation with S. Kirubalini and Stephan Kanagalingam.

³Oppressed-caste communities in Jaffna have long harbored complex opinions about the Tamil nationalist cause. For decades, they fought to be considered as more than an afterthought by national Tamil leadership. Nearly all Tamil political leaders of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s came from elite backgrounds, and most were Vellālar. S.K. Senthivel, who was a young Marxist activist in the 1960s, has argued for decades that the Federal Party and the Tamil Congress showed no serious interest in the needs of oppressed-caste communities. He writes: "While [the Federal Party and the Tamil Congress] spoke of the unity and rights of the Tamils, non-violent struggle and their rivalry for parliamentary seats, they showed no interest [in] the plight of the downtrodden people living among the Tamils and [the denial] of their rights by the caste system and untouchability" (Senthivel, 2005).

Missionary Labours] and Rāja Śrīkāntaṇ's *Cūraṇ Cuyacaritai* [*The Autobiography of Cūraṇ*] describe educational activism and community building work during the first decades of the twentieth century. The All Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabai's *Camūka Munṇōṭi Em. Ci.* [*Social Pioneer M.C.*] hosts a group of essays by acolytes of one of the most important anti-caste activists of the period, M.C. Subramaniam (1917–1989). Kē. Tāṇiyal's (1927–1986) excellent set of novels, short stories, and essays were the result of self-learned ethnographic methods and community-based descriptions of the past.⁴ Works like these offer critical vantage points into Sri Lankan Tamil history largely ignored by professional historians in any language and challenge the idea that sovereignty is the century's key narrative.

Sitting somewhere between primary and secondary source, *Ilaṅkaiyil Cāṭṭiyamum Atarketirāṇa Pōrāṭṭaṅkaḷum* [*The Struggles Against Casteism in Sri Lanka*], written in 1989 by S.K. Senthivel and N. Raveendran, is the most in-depth description of Jaffna's anti-caste discrimination movement. Its authors are both significant left activists, and their work provides unique access into the logic behind much of the anti-discrimination and civil rights work of the 1960s and '70s. Senthivel and Raveendran also display a tendency to privilege their own party's contributions, for instance in their insistence that the Communist Party of Ceylon-Peking Wing brought a clarity of ideological purpose that united previously disparate causes.⁵ "It cannot be denied," Senthivel has written, "that there have previously been from time to time attempts to combat the caste system and reject untouchability."⁶ Given their enormous contributions, this focus is understandable, though there are consequences for the description of oppressed-caste anti-discrimination activism prior to the 1960s as piecemeal. The labor, bravery, and energies of many hundreds of oppressed-caste activists and allies over four decades of the twentieth century deserves to be identified and better understood.

Theoretically, to paraphrase Gajendran Ayyathurai, I attempt to consider some of the diverse counter-caste practices that Sri Lankan Tamils have mobilized in response to caste-based subordination and exploitation.⁷ In doing so, I seek to contribute to Ayyathurai's larger call for a transformation in the study of South Asia through an investment in Critical Caste Studies, a dedicated scholarly project that systematically rejects academic tendencies to render caste as something natural and documentable, rather than as a social problem and argument made by dominant-castes for political and economic gain.

As others have long noted, the writing of oppressed-caste centered histories presents unique challenges, as does writing about people and places still recovering from decades of war. I have complemented traditional archive-based work in Colombo, Kandy, and Kew with a multi-year search for sources in Jaffna. My interviews for the

⁴For more on Kē. Tāṇiyal's method, see *En Katai*, 1986.

⁵Having been a member of the same political party as Senthivel and Raveendran, it is not surprising that in 1962, Tāṇiyal repeated this same line of argumentation that previous sporadic efforts to overthrow caste oppression in Jaffna had failed due to an inconsistent ideological basis for the campaign. Kē. Tāṇiyal, 1962, pp. 6–7.

⁶Senthivel, "Thoughts and Experiences...", n.p. Emphasis mine.

⁷"It Is Time for a New Subfield: 'Critical Caste Studies,' South Asia @ LSE Blog, 5 July 2021.

larger project of which this article is part began with an unexpected meeting down an unpaved Jaffna road in 2014. They continued through the fourteen months I spent conducting dissertation research in Jaffna in 2016 and 2017, and during annual month-long visits over the subsequent eight years. During this period, relationships with the families of several activists have revealed key sources and breath-taking personal insights. These families could be reasonably described as “activist families,” for the clarion call of their (grand)fathers, (grand)mothers, (great)uncles, and (great)aunts still ring clear as a bell and continue to inspire the dedicated pursuit of justice.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the terms used by oppressed-caste communities to describe themselves have been deliberate and of great political significance. As a result, I am reluctant to use one single foreign and potentially alienating term to describe them. To complicate matters, activists and scholars based outside the island use the term “Dalit” to be comprehensible to and act in solidarity with international audiences.⁸ Prashanth Kuganathan’s use of the term *pañcamar*—meaning, “the fifth people”—is reasonable; however, I have yet to find evidence of the term’s self-referential use by oppressed-caste people on the island in the first half of the twentieth century (Kuganathan, 2014, p. 79). Considering the immense efforts that oppressed-caste Tamils made to claim titles of respect and humanity that I partly document here, I use language cognizant of and deferential to that effort: I alternate between “oppressed-caste communities,” “oppressed-caste Tamils,” and “Minority Tamils,” depending on the period under discussion.

Finally, I must point out three limitations. As you will read, I have not focused attention on the role of the Jaffna Youth Congress because its larger story has already been ably discussed by both Jane Russell and Silan Kadiragamar, though it rightly could be described as an incubator for several of the oppressed-caste led organizations described below. Second, the struggle for civil rights discussed here coincides with widespread discrimination against the island’s Malaiyaka or Upcountry Tamil community, their disenfranchisement, and the stripping of their citizenship. For reasons that need to be better understood, Jaffna-based oppressed-caste activists did not seek to coordinate efforts with the island’s Malaiyaka Tamil community, despite a distinct interest to think island-wide from the early 1940s. Because of this, I do not attempt to incorporate contemporaneous movements among Malaiyaka Tamils. Finally, the roles of women in oppressed-caste activism in Jaffna remain glaringly under-reported. Though all the activist organizations I discuss below were formally led by men, interviews reveal the expansive role that women played as public speakers, educators, and leaders. Dedicated work on this subject is critical if we are to ever truly understand how these communities fought for and claimed a host of rights long denied.

⁸For instance, the Paris-based Front de Développement Pour La Societe Des Dalits Du Sri Lanka explicitly frames itself as a Dalit organization, Kē. Tāṇiyal’s first novel translated into English was subtitled “A Sri Lankan Dalit Novel,” and the important Malaiyaka writer based in Norway, Sarawanan Nadarasa, self-identifies as Dalit. In his work, Sarawanan highlights his own Indian heritage, which may have significance for his use of the word.

In what follows, I consider four distinct, decades-long campaigns for oppressed-caste civil rights that challenged the dense network of discriminatory activities that characterized life in Jaffna in the first half of the twentieth century. I begin with the claim of a Tamil identity.

The Arrogation of Being Tamil

Defining Tamil identity is notoriously complicated. Like a moving target, the idea has changed over time and place, and been subject to contestation, accumulation, and fracture. Today, Sri Lankan Tamils generally rely upon a set of intersecting elements when thinking about who qualifies as “Tamil.” This often includes language, geography, culture, and race. However, it would today be confusing to hear someone’s Tamilness questioned based on caste, regardless of where they were born or live, in Sri Lanka or the diaspora.⁹ Roughly a hundred years ago, however, this was possible. In the Jaffna of the late 1920s, a widespread definition of being Tamil limited membership to dominant-castes, especially the landowning Vellālar, as well as various middle, artisan, or service castes. These land-owning, educated communities claimed to be the sole inheritors of literary, political, and sacred traditions, some of which date back two thousand years to the Sangam period, making them the rightful heirs of the title “Tamil.” Historically denied access to education and thus literacy, Jaffna’s oppressed-castes were often excluded from this definition of Tamil, and thus not heir to what was becoming an increasingly important regional identity and source of pride (Wickramasinghe, 2014, p. 275).

Though this absence of a caste requirement among Sri Lankan Tamils today can be explained as the result of the circulation of early twentieth-century political thought from South India (i.e., through the writings of E.V. Ramaswamy or Periyar) and the multiple waves of migration within the Indian Ocean and further afield, Jaffna-based activism also contributed to this shift. Between 1927 and the mid-1940s, a discrete campaign, led in part by oppressed-caste activists, used organization names, government petitions, and newspapers to publicly claim that oppressed-caste communities were Tamil, thereby seizing or arrogating the term, expanding its meaning, and convincing others of the legitimacy of their claim.

By the turn of the twentieth century, to be Jaffna Tamil was already deeply associated with certain elite and distinctly Vellālar characteristics. Facility in the English language, a dedicated work ethic, frugality, and fiscal acumen were all associated with this identity. “The Jaffna Tamil,” wrote one observer in 1902, “could be seen in every part of Ceylon, India and the Straits and even in more remote parts of the earth where they have gone almost by necessity, and their pluck, perseverance, intelligence, and

⁹This is more complicated for the Malaiyaka Tamils, whose Tamil and Ceylonese/Sri Lankan credentials have been repeatedly questioned and described as illegitimate. For instance, the most recently completed census on the island (2012) officially labels Malaiyaka Tamils as “Indian Tamils.” Considering the often presumed oppressed-caste status of Malaiyaka Tamils, their definition as Indian or otherwise foreign is impossible to separate from a question of caste. Øivind Fuglerud made a similar claim about the ubiquitousness of Tamil identities, regardless of caste, in Jaffna in the late 1990s. See Fuglerud, 1999, p. 20.

elasticity of character have made them conspicuous wherever they have gone; and it is not impossible that a new civilization could flow from Jaffna into her own hoary mother-India" (Nathanael, 1902, p. 34). It is not hard to see how elite Tamil social and political life reinforced the idea that to be Jaffna Tamil was to be Veḷḷāḷar: Tamil political leadership on the island was Veḷḷāḷar, and membership of the leading Tamil political organizations, such as the Ceylon Tamil League, the Tamil Mahajana Sabhai, the All Ceylon Tamil Conference, and the Jaffna Association, were all predominantly Veḷḷāḷar. Elected village and town councils were also almost exclusively Veḷḷāḷar, as was the management of almost all newspapers, schools, temples, and churches.

In February 1927, a group of primarily progressive, dominant-caste Hindus operating under the name the Jaffna Depressed Classes League, Chunakam, began publishing a newspaper called *Tirāviṭaṇ*. Part of the goal of the newspaper was to reform Hindu perspectives on caste and untouchability to stem the tide of oppressed-caste communities becoming Christian. In the preceding decades, Christian—and particularly Catholic—outreach had made noticeable inroads among Jaffna's marginalized communities. Perhaps the most famous example of this was the work of Cuvāmi Nāṇappirakācar (1875–1947), who by 1927 had spent more than twenty-five years building Catholic communities, churches, and schools across the peninsula.¹⁰

The way oppressed-caste communities are described in *Tirāviṭaṇ* helps us see how language circulated in progressive Hindu spaces that explicitly sought to avoid the use of pejorative caste names. Though there was no single, predominant Tamil collective term in use at the time, a set of adjectives were nominalized to refer to oppressed-caste communities. These nominalizations generally relied upon the words *tāḷttappaṭṭa* and *oṭukkappaṭṭa* (both of which can be translated as “depressed,” “oppressed,” or “downtrodden”) and include *tāḷttappaṭṭavarkaḷ* (the downtrodden), *tāḷttappaṭṭa vakuppinaṅkaḷ* (the depressed classes), and *oṭukkappaṭṭavarkaḷ* (the oppressed)¹¹. More infrequently, we also find the use of *taṭṭukkeṭṭavarkaḷ* (those in need), *tiṇṭakkūṭātavarkaḷ/toṭakkūṭātavarkaḷ* (both meaning “untouchables”), and *kīḷ jāti*, meaning low caste.¹² Notably, none of these names are combined with or used to modify the word “Tamil.”

One of the first signs of a coordinated effort to claim a Tamil identity for oppressed-caste people on the island occurred the same year *Tirāviṭaṇ* was founded, in 1927. In July, the eminent dominant-caste Methodist educator Nevins Selvathurai (1863–1938) and a successful building contractor, Joel Paul (1893–1969), partnered with a group of Christian and Hindu leaders to found The Depressed Tamils' Service League. Their goal was “to investigate the hardships endured by the Tamils of the Depressed Classes

¹⁰For a vivid Marxist critique of these activities, see Tāṇiyal, 1986.

¹¹Yāḷppāṇam tāḷttappaṭṭavarkaḷiṇ caṅkam cuṇṇākam" [Jaffna Depressed People's Association Chunnakam], *Tirāviṭaṇ*, 27 February 1927.

¹²References to oppressed-caste communities in more mainstream newspapers of the period are rare, and generally refer to these communities solely by caste name. The *Intu Cātaṇam*, however, did on rare occasions refer to these communities as *tāḷnta cātiyiṇar* [low castes] and *tāḷnta vakuppār* [low classes]. See Vaṭamākāṇap paripāḷaṇam, 1930; Tāḷnta vakuppār piratiniti, 1930.

in Jaffna and in other parts of Ceylon and to endeavor to improve their condition, by means of education, social service, and other civilizing influences.”¹³ The use of the term “Tamil” in the organization’s name served several distinct purposes. It located them in a clearly recognizable political order and defined them as the representatives of a certain constituency. We can see that interest revealed clearly in a letter written to the Colonial Secretary two months after the League’s founding to request permission to appear before the Donoughmore¹⁴.



Fig. 1: Joel Paul circa 1930. Family collection. Photo reproduced with permission.

At the time, the Donoughmore Commission was widely expected to recommend a new constitution for the island and to remake the system of representative politics, which it eventually did in dramatic fashion (Russell, 1982). Representatives from multiple organizations advocating for the rights of oppressed-caste Tamils were given the opportunity to speak before the commission, including the Catholic Diocesan Union of Jaffna, the North Ceylon Workman’s Union, and the United Tamils’ League of Colombo. The Depressed Tamils’ Service League delivered evidence before the commission at Jaffna on 14 December 1927. The group highlighted a host of civil rights issues from educational disparities and discrimination in obtaining marriage licenses, to receiving care at pharmacies, accessing public wells, and the difficulty of obtaining equal justice under the law from dominant-caste juries.¹⁵ Four members of

¹³Jaffna Depressed Tamils’ Service League, “Memorial of the Jaffna Depressed Tamils’ Service League submitted to the Special Commission appointed to consider possible reforms in the Ceylon Constitution,” 7 December 1927. CO 1041/12, The National Archives, Kew, U.K.; hereafter TNA.

¹⁴Jaffna Depressed Tamils’ Service League, “Memorial of the Jaffna Depressed Tamils’ Service League submitted to the Special Commission appointed to consider possible reforms in the Ceylon Constitution,” 7 December 1927. CO 1041/12, TNA.

¹⁵Evidence of the Jaffna Depressed Tamils’ Service League (Witness No. 58). CO 1041/6, TNA.

the League gave testimony that day: Nevins Selvadurai, the Franco-Anglo Principal of St. Patrick's College, Father Charles S. Mathews (1879–1969), the American Principal of Jaffna College, Reverend John Bicknell (1877–1936), and Joel Paul. Paul's presence is significant, because out of the roughly two hundred people who sat before the commission—including many of the most important political figures on the island—Paul was the only known oppressed-caste person invited to speak.

By May 1930, Jaffna-based oppressed-caste claims to a Tamil identity began to be articulated directly to the reading public. We can see this argumentation in the Depressed Tamils' Service League's monthly newspaper *Janatarma Pōtiṇi*. The newspaper, which ran between May 1930 and January 1931, was both edited and funded by Paul. He had been educated in an American missionary school in Tellippaḷai and later trained to become a teacher, but this goal was thwarted by principals unwilling to hire someone from a Paraiyar, or drummer, background.¹⁶ Instead, Paul followed his father into work as a general contractor. With his keen mathematical mind and considerable work ethic, Paul built a successful construction firm responsible for some of Jaffna's most important twentieth-century buildings, including the now razed Jaffna Town Hall.¹⁷ Paul was also an active member of the Jaffna Youth Congress and remained in contact with Handy Perinbanayagam (1899–1977) until the end of his days.¹⁸

Records from Paul's early activist years are rare, though interviews with family and members of his organizations recall the fiery speeches he gave at public meetings. T. Arasaratnam, for instance, frail and more than 80 years of age when I met him, recalled travelling by train in the 1940s with Paul to attend one of the bigger public meetings in Jaffna town, made possible by the urban center. "For these type of meetings," he shared, "depressed class people from all over the village, they gather there. If they go to a particular village here, people won't come much. Now if you have a meeting in Tellippaḷai, only the people from Tellippaḷai will come. Not from outside. Jaffna means, without any fear they go. Because the town, no? That was the situation at that time."¹⁹

Though the formal leaders of The Depressed Tamils' Service League were men, we know this did not reflect the organization's complex assemblage of leaders and membership, let alone the audiences attracted to its public meetings. Interviews and emails with families connected to the organization provide a stream of references to multiple generations of women leaders who were forceful public speakers and key administrative aids.²⁰ At least three such women leaders are known, including

¹⁶Interview with Daisy Paul, 4 March 2023.

¹⁷"Tiṇṭāmaiyaī akarṇa ayaṛātu uḷaitavar" [The Tireless Worker Who Removed Untouchability], *Tiṇṭakaraṇ*, 17 June 1969; interview with Arasaratnam, 4 May 2022.

¹⁸Email correspondence with Robert Perinbanayagam, 5 October 2022.

¹⁹Interview with Arasaratnam, 4 May 2022.

²⁰Interview with Arasaratnam, 4 May 2022; Interview with a Paul family member who wishes to remain anonymous, 6 September 2025.

a Sarah Isaac and her daughters Vidya and Thamilini Isaac.²¹ We also know women were showing community leadership outside of formal organizations by petitioning government to intervene in cases of discrimination.²² Newspapers of the period highlighted the presence of women at the Service League's meetings, which was not ubiquitous in the period.²³

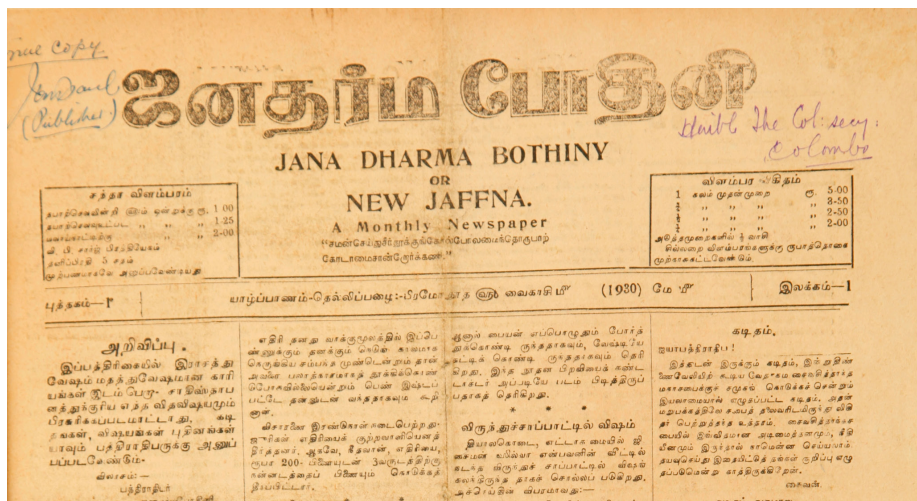


Fig. 2: The cover of the inaugural issue of *Janatarma Pōṭini*, May 1930.

In Joel Paul's introductory editorial in *Janatarma Pōṭini*, he framed his vision for the newspaper, the challenges it sought to overcome, and the solution it offered.

He wrote, in part:

Our opinion is that the way to support the oppressed is to empathize with both oppressor and oppressed through preaching the divine law of the brotherhood of man. We call for the recitation of the honorable and grace-filled *Janatarma Pōṭini*, which will unite and advance the Tamil people with equality beyond caste and religious difference, protect self-respect, and identify all as great and ancient Tamils.²⁴

There is no space here to adequately delve into the influences that fed Paul's arguments, but what is important for our purposes here is his stated goal: to "unite and advance the Tamil people with equality beyond caste and religious difference, protect self-respect, and identify all as great and ancient Tamils." To be Tamil, for Paul, was to share equally in a multi-millennial inheritance of beauty, moral character, and intellectual achievement at the heart of the Dravidian movement. Tamilness bound Jaffna's social

²¹ All three are pseudonyms.

²² "Hooligan Scare in Jaffna," *The Times of Ceylon*, 29 April 1930.

²³ "The Depressed Classes," *The Times of Ceylon*, 22 July 1927.

²⁴ "Enkaḷ pattirikai," *Janatarma Pōṭini*, May 1930.

world together in a way nothing else could; both religion and caste undermined an essential, linguistic unity. Despite having been raised in a world that considered him an outsider as a result of his birth, Paul rejected the discriminatory foundations of the idea, and claimed for himself and his community participation in a unified, expansive sense of Tamilness.

By July 1930, the campaign to be considered Tamil was showing results. One of the first editorials carried by N. Ponniah in his new monthly newspaper *Īlakēcari* made the argument that “oppressed Tamils are Tamils.” Unfortunately, copies of this first issue are not known to exist in libraries on or off the island, and so the details of his argument will remain unknown for the time being.²⁵

It is difficult to track the speed at which Ceylonese oppressed-caste Tamil-speaking people started to be broadly considered Tamil over the course of the twentieth century; however, there is evidence that the shift was already well underway by the mid 1940s. From at least 1944, widely-read newspaper editorials started referring to so-called “high caste” Tamils. For instance, in an opinion editorial discussing caste and social disability in Jaffna, A. Arulampalam of Nīrāviyaṭi noted that, “True, high caste Tamils and Hindus may feel wounded at the breach of time-honoured custom...” (Arulampalam, 1944). We also see a shift in this period among politicians seeking to speak on behalf of all Ceylon Tamils and thus claiming Minority Tamils as part of their constituency. Immediately following the Soulbury Commission’s Report, G.G. Ponnambalam outlined the platform of the All-Ceylon Tamil Congress that made clear their intent to represent all Ceylon Tamils, regardless of caste, and that the pursuit of separate electoral representation that would “divide the Tamil people” was a “short-sighted policy and suicidal for the race, though perhaps advantageous to certain individuals.”²⁶ Though Ponnambalam’s argumentation ran contrary to the interests of oppressed-caste activists, the highly publicized moment attracted the attention of a reading public well beyond the progressive circles that read *Jaṇatarma Pōṭiṇi* or *Īlakēcari*. The moment signals a powerful embrace and legitimization of the argument that Joel Paul had fought hard to put before the Jaffna public.²⁷

Next, I turn from the arrogation of a Tamil identity to the demand for education equality.

²⁵We know that this argument was made thanks to a brief note of appreciation Paul published in *Jaṇatarma Pōṭiṇi* in July 1930. “Īlakēcari,” *Jaṇatarma Pōṭiṇi*, July 1930.

²⁶“Tamil Congress and Reforms,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 5 February 1946.

²⁷Despite these efforts, the Tamil identity of oppressed-caste people in Jaffna was still not universal in the 1970s and early 1980s. Pfaffenberger notes that some Veḷḷāḷars denied that oppressed-caste groups were Tamil during his doctoral fieldwork between 1973 and 1975. Pfaffenberger, 1990, p. 83. Evidence also suggests that some oppressed-caste communities in the period did not themselves identify as Tamil. The militant activist-turned public intellectual Sivaram recalled visiting a Jaffna oppressed-caste village in 1983 that shared none of the nationalist fervor of the urban middle class. Even news of the Sinhalese-led, anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983 failed to generate a strong reaction among the villagers. Civarām, 2005.

Equality in Education

Education was a second critical venue for Jaffna's oppressed-caste activists in the first half of the twentieth century. At the height of opposition to the movement, petitions were signed, public letters filled newspapers, thousands of dominant-caste parents were prosecuted and fined for keeping their children home from schools practicing equal seating, and more than ten schools were burned to the ground. This section considers efforts in Jaffna to claim and utilize rights to free elementary education and the various ways in which this cause was resisted.

From the mid-nineteenth century, Jaffna was one of the most literate and well-educated parts of the island. By 1929, Christian and Hindu institutions managed almost all the 424 schools and colleges in the Northern Province, most of which relied upon funding assistance from the central government.²⁸ This dense educational infrastructure helped make white-collar labor one of Jaffna's best-known exports. Up until the mid-1920s, this educational system was largely a dominant-caste domain. In 1920, the Ceylon Legislative Council passed an educational ordinance making it illegal to consider caste in admissions to state-assisted schools.²⁹ This law, which came into effect the first day of 1924, drew the attention of oppressed-caste parents, and in the years following, colonial administrators mentioned a new interest in education among Jaffna's "depressed classes."³⁰

By February 1925, one of the island's most prominent politicians, Sir P. Ramanathan, guided a set of resolutions through Jaffna's Hindu Board of Education that moved the board toward alignment with the law. The resolutions proclaimed it "the duty of every Hindu" to help those who "had the misfortune of being born in what is called the lower caste family attain through education the principles enjoyable by what is called high caste persons."³¹ Despite being framed as altruism, the resolutions did little more than encourage members to follow the law. Sir Ramanathan's efforts attempted to reconcile the Department of Education's apparent new willingness to enforce equality measures with concurrent dominant-caste opposition.

One way that managers of some Jaffna schools sought to subvert the legislation's caste equality provisions was by arranging school life according to caste, with separate facilities for eating, drinking, and sitting. Oppressed-caste children were generally seated at the back of classrooms, on the floor, while dominant- or middle-caste children sat at the front on benches or chairs, some with desks. In the 1920s, differential seating was hardly restricted to school rooms, and was ubiquitous in public

²⁸Ceylon, *Administrative Reports for 1929*, pt. I, p. D12.

²⁹Ceylon, *Educational Ordinance of 1920*, pt. III, para 13, p. 633.

³⁰Ceylon, *Administrative Reports for 1927*, p. A12.

³¹Educational discrepancies between communities were publicly justified based on cultural or natural attributes rather than unequal opportunity. For instance, according to an author who used the pen name "Common Sense:" "It is our common experience that the children of the people belonging to the castes which have been regarded for generations as high have in them the germs of certain noble qualities which the children of the low castes lack to a great extent, and have, on the other hand, positively harmful mental tendencies." "Equal Seating in Schools," *The Hindu Organ*, 5 March 1928.

and private spaces.³² It is not rare to hear of it still in operation.³³ It was this last form of discrimination inside schools that campaigners decided was rectifiable, as it most clearly broke the spirit of the equality provisions in the law.

Multiple connected efforts were made to compel government action on unequal seating. From July 1927, the Jaffna Depressed Tamils' Service League had signaled education to be one of three critical targets for social reform, along with poverty and "insanitation."³⁴ By that December, the League's leadership emphasized unequal access and treatment in Jaffna's schools in its written and oral evidence before the Donoughmore Commission.³⁵ We also know an oppressed-caste mother from the Roman Catholic Tamil school in Mayilitti wrote a petition to L. Macrae, the island's Director of Education, in which it was explained that oppressed-caste children were made to squat on the ground for hours.³⁶

In late February 1928, a group of leaders from the Depressed Tamils' Service League paid a visit to Macrae in Colombo and provided further details on the state of educational inequality in Jaffna.³⁷ Macrae reportedly assured the deputation that "the Government had no intention whatever of going back on the resolution to treat all school children alike." Macrae's own evidence before the Donoughmore Commission a month earlier also showcased an unwillingness to abide by discriminatory local custom, so we cannot rule out the prospect that white British administrators were setting policy they interpreted as protecting local minority rights. Though multiple actors are likely responsible, wheels were set in motion and a new directive was issued in 1929 that explicitly prohibited distinctions of caste in assisted schools.³⁸ Were the Department of Education to find that such practices were maintained, the school in question would lose its financial support and be required to transition into a private school supported by student fees.

Despite there being a varied collection of published perspectives on the question of equal seating, public opinion as such is hard to gauge due to obvious questions of representation. Even though it was claimed that "the opinion of most of the thinking

³²As public examples of the general practice were challenged in Jaffna in the first half of the twentieth century, differential seating was explicitly deployed to reiterate caste position and subordination, and as a form of insult. In the early 1940s, Ponṇar and Cellaia were respectively elected to the Chankanai and Paḷai village councils, making them some of the first oppressed-caste people to win elections in Jaffna. According to Kē. Tāṇiyal: "When village council member Ponṇar went to the first village council meeting, he was invited to sit on the ground. When Cellaia went to the meeting, a coconut tree stump was placed as a seat. These moments should be engraved in brass in the history of the democratic system of Tamils." Kē. Tāṇiyal, c. 1979, p. 4.

³³For instance, evidence of the post-war practice of preferential seating is noted by Bremner, 2013, p. 33.

³⁴"The Depressed Classes," *The Times of Ceylon*, 22 July 1927.

³⁵Evidence of the Jaffna Depressed Tamils' Service League (Witness No. 58). CO 1041/6, TNA.

³⁶"Hooligan Scare in Jaffna," *The Times of Ceylon*, 29 April 1930.

³⁷"Caste in the Classroom," *The Times of Ceylon*, 28 February 1928.

³⁸"Report of the Commission to Inquire into and Report upon the Present System of Education in Ceylon" (Sessional Paper XXVII of 1929).

people in these days” is “that depressed classes should be elevated,” debate centered upon whether government enforcement would be effective.³⁹ Challenging custom, it was argued, and imposing caste equality through state action, is most likely to provoke opposition, strengthen caste sentiment, and provoke violence.⁴⁰ It may even “create enmity between the two sides and make Nalavas homeless,” as the jurist H.A.P. Sandarasegara once argued.⁴¹ In response, oppressed-caste activists pointed out that all citizens should have equal rights to public services.⁴²

Meanwhile, others sought to link the demand for equal seating to growing calls for independence. The editor of *The Times of Ceylon*, for instance, registered his skepticism that independence would lead to adequate protections for the rights of minority castes, and questioned whether it would instead lead to the exchange of one form of domination (foreign) for another (casteist).⁴³ In fact, this concern had been a running theme through the Donoughmore Commission’s hearings and the evidence it received. For instance, the renowned Sinhala



Fig. 3: M. Sarlis. “No Swaraj To Lanka Until the Scales are Equal.” Painting on paper. CO 1041/10, TNA

muralist M. Sarlis produced a remarkable image making a similar point.⁴⁴ Drawing on Lankan, British, and classical Western imagery, the painting centers Lanka Mava, or Mother Lanka as Lady Justice, light-skinned, bejeweled, and dressed in a Kandyan sari. Lanka Mava stands before a map of the island and the Union Jack, and holds the scales of justice. The scales, labeled Minor Castes and Powerful Castes, are tipped

³⁹“Equal Seating in Schools,” *The Hindu Organ*, 5 March 1928.

⁴⁰This same argument was made repeatedly by opponents to state protections for the rights of oppressed-caste people, first against education equality, then against rights to public cremation grounds, and eventually, access to temples.

⁴¹“Equal Seating Ferment in Jaffna,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 18 June 1930.

⁴²“Caste in the Classroom,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 28 February 1928.

⁴³“Swaraj for Jaffna,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 29 April 1930.

⁴⁴For more on M. Sarlis, see Sanathanan, 2017.

in favor of the latter group. She points to the painting's argument spelled out: "No Swaraj To Lanka Until The Scales Are Equal." The image was apparently given to the Donoughmore commissioners as it was bound into one of the commission's correspondence files now held at the National Archives at Kew.

The 1929 directive to school managers to enforce equal seating or lose their funding created a sensation in parts of Jaffna, with some schools losing eighty percent of their students almost overnight.⁴⁵ Though students at certain schools were heading for the gates, some of Jaffna's educational institutions had accepted and integrated oppressed-caste children into their ranks for two decades. For instance, the American Ceylon Mission's Tamil elementary school in Tellippalai accepted its first oppressed-caste students in 1901 and then enforced equal seating from February 1905 (American Ceylon Mission, 1905, p. 41). Other schools, such as those started by Cuvāmi Ṇāṇappirakācar from the 1910s, were opened specifically in oppressed-caste villages and designed for community upliftment. By 1930, St. Patrick's College had long been operating without caste distinction, followed by Jaffna College, Hartley College, and Uduvil Girls' College.⁴⁶ S.R. Jacob's (1903–1974) experience as Jaffna College's first oppressed-caste boarding student in 1917 was recorded in vivid detail by John W. Bicknell, the son of Principal John Bicknell.⁴⁷

Members of the Hindu Board of Education in Jaffna were up in arms and passed resolutions attempting to delay enforcement and shift the financial burden to the Board of Education should school property be damaged as a result of the policy.⁴⁸ Neither tactic worked.⁴⁹ Major problems were initially reported from Elalai and Kopay. In Tuṇṇalai North's Wesleyan Mission Tamil school, Veḷḷālar students abandoned en masse, leaving just two oppressed-caste children.⁵⁰ Between 1929 and 1933, more than 30,000 fines were issued to parents for school absences, many of which were undoubtedly protests against equal seating.⁵¹

Fire was often used as a form of violent protest, by dominant- and oppressed-caste activists alike. Several schools had been burned in Jaffna's villages before the first case of arson reached the courts and was detailed in the press. Most village schools at the time were wooden-framed shelters roughly ten by twenty feet, surrounded by meter-high mud walls, all of which was covered in palm or palmyra leaf thatch. The schools were thus highly flammable and once set aflame, were engulfed in a matter of minutes. On 24 April 1930, the Vacāviḷāṇ Roman Catholic Tamil school was razed by a group

⁴⁵Ceylon Administrative Reports for 1929, pt. I, p. D7-8.

⁴⁶"Hooligan Scare in Jaffna," *The Times of Ceylon*, 29 April 1930.

⁴⁷Bicknell, 1981, pp. 21–22. Having been deeply inspired by M.K. Gandhi's writings, S.R. Jacob spent the majority of his life dressed in *khadi*, that is, simple home-spun cloth. Consequently, from the 1930s, he was known within his activist and union circles as "Jacob Gandhi."

⁴⁸"Hooligan Scare in Jaffna," *The Times of Ceylon*, 29 April 1930; "Equal Seating in Jaffna," *The Times of Ceylon*, 8 May 1930.

⁴⁹"Equal Seating in the North," *The Times of Ceylon*, 14 June 1930.

⁵⁰"Equal Seating in the North," *The Times of Ceylon*, 14 June 1930.

⁵¹Ceylon Administrative Reports for 1929, pt. I, p. D12, Ceylon Administrative Reports for 1931, pt. I, p. D12, Ceylon Administrative Reports for 1933, pt. I, p. D9.

of seven Catholic Veļļāļars, three days after the announcement about enforcement of equal seating was made.⁵² Two and a half weeks later, in Ēļālai, it was oppressed-caste people who set a school ablaze.⁵³ Hours before the fire was lit, Veļļāļars in Ēļālai met and resolved to ban those seeking equal seating from their land and palmyra trees, thus denying the local oppressed community their livelihood. Within weeks, schools in Tunņālai North and Urumpirāy were in cinders.⁵⁴ In all, more than ten schools were burned, and two villages were forced to pay for a local detachment of constables referred to as “punitive police” until the crisis abated.⁵⁵

Governmental reporting declared that by the end of 1931, with the exception of the Jaffna village of Pūtūr:

“active opposition to equal seating has died out, although it cannot be doubted that there are many who silently disapprove. Nevertheless the depressed class people in certain villages are afraid that if they were to send their children to school, the high caste people would harass them in various ways. They feel that it is not possible for them to resist them or prosecute them in courts successfully...”⁵⁶

In the years immediately following, Jaffna Government Agent E.T. Dyson recorded several visits to villages to investigate complaints against members of the government’s village-based administrative apparatus, including village committees, headmen, and police vidanes. “It is regrettable to note,” the same report mentioned, “that some of the Village Committees are encouraging opposition to equal seating by dealing with prosecutions for non-attendance according to their sympathies instead of in accordance with the law.” In March 1932, he drove out to Pūtūr to determine whether a headman and a teacher of an aided school there were working against equal seating. “The charges are not without foundation,” he wrote.⁵⁷ In July of that year, a caste dispute revealed that while Veļļāļars in Ilavalai had accepted equal seating in the Tamil language school, they “resented some Pallar boys being admitted into the English school.”⁵⁸ Later that month, G.A. Dyson fined the headman of Sirupiddy, V. Kathirgamar, Rs. 10 for “encouraging by his attitude opposition to equal seating in schools.”⁵⁹

There are indications that equal seating was not completely settled even by 1934, but colonial reporting from the period points out that “the desire of the depressed classes, particularly in the Northern Province, for education has been maintained...”⁶⁰

⁵²“Caste Revolt in Jaffna,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 1 May 1930.

⁵³“School Burning in Jaffna,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 15 May 1930.

⁵⁴“Equal Seating in the North,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 14 June 1930; “Opposition to Equal Seating,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 3 July 1930.

⁵⁵“Lawlessness in the Jaffna District,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 12 July 1930.

⁵⁶*Ceylon Administrative Reports for 1931*, pt. I, p. D12.

⁵⁷Jaffna GA Diary, 12 March 1932. 20/127, Kandy branch of the Sri Lanka National Archives, Kandy, Sri Lanka; hereafter SLNAK.

⁵⁸Jaffna GA Diary, 7 July 1932. 20/127, SLNAK.

⁵⁹Jaffna GA Diary, 29 July 1932. 20/127, SLNAK.

⁶⁰*Ceylon, Administrative Reports for 1934*, pt. I, pp. D8, A40.

As admission to and treatment in private schools was not considered to be within the government's jurisdiction, it would not be until the early 1950s that Ramanathan College and Parameshvera College—two of Jaffna's most elite Hindu institutions of higher education—accepted oppressed-caste children. In 1954, the leaders of the North Ceylon Toddy Tappers' Union testified to a government committee on the interconnections between economics and educational access.⁶¹ As J.D. Aseervatham, S.R. Jacob, G. Nalliah, and M.C. Subramaniam explained, "we feel [our children's recent acceptance into Ramanathan and Parameshvera Colleges] has become possible because our children are neatly dressed on account of better economic conditions. The management did not find difficulty as our children were dressed better."

By the early 1950s, Jaffna's oppressed-caste activists, along with brave parents and children, had successfully leveraged ideas of equality under the law to mobilize the island's Board of Education, managers and teachers, village councils and headmen, and even the Hindu Board of Education to enforce educational equality in state-supported schools. The record shows that in some places this project was fiercely resisted and in certain villages it took years for the question of equal seating to be resolved. Despite these challenges, the example of equal seating provides evidence that the Ceylonese colonial state was able to implement policies targeted at ending caste discrimination in public space using public funds, and that oppressed-caste activists played no small role in compelling the state's action.

I now turn to ways in which ritual spaces surrounding death became a venue for the campaign against caste discrimination.

Equality in Death

After the shots rang out, two men lay dead. Both had died instantly within feet of the burning funeral pyres. Though twelve kilometers and more than a decade separated their demises, the deaths of Caravaṇamuttu Rāmaliṅkam and Mutali Ciṇṇatampi were connected by an oppressed-caste campaign to exercise rights to public cremation grounds. This section demonstrates how public space for death rituals became important venues for oppressed-caste rights work. Between 1930 and 1950, ten known cases of the explicit use of cremation to claim rights hitherto denied were documented in contemporary newspapers, colonial reports, and police records. At least four other examples that did not lead to serious injury or police involvement are also known. As they did to secure equal education, oppressed-caste activists mobilized the colonial state to protect their rights. As we will see, the state was an imperfect defender of those rights, especially as independence approached and Jaffna's politics turned distinctly Tamil nationalist.

On 20 May 1931, in a Jaffna village outside Cankānai, seventeen Ceylonese police officers stood shoulder to shoulder, bayonets fixed, while stones rained down upon them. Their uniforms were already ripped and bloody from an earlier clash, while

⁶¹Ceylon, Sessional Paper XVIII. Evidence before the Special Committee to Investigate the Working of the Tree Tax System in Jaffna, 1954, p. 28.

one of their number, Police Constable Ibrahim, lay unconscious and bleeding from a strike to the head.⁶² According to police testimony, a group of several hundred Cāṇṭārs and Kōviyars had used clubs, knives, and rocks in an effort to exclude a local Paḷḷar community from cremating the body of an elderly woman, Tampan Cinnī.⁶³ Police Inspector R. Stewart recorded that, prior to the clash, he had tried to convince both the Cāṇṭār and the Paḷḷar community to resolve the conflict. “I told the Cahndas [sic] that we had to prevent a breach of the peace, and that I would use all necessary force to prevent such a breach.”⁶⁴ Working in tandem with the Maniagar, they tried to convince the Paḷḷars to bury the body, as had been their local practice. Stewart reminded them that the Vellālars own the land on which they lived and the palmyra palms they tapped for their livelihood.⁶⁵ The community declined to bury the body, which by Stewart’s estimation had been dead for about two days.⁶⁶ The community then requested police protection, to which Stewart responded by telling them to collect water for the rites from their own area and see to the cremation.⁶⁷

By the time the clash had occurred in May 1931, oppressed-caste communities in various parts of Jaffna had already started to adjust their funeral practices. As part of the investigation surrounding Caravanamuttu Rāmaliṅkam’s death, T. Suppiah, a Police Vidhan of Caṅkāṇai East, explained that it is not normally the custom of Paḷḷars to cremate their dead. “But now it is being done in the adjoining village Manepay. I know instances of Pallas being cremated. It takes place in Chulipuram, Chunnakam.”⁶⁸ Cremations by communities previously excluded from the ritual were clearly on the rise, and the practice appears to have been occurring for some time without serious incident. Sinnadiyan Kanapathipillai, a 30-year old Paḷḷar who had been part of the funeral party at Caṅkāṇai, testified that the community had already cremated five or six bodies before the day in question.⁶⁹ That year, the Administrative Report for the Northern Province of 1931 also sought to explain the noticeable growth in what were referred to as “riot cases” as part of larger changes in the social order: “During the

⁶²83/1559, 83/1560F, and 83/1560C, SLNAK.

⁶³In his testimony before the inquiry resulting from the incident, Police Vidhan of Changanai East T. Suppiah explained that it was the Vellālars, Kōviyars, and Cāṇṭārs who objected to the cremation. Paḷḷar members of the funeral procession Sinnadiyan Kanapthipillai and Nannian Kuddiyan both noted that Cāṇṭārs and Kōviyars were in the crowd attacking the police, though neither was willing to name those they saw. 83/1560, SLNAK.

⁶⁴83/1560C, SLNAK.

⁶⁵83/1560C, SLNAK.

⁶⁶The decomposition of a body in May—often the hottest month of the year—is rapid, making the timing of mortuary practices all the more important. For several cases such as this, the timing of decomposition placed pressure on all parties involved, creating a deadline tied to intimate questions of respect and public health. In May of 1946, the body of the grandmother of S.N. Rajendram awaited cremation for more than four days as activists and city officials fought over where the cremation could be conducted. At the time, Rajendram was President of the United Youth League and an up-and-coming oppressed-caste leader. “Body Unburied for Four Days,” *Ceylon Daily News*, 4 May 1946.

⁶⁷83/1560C, SLNAK.

⁶⁸83/1560C, SLNAK.

⁶⁹83/1560C, SLNAK.

year 26 riot cases were reported, as against 5 and 9 in 1929 and 1930, respectively. An assertive tendency in the depressed classes due to their growing emancipation and a corresponding reaction in higher castes has stimulated friction in certain quarters and led to this increase.”⁷⁰

With his constables lined up on the cremation grounds, the armed Cāṇṭār and Kōviyar contingent before them and the Paḷḷars behind, and Police Constable Ibrahim bleeding from the head due to a stone strike, Inspector Stewart’s instructions were clear: there was no law preventing the Paḷḷars from cremating the body, and he was to prevent any breach of the peace.⁷¹ As soon as the funeral pyre behind the police line was lit, according to police testimony, the anger of the Cāṇṭārs and Kōviyars was renewed. Stones continued to fall as the Cāṇṭārs and Kōviyars approached the police line. In response, PI Stewart emptied his revolver into the air above the advancing crowd, and took a rifle from one of the police constables. According to Stewart, as soon as the crowd reached ten yards from the police, “a man jumped forward from the crowd, with a drawn knife. I fired from the hip and he fell.” Numerous inconsistencies in this description of events were highlighted during the resulting investigation and trial, though PI Stewart was exonerated of any wrongdoing.⁷² In the moment, PI Stewart interpreted his role as the protector of public rights to the cremation ground, a choice that was then supported by the resulting administrative review.

Thirteen years later, in 1944, the political terrain had shifted and along with it, the significance of the movement to open cremation grounds. Adding to longstanding debates over custom and privilege were newly urgent concerns over the interference of outsiders. With the prospect of independence coming into clearer focus, fears of majoritarian rule and the threat of Sinhala politics “interfering” in “local” issues were increasingly voiced. This growing call, an early vocalization of a Tamil nationalist impulse, became an important element in the direction and development of oppressed-caste politics.

On the evening of 26 September 1944, Mutali Ciṇṇatampi was standing with about 25 family members in the Villūṇṇi cremation grounds, keeping watch over the body of Vallippillai, his elderly aunt, as it burned.⁷³ As much of the evening’s ritual had finished, most of the hundred or so family members had left before the shots rang out. Ciṇṇatampi died on the spot, while two kinsmen, Murukar Poṇṇaiyā of Point Pedro and Anthony Valichaur of Kāraiṇyūr were also wounded.

The moment was preceded by years of effort by oppressed-caste leaders to convince the Jaffna Urban Council to provide space for oppressed-caste cremations in Jaffna Town. In 1941, a motion was put forth in the council to open Villūṇṇi to all castes, though the matter was tabled without a vote.⁷⁴ Then, three months before Mutali Ciṇṇatampi was shot, Urban Council Member Sam Sabapathy put forward a

⁷⁰Ceylon, *Administrative Reports for 1931*, pt. I, p. D13.

⁷¹83/1560C, SLNAK.

⁷²83/1560C, SLNAK; “Revolver or Gun Shot?” *The Times of Ceylon*, 21 January 1932.

⁷³Acting Inspector-General of Police W.T. Brindley to Minister for Home Affairs A. Mahadeva, 19 May 1945. 83/1317, SLNAK.

⁷⁴“Shots Fired at Funeral,” *The Hindu Organ*, 28 September 1944.

motion to create a crematorium for residents of the town who had no other facility.⁷⁵ No apparent action was taken.

The Government Agent of the Northern Province (GA NP), C. Coomaraswamy, spent much of the slowly unfolding crisis balancing between obligations to maintain order, public safety, and equality of access to public services, with the need to respect the concerns, actions, and inactions of local elected officials under whose jurisdiction the cremation grounds fell. Through the Villūṇṇi episode, Chairman of the Jaffna Urban Council C. Ponnambalam struck a conservative line. He frequently argued that custom had taken on the power of law, that existing facilities for oppressed-caste cremation were sufficient, and that the real danger of the moment was the threat to public order. That he took such a firm position belied his complicated relationship to the growing significance of oppressed-caste politics. Some months before the crisis, he had put forward a motion that sought to curb caste discrimination in restaurants and tea shops in the Urban Council.⁷⁶ Though he quickly withdrew the motion, explaining that he was “guided by the views of the majority of citizens,” his actions reveal the growing appeal of catering to a new constituency.⁷⁷

At multiple stages throughout the conflict, GA NP Coomaraswamy repeatedly appealed to members of the council to resolve the situation. He offered suggestions to designate part of Villūṇṇi a general public cremation ground and, when that idea was rejected, to open a new general crematorium within the town limits.⁷⁸ During a conference with the leaders of the Urban Council in October 1944, he emphasized that he spoke to them as one of their own—a Vellāḷar and Caiva Hindu—and that negotiating a conclusion would avoid a future breach of the peace.⁷⁹

Two days after Ciṇṇatampi was shot, his family requested permission to cremate his body at Villūṇṇi. Standing before the GA NP Coomaraswamy and the Superintendent of Police (SP) Osmund de Silva, the family’s Vellāḷar representative V. Sittampalam asked for an immediate response in writing from Chairman C. Ponnambalam.⁸⁰ The request was denied and Ciṇṇatampi’s body was cremated in Kolōmpōturai, outside the Jaffna town limits.

Only a few days later, on 1 October 1944, violence was narrowly averted by police in Arāli North when a Nalavar funeral party cremated the body of a member of their community despite opposition by two nearby communities.⁸¹ In his correspondence with GA NP Coomaraswamy, SP de Silva also made clear that he wanted direction as to what attitude the police should adopt should the Nalavar community request police protection to cremate another body at Villūṇṇi. The question appears to have been settled nine months later, during a meeting between the GA NP and police leadership when it was revealed that the “police have no legal right to prohibit cremation or burial

⁷⁵“Jaffna Seeks Textile Quota,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 14 June 1944.

⁷⁶“Stormy Meeting of Jaffna UC,” *Ceylon Daily News*, 14 September 1943.

⁷⁷“A Challenge to the Tamil Congress,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 29 September 1944.

⁷⁸“Villundi Tragedy Sequel,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 19 October 1944.

⁷⁹“Not Willing to Share Villundi Crematorium,” *The Observer*, 18 October 1944.

⁸⁰“Intolerance Over Crematorium,” *Ceylon Daily News*, 29 September 1944.

⁸¹Osmund de Silva to C. Coomaraswamy, 3 October 1944. 83/1317, SLNAK.

of Nalavas at Villundi but, if a breach of the peace is anticipated, action could be taken under Section 114 Cr. P.C.”⁸² Section 114 of the Criminal Penal Code is an insurrection clause.

By the first week of May 1945, no progress had been made on the proposed general cremation ground within the Jaffna Urban Council limits. In response, activists arranged for the body of another Nalavar community member to be cremated at Villūnri. Soon after the cremation on 7 May, a telegram was sent to the Inspector-General of Police (IGP) Ranulph Bacon in Colombo by S.R. Jacob, the President of the North Ceylon Minority Tamils Mahasabha to inform him of the cremation and requesting police protection for the collection of ashes.⁸³ This was followed up the following day by another telegram that added “WHY NO REPLY MATTER URGENT.”⁸⁴ Jacob had also written directly to Ceylon’s Governor Sir Henry Monck-Mason Moore appealing for protection.⁸⁵

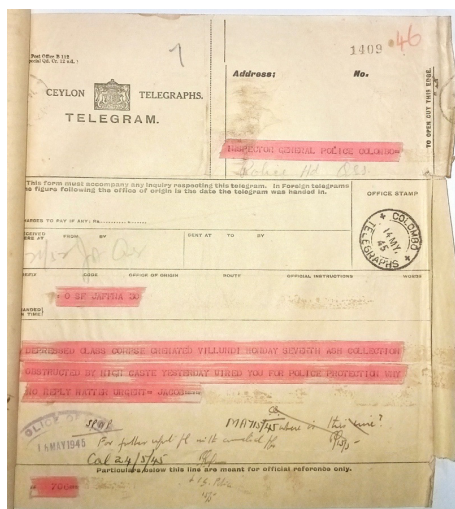
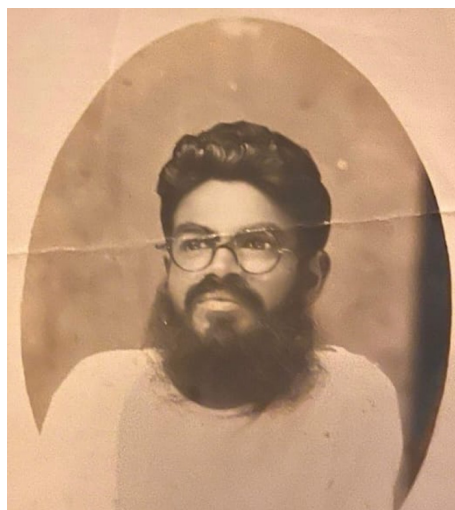


Fig. 4: President of the North Ceylon Minority Tamils Mahasabha S.R. Jacob circa 1930. Family collection. Photograph reproduced with permission. Fig. 5: The telegram Jacob sent to Inspector General of Police Ranulph Bacon to request police protection for the collection of ashes at Villūnri. 83/1317, SLNAK. Photograph credit: Stephan Kanagalingam.

Within a month, A. Nagalingam of the Saiva Virithi Sangam of Kottāṭi had sent the Minister of Home Affairs a petition signed by 27 members of the organization, calling on him to act.⁸⁶ Nagalingam claimed that the police were “the aiders and

⁸²“Notes of Conference held at Kachcheri on 10.6.45.” 83/1317, SLNAK. After further inquiries by the SP NP, the IGP finally weighed in on this question three months later, in September 1945, confirming “the Police have no legal right to prevent the Depressed Classes entering the Villundi crematorium to cremate their dead.” SP NP to IGP, manuscript note, 12 September 1945, with answer of 15 September 1945. 83/1317, SLNAK.

⁸³S.R. Jacob to Ranulph Bacon, Telegram, 13 May 1945. 83/1317, SLNAK.

⁸⁴S.R. Jacob to Ranulph Bacon, Telegram, 14 May 1945. 83/1317, SLNAK.

⁸⁵Acting Inspector-General of Police W.T. Brindley to Minister for Home Affairs A. Mahadeva, 29 May 1945. 83/1317, SLNAK.

⁸⁶83/1317, SLNAK.

abetters” of the Nalavars in their criminal activity and “doing everything possible...to upset religious custom.”

In response to the petition, Jaffna Chief Inspector of Police T.B. Herath forcefully defended the police’s approach. “I submit that it is a libel on the part of the Petitioners to say that we have taken sides in this matter,” he argued. “It was in this connection that the leader of the depressed classes asked me for Police protection to remove the Ashes from the Crematorium. I told him that I would do nothing of the kind and also informed him that I would not hesitate to place him in custody if he was going to be the means of a serious breach of the peace. Our policy has been and is strictly impartial and within the law. As a result the intelligent and disinterested public here appear to have confidence in the Police at present.”⁸⁷ According to reports, the ashes were never collected.

In 1931, the Jaffna police went to great lengths to enforce the law of equal access, even to the point of showing armed force and opening fire on a group of dominant-caste protesters and their enforcers after having been attacked. By 1944, when an oppressed-caste community sought to exercise their legal rights, the government establishment considered and then declined that same protection. Government officials appear to have accepted the plausibility of the arguments put forth by leaders of the Jaffna Urban Council that custom had obtained the power of law, and the contravention of custom was a threat to public safety.

Finally, we now turn to oppressed-caste efforts to ensure electoral representation.

Equality in Electoral Representation

Between 1927 and 1946, three commissions guided the establishment of Ceylon’s system of national representative government. Though adjustments have been numerous, many of the changes this period put into place remain constituents of Sri Lanka’s system of government. In hundreds of interviews across the island, senior British and Ceylonese administrators spoke with a vast array of individuals who insisted on making their claims to representation heard. In 1927, a commission led by Richard Hely-Hutchinson, the 6th Earl of Donoughmore, recommended universal adult suffrage and paved the way for widespread adult participation in the democratic process. This was followed by a second British-led commission in 1945, in which Herwald Ramsbothom, the first Viscount Soulbury, investigated and then proposed a constitutional system in which electoral representation to the new Parliament would be balanced between both territory and what were called “communities of interest.” Finally, in 1946, the eminent Ceylonese jurist L.M.D. de Silva chaired the island’s first delimitation commission, which used the Soulbury report and its own hearings to draw electoral boundaries for the first parliamentary elections in 1947.

During the work of each of these three commissions, oppressed-caste activists gave testimony, held political meetings, and wrote publicly to protect their electoral

⁸⁷CIP Jaffna T.B. Herath to ASP Jaffna P.R. de S. Seneviratne, 17 August 1945. 83/1317, SLNAK.

rights.⁸⁸ In response, oppressed-caste leaders faced claims denying their community's existence, threats of verbal and physical harm, and the regular denial of reasonable requests for the same rights their fellow citizens enjoyed. Throughout each step of the process, all three commissions listened to oppressed-caste claims of ubiquitous mistreatment and the need for independent representation. Each time, hereditary caste and political interests impressed upon commissioners reasons to limit efforts designed to ensure oppressed-caste representation. The combined effect of this advocacy, explored below, resulted in an electoral system that effectively barred oppressed-caste representation from Parliament for thirty years.⁸⁹

At the time of the Donoughmore Commission's arrival on the island in November 1927, the prospect of universal adult franchise represented a distinct threat to the conservative political order writ large, not just for the Vellālar-controlled Tamil political landscape. At the time, the right to vote was restricted to literate adult men with a monthly income of at least Rs. 50 per month or those who owned property worth Rs. 1500. This resulted in an island-wide electorate totaling 204,997 men, or about 4 per cent of the island's population, in 1924.⁹⁰ Queried as to his perspective on expanding the franchise to all adult men, Ponnambalam Ramanathan responded that a wider franchise would place power in the hands of men who have no time for reading newspapers, engaging in political debates, or other activities that educate people for civic responsibility. "You want to give him political privileges?" Ramanathan implored, "For his own sake I say he will have no time for it."⁹¹ His argument against the expansion of the franchise to women revealed a similarly conservative and patronizing perspective that was clearly at odds with the socialist tendencies of the commissioners. The Commission recommended a broad franchise for most men above the age of twenty-one and women above thirty. The Colonial Office in London responded by reducing the age threshold for women to twenty-one, making the island the first country in Asia with universal franchise.⁹² In its report, the Donoughmore Commissioners noted that, though they were unable to recommend special representation for oppressed-caste communities, they believed the extension of universal franchise, combined with recent efforts to ensure equal educational opportunities, were "the true remedies for their condition." (Ceylon, 1928, p. 72).

Arriving on the island in 1945, the Soulbury Commission was tasked with thinking through constitutional reform that would more directly prepare the island

⁸⁸Oppressed-caste activists were also concurrently fighting for electoral representation at the municipal and village level, where successes were more forthcoming. In the 1948 Jaffna Municipal Council elections, D. James was elected for the Cathedral ward, which had been created specifically because of pressure by various activists. "He Creates Precedent," *The Times of Ceylon*, 7 December 1948.

⁸⁹In 1977, with the support of the Tamil United Liberation Front, T. Rasalingam (b. 1933) was elected from the Uṭuppiṭṭi constituency.

⁹⁰Ceylon, *Report of the Special Commission on the Constitution*. Ceylon Government Press, 1928: 12, 61.

⁹¹CO 1041/4, TNA.

⁹²K.M. de Silva, *A History of Ceylon*, p. 522.

for independence. Part of that remit included making recommendations for new electoral boundaries. Though the actual drawing of boundaries was left to the Minority Tamils Progressive Union, a subsequent body, the Soulbury Commission did make a range of recommendations devised to navigate the political challenge of ensuring minority representation. While taking keen interest in the claims put forth by leaders of the All-Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabha, the Soulbury Commissioners publicly recognized the distinct limitations associated with single-seat electoral divisions.⁹³ Scattered or widely dispersed minority communities of interest were generally unable to concentrate enough votes to win any one single-seat election, leaving them without representation. In response to this issue, the Soulbury Commissioners recommended that the Delimitation Commission consider creating larger, multi-member constituencies. In theory, minority communities of interest would then be able to consolidate enough votes for a single candidate. Parts of Colombo and Jaffna were both recommended for such consideration (Ceylon, 1945, p. 73).

Between the release of the Soulbury Commission report in 1945 and the Delimitation Commission report of 1946, an oppressed-caste elected Member of Parliament was a distinct possibility for Jaffna. The hearings before the Delimitation Commission reflect this possibility, both as optimism from the perspective of oppressed-caste activists and concern from the Tamil political establishment. The arguments of oppressed-caste organizations, particularly the All-Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabha and the Minority Tamils Progressive Union, centered on the call for multi-member constituencies.⁹⁴

In his multiple testimonies before the Delimitation Commission, the leader of the All-Ceylon Tamil Congress and State Council member for Point Pedro G.G. Ponnambalam offered a master class in lawyerly skill and charismatic charm. While his Oxbridge English and patrician courtesies were common to his generation of Ceylonese politicians, Ponnambalam also had a wickedly sharp sense of humor and was known to use insults to devastating effect. Due to his experience, position, and skill, Ponnambalam's testimony carried enormous weight. Ponnambalam argued that the commission should adopt an expansive interpretation of minority rights to representation. In his enumeration, this definition would field 34 minority seats, 13

⁹³During the Soulbury Commission's visit to Jaffna in February 1945, member Frederick Rees and commission secretary Trafford Smith were invited by members of the All-Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabha to tour a recent site of caste violence. In Kanpollai, a village outside Point Pedro, the group visited the site of a home razed two days earlier and spoke with victims. Immediately following this visit, the three leaders of the All-Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabha that accompanied commission members were attacked. M.C. Subramaniam, D. James, and V.R. Ganapattipillai were tied together using Subramaniam's shawl, and an attempt was made to light the three on fire. A doctor and three policemen happened to drive past and stopped the assault before anyone received a life-threatening injury. Kē. Tāṇiyal, 1979, pp. 5–6; *Ceylon Daily News*, 16 March 1945.

⁹⁴Representatives to the first Delimitation Commission hearings in Jaffna for the All-Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabha were J.D. Aseervatham, M.A.C. Benjamin, D. James, P. Jonah, and G. Nalliah. Representatives for the Minority Tamils Progressive Union were A.B. Rajendra, Ariya Pathirana, and M.C. Subramaniam.

of which would be held by Ceylonese Tamils. Then, to avoid potential threats to the unity of a Ceylonese Tamil voting bloc, Ponnambalam systematically deconstructed the arguments of oppressed-caste activists who sought representation as minorities among Ceylonese Tamils. In previous testimony before the Soulbury Commissioners, Ponnambalam had publicly questioned whether a Minority Tamil community of interest actually existed in the first place by pointing out that the term “depressed classes” was difficult to define.⁹⁵ “In this country,” he went on, “it is a fairly wide term, and a rather nebulous class.” Before the Delimitation Commission, Ponnambalam leveraged ongoing disagreements within the oppressed-caste rights movement itself. This point was made abundantly clear in the testimonies of the two primary Minority Tamil organizations. When asked whom they represent, members of the All-Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabha argued that Vaṇṇars (launderers) and Ampaṭṭars (barbers) were not part of the “depressed classes” because they have public rights that Naḷavars, Paḷḷars, and Paṛaiyars do not.⁹⁶ Speaking on behalf of the Minority Tamils Progressive Union, Ariya Pathirana—Jaffna’s leading Sinhala politician and a former member of the Jaffna Urban Council—argued that Vaṇṇars and Ampaṭṭars were certainly part of the “depressed classes,” as they faced the same exclusion from political life as all the other oppressed communities.⁹⁷

The question of the size of the Minority Tamil community was of critical importance, as the larger the community, the more important it was to ensure their representation. Unlike categories such as religion and race, caste has been excluded from modern census taking since its inception in 1871, and so when the question of the size of oppressed-caste communities was raised, authoritative data was unavailable.⁹⁸ Estimates varied from as little as 42,000 to over 200,000 people. When asked about this latter number, Ponnambalam quipped: “All I can say is, some of us might belong to that category.”⁹⁹ Ponnambalam thus undermined and dismissed Minority Tamil claims using caste-inflected humor designed to appeal to a dominant-caste listener. The efforts of oppressed-caste activists and their allies were clearly hampered by the lack of independent data, and this ambiguity provided license to their opponents.

Taking a slightly different tack, the Nationalist Tamils Committee argued that because the social advancement of oppressed-caste communities was proceeding so

⁹⁵“Argument for Balanced Representation,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 16 February 1945, p. 1.

⁹⁶Delimitation Commission, Proceedings of the Public Sessions Held at Jaffna, 5 July 1946: 21. 108.25/9, Sri Lanka National Archives, Colombo, Sri Lanka; hereafter SLNA.

⁹⁷Delimitation Commission, Proceedings of the Public Sessions Held at Jaffna, 5 July 1946: 44. 108.25/9, SLNA.

⁹⁸There is a history of debates among those designing the Ceylonese and Sri Lankan censuses as to whether caste should be included. For instance, in early 1945, a conference of Government Agents discussed the proposal and there was general agreement that it should be an included category, though the recommendation was not accepted by the executive committee of the Ministry of Labour, Industry and Commerce which had the final say. See *Census of Ceylon 1946*, 1, no. 1: 155, pp. 277–228.

⁹⁹Delimitation Commission, Proceedings of the Public Sessions Held at Jaffna, 5 July 1946: 73. 108.25/9, SLNA.

quickly, a permanent electoral response was unnecessary. Instead, A.E. Tamber and Handy Perinbanayagam argued for a transitional representation: "Their disabilities can be obliterated in a short time. Things are moving pretty fast and we would not stand in the way of nomination of a depressed class man to the Parliament."¹⁰⁰ Oppressed-caste activists also seemed to see the writing on the wall, and pivoted to a second option. J.D. Aseervatham, the representative of the All Ceylon Minority Tamil Maha Sabha at the delimitation hearings, closed his remarks by advocating for the nomination of an oppressed-caste leader to the Senate or House of Representatives.¹⁰¹

Upon the Delimitation Commission report's release, the possibility of electing an oppressed-caste member to Parliament faded, as the commission was unwilling to design an electoral space in Jaffna with the distinct aim of facilitating oppressed-caste representation. This choice was principally justified based on a question of quantifiable evidence. "Figures supplied by various deputations were largely, if not entirely, the result of private effort," the Commission wrote, "and we find it impossible to accept them for the purposes of accurate delimitation."¹⁰² Despite this choice, the Delimitation Commission did explain that they sought, to the best of their ability, to leave oppressed-caste communities electorally undivided, "to give these groups a greater voice in the election of representatives than they have hitherto possessed."¹⁰³

Though the Delimitation Commissioners made clear that they had no ability to comply with the multiple requests they received to recommend to Governor Henry Monck-Mason Moore that he nominate an oppressed-caste representative to Parliament, the inclusion of this note in their final report sent a message.¹⁰⁴ Just more than a year later, on 16 October 1947, Governor Moore appointed A.B. Rajendra to the upper chamber of the Senate, making him the first oppressed-caste member of Parliament.¹⁰⁵ Having graduated from St. Patrick's College in Jaffna, he rose through the ranks of the Education Department to eventually become Interpreter Mudaliyar to the Governor. After retirement, he became President of the United Youth League and was a leader of the Progressive Minority Tamils Union.

Aside from the symbolic value of his appointment, A.B. Rajendra was able to rapidly contribute to the oppressed-caste cause from his new position. On 27 January 1948, Senator Rajendra made a motion calling on government to ensure access to public wells and cremation grounds, and to require all public authorities who issue licenses to restaurants and tea shops to include conditions that prohibit discrimination (Ceylon, 1948, pp. 941–942). The motion resulted in the Cabinet issuing a government circular that was discussed in the Jaffna Urban Council in October 1948. Chairman C. Ponnambalam did not attempt to hide his displeasure. After reading the circular out

¹⁰⁰Delimitation Commission, Proceedings of the Public Sessions Held at Jaffna, 6 July 1946: 21. 108.25/9, SLNA.

¹⁰¹See, for instance, "North Wants Nine Seats," *The Times of Ceylon*, 10 July 1946.

¹⁰²Ceylon, Sessional Paper XIII, Report of the First Delimitation Commission, 12.

¹⁰³Ceylon, Sessional Paper XIII, Report of the First Delimitation Commission, 12.

¹⁰⁴Ceylon, Sessional Paper XIII, Report of the First Delimitation Commission, 12.

¹⁰⁵A.B. Rajendra would be followed in Parliament by the nominations of G. Nalliah in 1957, and M.C. Subramaniam in 1970.

loud, he stated that the central government should “not preach without practicing,” and that it was guilty of discrimination of its own, a comment with obvious nationalist implications.¹⁰⁶

Despite the 1948 government circular, caste discrimination and exclusion from public space continued into the 1950s. In 1956, the teacher and Communist activist P. Kandiah (1914–1960) was elected to Parliament for the Point Pedro constituency. Helping begin a long tradition of Communist support for oppressed-caste politics in the North, Kandiah was influential in helping advance the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act. Brought by the Federal Party’s MP for Trincomalee N.R. Rajavarothiam (1908–1963), the act passed with the support of S.W.R.D. Bandaranike on 13 April 1957. The act read like a summary of oppressed-caste anti-discrimination activism of the period. It prohibited more than ten separate forms of discrimination, including the prevention or exclusion of a person on the basis of caste from schools, cremation grounds, public wells, public vehicles, shops, restaurants, or temples normally open to all followers of a religion. Though rarely referenced today, the Act was a watershed moment for the movement. It would take another decade before someone was charged under the law and for that case to wind its way through the courts, but once the dust settled the result was momentous.¹⁰⁷ For the first time, a legislative act had overruled the legal protection of dominant-caste custom and privilege protected in Tēsavalamai, the Dutch-codified legal codes of Jaffna. That is to say, in about thirty years of work, oppressed-caste campaigners managed to secure legislation that ended at least two-hundred and fifty years of legal sanction for dominant-caste supremacy.

Conclusion

We can also see from this story that the decades of activism leading up to the well-known 1968 clash at Māviṭṭapuram was led by a diverse group of oppressed- and dominant-caste leaders, that included Hindus, Christians, Sinhalese, Buddhists, and foreigners. Activists were variously motivated by a Christian sense of human equality, an interest in renovating Hinduism, a sense of Tamil unity that transcended religion, and a socialist drive to overturn social inequality. Combined, all these motivations produced a multi-faceted anti-discrimination agenda. Like any other social body, the movement also navigated its own internal conflicts.

As we have seen, the role of the colonial and then post-colonial state varied throughout this period. Early on, the state was an active defender of public rights to education and cremation ground space, yet by the 1940s government representatives had become hesitant to contradict the protectors of tradition and were willing to accept delay tactics for the preservation of the status quo. As Tamil nationalism became a more direct motivation in both local and national politics, oppressed-caste claims of Tamilness were used against their calls for separate representation.

¹⁰⁶“Set Example,’ State told: Circular on Caste ‘Discrimination,’” *The Times of Ceylon*, 14 October 1948.

¹⁰⁷Balmforth, 2023

That oppressed-caste advocates failed to ensure that the island's new electoral system protected their equal access to political representation is beside the point. They achieved meaningful victories by winning seats in village councils, the Jaffna Municipal Council, and through appointment to Parliament. In so doing, Jaffna's oppressed-caste advocates of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s reshaped Tamil political life on the island, and helped make Jaffna at the dawn of independence arguably more politically equitable than ever before.

There are several potential routes forward for this history, far more than I am able to note here. First, I have just touched on internal divisions that challenged the unity of oppressed-caste activism in the period—including narrow and more expansive definitions of being part of the “oppressed classes”—but this just one of many points of fracture that need to be better understood, as ideologies, methods, religion, and personality clashes all threatened to break-up the movement. Better understanding these challenges helps us see just how remarkable the movement itself was, to have overcome so much. Second, this article has focused on Jaffna due to its centrality to the oppressed-caste rights work in the period, but Jaffna is just one of several important parts of Tamil Sri Lanka. We need to better understand how space has affected the story of caste discrimination, both across the island and across Jaffna. Third, Sinhala politicians, Buddhist monks, and Colombo-based political agendas have played important roles in this history beyond the simplistic “interloper” narrative that Tamil nationalist politicians used to dismiss criticism. For instance, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, and Madihe Pannaseeha Mahathera all channeled resources and political support to oppressed-caste activists and communities in Jaffna, and these remain little understood parts of the story.¹⁰⁸ Fourth, deep consideration of the intellectual origins of oppressed-caste activism is necessary, because it came from some surprising corners. Periyar and Gandhi both played roles, as did a host of Christian and Marxist writings and thinkers, but we also know that American Black intellectual history played a role: we know Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901) was being publicly discussed in Jaffna as early as 1916. Finally, multiple Canada-based family members interviewed for this project explicitly requested anonymity due to ongoing experiences with caste discrimination, including social isolation and fear that public association with this history could harm the marriage prospects of the youngest generation. Further research on caste in the diaspora is clearly needed to expand on work being conducted by P. Thanges and most recently, Mark Whitaker in the first part of this Symposium.

A fuller account of the transformations that oppressed-caste activists of this period achieved will point to the ubiquity of caste struggle between the 1920s and 1950s. Due to space limitations, I have focused only on the campaigns surrounding Tamil identity, education, mortuary space, and electoral representation. Future research will demonstrate coordinated oppressed-caste efforts to access clean water, land, and economic independence. Combined with what we know about the movement

¹⁰⁸Also, see Dominic Esler's article in this volume for a critique of the scholarly separation between Tamil and Sinhala caste systems on the island.

to challenge caste discrimination and open temples and tea shops in the 1960s, and new work on the horizon by Bahirathy Rāsānan on the complicated role of caste in the LTTE, a new picture is developing. Caste struggle, in various forms, articulated by different actors, and for a range of ends, has been a constant and central narrative in twentieth-century Sri Lankan Tamil history. Both its remarkable successes and the obstacles it has overcome can serve as powerful lessons for anti-caste activists today.

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Rethinking Knowledge, Unthinking the Brahminical: Dalit Feminism and Gender-Caste

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Abstract

This article introduces a Dalit decolonial feminist standpoint as an epistemic and political framework that redefines feminist thought through four interrelated pillars. It argues that decolonial and postcolonial frameworks remain constrained by their inability to recognise caste as the meta-structure that organises social relations, epistemic hierarchies, and modernity itself. Building on Dalit feminist thought, the article situates the Dalit decolonial feminist standpoint as a methodological and conceptual intervention that locates the entanglement of Brahminical patriarchy and coloniality as the constitutive core of modern knowledge. It proposes that decolonisation without debrahminisation reproduces the logic of caste within the emancipatory vocabulary of decoloniality. Among the standpoint's pillars, the analytic of gender-caste assumes central significance, positing that any theorisation of gender in South Asia must acknowledge caste as meta to its construction and lived expression. Together, these pillars foreground Dalit women's lived and theorised experiences as epistemic interventions that challenge the universalising tendencies of both colonial and Brahminical modernities, reworlding feminist thought towards a decolonial future.

Keywords

Decolonial, Caste, Feminism, Standpoint, Dalit, Subaltern

Introduction

South Asian postcolonialism has been facing an intellectual dead end in its anti-colonial consciousness due to the limits of nationalistic postcolonialism to address precolonial inequalities and segregation. However, several reasons contribute to this

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spectacular stoppage. Two reasons that needs urgent discussion within academia are namely, the problem of indigeneity and an overarching brahminic world view. Aloysius (2007) identifies this failure as rooted in what he calls the culture–power fusion of Indian nationalism, where the language of liberation was used to reproduce traditional hierarchies of caste and class. His historical-sociological analysis foregrounds the submerged masses, the Dalit-Bahujan- Adivasi majority, as the absent subject of nationalist imagination. The nationalist project, rather than achieving an egalitarian community, reconstituted the brahminical social order under a secular state form producing what he calls a state without a nation that exposed the contradiction at the heart of Indian postcoloniality.

The pursuit of decolonization must be understood against this backdrop of exclusion and appropriation, where socio-cultural actors across the tri-continents have sought diverse ways to dismantle coloniality and negotiate indigeneity—an enduring debate within Indian politics. Specifically, the Indian subcontinent as a socio-cultural and economic space houses communities, cultures and languages with often overlapping long *durée* histories. Therefore, debates around what and which elements could possibly represent pan-Indian indigeneity are always active and emblematic of Indian politics. In addition, the centrality of caste oppression across these debates and histories complicates an uncritical reinstitution of caste infested indigenous past. The violence and inequality inherent to precolonial caste structures were consolidated under British colonial rule and continue to shape postcolonial experience. Colonization, specifically British rule, exploited the pre-existent caste hierarchies to employ indirect rule over the vast subcontinent. This confluence of brahminic and colonial values facilitates an uninterrupted carry over of casteism into contemporary fabric of Indian every day and structural social (Guru and Sarukkai, 2019), foreclosing the possibility of a truly decolonial perspective.

Additionally, post-independence, postcolonialism focused on anti-colonial narratives which pitted modernity as a western virtue against Indian indigeneity (traditions, customs and cultural practices) which upheld caste values and aesthetics (George, 2024). While being exploitative to every group of natives, colonization left behind an elite class of national leaders with caste privileges to build and represent India and thus, the Indian postcolonial image (Panikkar, 2016). This produced a monolithic Brahminical representation of Indianness, reflecting an oligarchic social order where socio-economic and cultural capital remain concentrated in upper-caste hands, while Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi communities continue to face systemic exclusion. Over the past decades, relative social mobility achieved by individuals across the oppressed communities have created contact zones between the communities and hitherto ‘untouched’ social spaces including academia.

Subaltern theorists from DBA communities have successfully put forth reimaginations of the decolonial efforts with debrahminisation at its centre. Ayyathurai (2021) argues the emergence of Critical Caste Studies as a distinct subfield is crucial for academic engagement with caste as a pervasive social and epistemic structure. This approach challenges the normalization of caste hierarchies in knowledge production

and insists on centring the experiences and resistances of subordinated communities, thereby complementing decolonial and anti-caste projects. However, there is a persistent dissonance between decolonial and anti-caste projects, wherein, the former is regarded as transnational and the latter local. Therefore, this article delves into the experience of caste within coloniality (and vice-versa) to advocate for a rethinking of approaches to decolonization as a single axis anti-colonial endeavour within an indigenous social vacuum erasing multiplicity of postcolonial gendered experiences. Dalit feminist approach to decolonization broadens the boundaries by escaping a myopic view of the processes of colonisation towards the end of social justice.

This article advances a Dalit Decolonial Feminist Standpoint (DDFS) as both a theoretical and methodological framework for decolonial research underscoring that decolonisation in the Indian context is inseparable from debrahminisation. The standpoint is animated by a dual imperative: first, to forge solidarities across outcaste communities; and second, to reconfigure cognitive and social orders toward justice. It is articulated through four guiding pillars: (1) subaltern experience as relational and foundational; (2) recognition of the entangled core of Brahminical patriarchy and colonialism; (3) the discourse of the unthought, grounded in the lived reality of untouchability; and (4) caste as meta, articulated through the category of gender-caste, which together constitute the methodological core. Together, these pillars support decolonial inquiries to centre Dalit consciousness by serving as reference points throughout the research process. They enable decolonial research to address the epistemic silences foregrounding Dalit positionalities and Indian particularities in ways that challenge dominant epistemologies. In doing so, DDFS provides a means of exploring questions of gendered postcolonial being that remain obscured within existing frameworks. The article proceeds in three interlinked stages. It opens with an exposition of the Hindu social order as theorised by Ambedkar, before critically examining the mechanisms of Brahminical patriarchy and the constraints of mainstream Indian feminist frameworks. It provides a brief conceptual scaffolding setting the stage for the subsequent section, which elaborates the Dalit decolonial feminist standpoint.

The Paradise that Never Was: Hindu Social Order

Beginning in the fifteenth century, Europeans began colonizing the Indian subcontinent in various ways and on different scales. However, for centuries before colonization, both European and non-European travellers observed, chronicled, and shared their diverse, and sometimes opposing, social and intellectual perspectives on the lands beyond the Indus. In order to identify and dissect the influence of colonization on homogenising social categories, albeit incompletely, necessitates tapping into the social within the consciousness of precolonial societies which moulded the experiences of the self and the communities. From earliest travel accounts to ethnographic and trade documents, the socioeconomic hierarchy of *varnas* (Hindu broad caste groups which house numerous sub-castes) and *jatis* (sub-castes) is frequently documented as a cultural-religious commonality that unites the Indian subcontinent, all of which

are viewed with curiosity and/or disdain (Subrahmanyam, 2017). Subsequently, global travellers, colonial anthropologists, and native academics explored the caste system in great detail as a feature of ‘Hindoos’¹ (Nesfield, 1885; Davids, 1911; Senart, 2018). These views offer partial accounts of the complex social order marked by vast linguistic, cultural and social diversity as foundational to the inhabitants of the subcontinent. These accounts, though useful, need to be assessed within the context of untouchability i.e., the unlikelihood of elite travellers and scholars to engage with oppressed and slave castes due to the strict practice of caste segregation. Therefore, strict segregation coupled with high degree of endogamy erases any possibility of a truly subaltern perspective within early accounts. This misfortune continues to affect Indian intellectuals and extends to decolonial discourses which maintain minimal engagements with anti-caste decolonial perspectives. This has created a series of potholes in the development of postcolonial studies.

The role of caste in enabling administrative colonization through a coalition of colonial and brahminic forces is seldom a topic within decolonial discussions. In particular, as an approach to understand how different meta structures fused over centuries to produce and sustain the contemporary categories of social identities. Hindu social order as theorised by Ambedkar is a foundational theory which investigated the local configuration of power and social relations linking multiple historical (and contemporarily valid) aspects of the Indian sub-continent centring the twin categories of caste and gender. The Hindu social order is separate from what we understand in the contemporary world as Hinduism—a unified religion borne out of British colonization (Subrahmanyam, 2017; Chakravarti, 2023). Nevertheless, it must be noted that Hinduism is dependent on the Hindu social order in its mythological, ritual, and social practices and therefore, cannot sustain independently (Ilaiah, 2002). Within Hindu texts, in particular Manusmriti,² Hindu social order was justified using the divine doctrine that different *varnas* were created from distinct parts of the divine body of Brahma³ (Olivelle and Olivelle, 2005). It must be noted that while all religious texts recognize equality in creation, Hindu texts are the exception where inequality becomes the foundation of the religion. Ambedkar explains that Hindus, similar to

¹Hindoo as a word carries religious, cultural and geographical connotation in contemporary world. However, in precolonial India, Hindoo was predominantly tied to the lands beyond the river Indus. It must be noted that Hinduism as an umbrella religion took form after the British rule conglomerating numerous beliefs, dieties and customs. Therefore, caste as *varnas* and *jatis* predate Hinduism as a religion and forms its base.

²Manusmriti also known as the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra or Laws of Manu, is one of the many legal texts and constitutions among the many Dharmaśāstras of Hinduism which details rules of caste and brutal punishments which should be imposed on those who break caste laws. Manusmriti was one of the first Sanskrit texts to be translated into English, in 1776, by British philologist Sir William Jones to construct the Hindu law code for the East India Company administered enclaves.

³Brahma is a Hindu god, who is worshipped as the creator within the *Trimurti* (trinity of supreme divinity that includes Vishnu and Shiva). He is associated with creation, knowledge, and the Vedas. Brahma is prominently mentioned in creation legends.

other religious followers, consider men as a creation of God but with an addendum to it,

according to them, the whole truth consists of two parts. The first part is that men were created by God. The second part is that God created different men from distinct parts of his divine body. The Hindus regard the second part as more important and more fundamental than the first. (Ambedkar and Moon, 2019, 100).

The divinely ordained doctrine of inherent superiority and inferiority among distinct human classes finds its centrality in both colonialism and Brahminism. However, within Brahminism, the explicit prescription of caste slavery and oppression in its religious texts further deepens the socio-religious and cultural normalization of inequality. This doctrine insisted that the creation of distinct and different classes of humans are intrinsic, fundamental, and a divinely ordained way of existence and thus, should be translated into the daily lives and practices of Hindus. Nevertheless, caste distinction is sustained with the aid of religious and social sanction. This categorization was practised through birth-based imposition of occupations which dictates ones ritual, economic and social stature within a graded hierarchy consisting of endogamous caste communities (Balakrishnan, 1983; Iliaiah, 2000; Yengde and West, 2019). Through his prolific scholarship, Ambedkar highlights that the immutability of positions maintained through endogamy effectively opposed the concepts of fraternity and equality found in most other religious texts (Ambedkar, 2021). Under the order, the oppressed castes were penalized for their incidence of birth through extreme deprivation of socio-economic resources, occupational slavery and social ostracization (Ambedkar, 2014). In particular, untouchables (Dalit) and tribal (Adivasi) castes who were considered to be outside of the divine order were relegated to slavery which entailed extreme physical violence, deprivation and mental humiliation (Mohan, 2015; Paul, 2021).

In addition, the Hindu social order needs to be understood as an ordering of caste groups rather than individuals, wherein, it was impossible for an individual from a particular caste group to gain caste mobility,⁴ thereby depriving them of the possibility of a casteless self and thus, social freedom. What is most significant in his theorisation of Hindu social order is the inseparability of caste from other social identities. The Hindu social order which operates through caste system was also identified as the control point for gender identities, occupation, economic class, ritual and social status (Ambedkar, 2014). Historically, caste position dictated your gender, economic and rituals roles within the society. Ambedkar identifies gender violence through gendered practices such as sati, child marriage, and imposed widowhood, which serve as norms⁵

⁴Though exceptional, over centuries, certain subcastes as a class have been mobile along the caste hierarchy due to various socio-economic changes (Osella and Osella 2015). However, scholars argue that colonisation further rigidified caste structures further reducing the possibility of caste mobility of even caste groups (Dirks, 2011).

⁵It must be noted that atrocities against women in India which were discussed and debated during independence struggles and social reform movements, including sati, and widowhood

instituted to maintain the caste order (Ambedkar, 2021). Therefore, the justification for caste order and its practises, though tied to religion, cannot be wholly contained within its boundaries. In other words, caste serves as the simulacra of cultural life and as the fulcrum of economic distribution in precolonial and, consequentially in colonial India.

Given the extent of caste labour and exploitation, the British were able to control the subcontinent by establishing their power over the caste elites. The pre-existence of cheap bonded service and slave castes who functioned as endogamous communities of workers controlled by socio-ritual classes of caste elites helped the colonisers, especially the British, to adopt a unique *modus operandi*. The absence of large-scale transcontinental slavery into South Asia during colonization is due to the presence of large indigenous populations of Shudra workers and Dalit slaves. To elaborate, the caste system which functioned as an organising principle and subsequently, as a rigid hierarchal socio-cultural and economic division of labourers helped colonial officials to form alliance with the ruling natives and dominant classes (oppressor castes) permitting imposition of direct administrative colonialism (Omvedt, 1994; 2011). As a result, institutions of caste slavery, endogamy and untouchability were utilised for the benefit of the coalition (British-native masters) and subsequently, parcelled as a non-violent harmonious local tradition riddled with complex religious sentiments (Mohan, 2015; Dirks, 2001).

During the colonial period, there were structural changes in the social order, which did not entail a destruction of the pre-existent order but rather changes within the functioning of sociabilities and hierarchies in response to colonial values. The syncretisation of race and caste is one of the best examples to grasp the colonial-brahminic schema. The British officials were unable to comprehend the complex and foreign system of caste. However, racial segregation was both acceptable and logical to the colonial minds. Therefore, the scientifically unfounded colonial formulation of racial superiority of the white Aryan race was superimposed on the Indian populations to validate the oppressive caste-based hierarchies in line with racist colonial ideologues (Thapar, 1996). Using biological essentialism characteristic of Europe, British officials recognised brahmins⁶ as a race with distant Aryan ancestry whereas, the oppressed castes were deemed as inferior races ignoring the complexities associated with caste system (Thapar, 2019). This rhetoric helped the colonial officials to create a native class loyal to them based on the myth of racial proximity whilst maintaining native hierarchy and their superiority over all Indian populations including the brahmins. Therefore, the colonial period was characterised by racialisation of caste and castification of race entwining white and caste supremacy. The syncretisation of race and caste justified caste oppression in secular terms supported by colonial scientific racism and caste became an example of universality of racial inequality (Cháirez-Garza et al., 2022). Therefore, the caste system, though not colonial in its origin was used and influenced by British colonialism (Dirks, 2001).

were oppressor caste practices effectively excluding Dalit women and their issues.

⁶priestly caste which occupies the top-most position in the caste hierarchy.

The trauma of colonization and subsequent rise of nationalism united separate regions with distinct sub-cultures, assuming the geo-historical cultural space of India into existence (Sarkar, 1992; Anderson, 2006). With the birth of India post-independence in 1947, class began to be used as a pseudonym for caste to project the idea of secular modern India. Furthermore, Hindu nationalism functioned as a unifying agenda legitimising the Hindutva⁷ ideologues of providence and fixed divine order into the fabric of postcolonial India (Mehta, 2022). Unfortunately, the enthusiasm to institute a coherent and simple to comprehend history for nation-building led to the marginalisation of sub-cultures, erasure of histories of the minoritized and thus, their accounts of social ostracization and economic deprivation (Chakrabarty, 1992; Guru and Sarukkai, 2017).

Over many centuries, it has evolved as an oppressive system with the ability to mutate and reproduce graded inequality interacting with colonialism, modernity and capitalism (De Neve, 2019). The mutual interdependence colonial-brahminic systems of oppression has influenced the *modus operandi* of the caste system while safeguarding its main characteristic to exploit its hierarchical structure for sustenance of neo-colonial capitalist exploitation (Thorat et al., 2023). It has a long history and present rooted in its continuous breeding with (neo)colonial values resulting in a unique conjugation of systems of caste, gender, religion, ethnicity and race. This makes an isolated study of postcoloniality without an analysis of modernity of brahminism an incomplete endeavour. Anti-caste convictions stand in direct opposition to the ethnocentric essentialist idea of a glorious past and emphasises the need to synchronously decolonise and debrahminise⁸ systems of intersectional oppression.

Brahminical Patriarchy versus Dalit Consciousness

Decolonial scholars such as Oy  w  m   (1997) and Lugones (2016) have explored how colonial systems of power have shaped our contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality and the systematic suppression (and erasure) of non-European ways of being. The violence of colonization and Euro-American cultural hegemony have distorted and influenced the pre-existent gendered ways of existence of the previously colonised societies. Therefore, a major task at the hands of decolonial gender scholars is to recover and represent alternate understandings of gender in order to highlight the colonial sociality of contemporary gender constructions. In addition, interventions by Black feminist activists and scholars highlighted the existence of different gendered experiences even within Euro-American societies arising out of historical

⁷Hindutva is a political extremist ideology which seeks to establish Hindu hegemony within India equating Hinduism with Indianness (Leidig, 2020).

⁸I conceptualise debrahminise as the act of dismantling the brahminical order which is founded on the gradation of classes of people. This entails conscious political and collective efforts. It requires anti-caste and feminist intentions to imagine a post-caste and post-patriarchal future. It does not isolate the varna of Brahmins but actively resists the system of caste. However, there is a need to acknowledge privileges of all castes relative to each other to fight this graded system of inequality.

racial, cultural and social oppression (Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2015). However, following the discussion on precolonial Hindu social order, it is clear that gender functioned for and within caste-bound laws in the Indian subcontinent.

An individual's gender role, expression and sexuality was constructed, controlled and allowed by their specific *jati*. This leads to extreme isolation and control over sexuality of oppressor caste women, while lower caste women experiences a state of non-being characterised by violence, economic deprivation and untouchability. Ambedkar characterises caste as an order which required close monitoring of its sub-populations to reinforce and uphold the unnatural division of people. He identified sustained endogamy, enforced through strict control of women and their sexuality, as the key factor that transformed caste-based segregation into a functional social order (Gorringe, 2018; Ambedkar, 2021). To quote Wakankar, 'Hinduism's freedom co-exists with an affirmation of caste distinction (2010, p. 28). Therefore, individual freedom is incompatible with caste values and caste communities were prescribed endogamous social quarantine in lieu of purity.

There is a huge gap between early theorisations of gender which centralised caste and postcolonial theorisations which favoured a nationalist anti-colonial approach (Sarkar, 2009; Guru, 2011). The oppressor caste hegemony within post-independence nation-making and inaccessibility to knowledge/power which afflicted Bahujan and Dalit populations favoured a monolithic brahminic representation of the postcolonial subaltern obscuring caste inequalities. Subsequently, postcolonial gender scholarship, which has been canonized, follows frameworks that emerge from the habitus and endogamic knowledge circuits of the caste privileged. Although several streams of regional social reform movements focusing on women's issues preceded the nation building process of India, historiography of modern Indian feminism often begins with the pro-women's rights sentiments in the late 1850s in mainland India (Pande, 2018).

To elaborate, during British rule, the reluctance of the dominant Hindu elite to accommodate women reforms, the British crown's eagerness to spread Christian values, and the reformers' determination to use the self-rule negotiations as a bargaining point resulted in some unlikely alliances (Banerjee, 2003). Several reformers appealed directly to the British officials and non-officials for enacting laws prohibiting Hindu practices such as Sati, child marriage and mandatory widowhood surpassing the mediation of the native elites (Basu, 1995). Hence, colonial government was often perceived as an ally by the social reformers in their fight against tradition with orthodox oppressor caste Hindu elite. During the independence struggles, to prevent further British-reformer coalitions and to consolidate native leadership, visible and deliberate attempts were made by Indian nationalist leaders to address feminist and social reform claims.

The leaders of the independence struggle(s) predominantly belonged to the Hindu oppressor caste elite communities. Consequentially, the women included within major mobilisations and organisations of the newly formed India was of a similar

background.⁹ In addition, these groups had the power and influence to pick and choose elements from colonialism, and brahminism to present a reformed brahminism to form the foundation of modern India (Omvedt, 2000). Subsequently, a figure of the modern Indian womanhood (modern but different from that of the west), which suitably reflected the virtues of nationalism and colonial patronage, modelled after oppressor caste aesthetics was iconised to unite reformers and nationalists (Sinha, 2000). This can be identified as a re-brahminisation of Indian patriarchy which sought to subsume feminist movements and invisibilise caste differences within the larger rubric of anti-colonial nationalism. This attempt to handcuff feminist movements (predominantly for and by women movements) to nationalist factions and party politics subsequently submerged feminist theorisation and activism in the immediate aftermath of independence (Patel and Sinha, 2021). A detailed analysis of Indian feminisms is outside the purview of this article and will be a reiteration of the well-known. However, it will be beneficial to briefly discuss certain concepts and debates which developed in the last few decades in Indian feminism(s).

As mentioned above, the model Hindu woman was constructed for oppressor caste women by oppressor caste men. What is interesting is how the exclusion of oppressed caste women from this category became fundamental to its construction. While exalting the model of Hindu women as the desirable, it was important to construct an Other which symbolised the downfall. The outcaste experience of Dalit women was juxtapositioned against the relatively better off existence (especially in terms of material privileges but not limited to) of oppressor caste women (Geetha, 2007). Through an analysis of domestic manuals and didactic literature of post-independence India, Gupta traces how Dalit women were constructed in opposition to the oppressor caste women within a gendered casteist discourse instituting stable categories of oppressor caste *pativatras* (ideal wives) and oppressed caste and/or Dalit *kutnis* (vamps). She notes, 'the construction of woman in this literature had thus two sides: upper caste was what woman is and ought to be; Dalit was what she had better not be. It allowed the upper castes to maintain a position of moral and caste superiority' (Gupta, 2008, p. 115). Postcolonial reinvention of gender categories maintained and used the gaping differences between castified gender experiences. The symbol of modern Indian woman was the gendered other of oppressor caste Hindu men who were the ideal modern Indian citizen. Thus, Dalit women who face othering in terms of racialised caste and gender becomes the 'despicable other' of the 'gendered other' representing the doomed womanhood. In short, Dalit women were constructed in the negative and embodied caste-gender impurity pushing them into a zone of non-being (Fanon, 2008).

Caste difference, thus, controls the construction of gendered differences between oppressor caste womanhood and Dalit sub-humanity. At 2015 Delhi pride, young Dalit queer journalist Dhrubo Jyoti highlighted the ambivalence of gender and caste

⁹For example, a report of the 1889 session of the Indian National Congress in Bombay notes the presence of women delegates as being no less than ten consisting of Europeans, Christians, one Parsi, one orthodox Hindu, and three Brahmins (Kosambi, 1988).

as separate identities, 'we bring caste up because caste is everywhere and in my everything. Caste is in my shirt. Caste is in my pant. Caste is in my sex. Caste is in my being and Caste is in every part of you too!' (Upadhyay, 2020, p. 467). This dichotomy between oppressor and oppressed castes which existed in their material, cultural, social and ritual positions in the Indian societies unfortunately offered an abysmally weak bargaining position to Dalit women and queers to intervene in mainstream feminism in the immediate aftermath of independence. Knowledge production and power networks were controlled and inhabited by caste oligarchies. Therefore, it should be noted that the absence of representation of Dalit feminism within historiography of Indian feminism should not be regarded as evidence of its inexistence but that of exclusion. Several examples points to a common oppressed caste feminist consciousness emerging from a different social situatedness from the precolonial to post-colonial periods tackling the entangled core of brahminical patriarchy and colonialism (Raj, 2013; John, 2015).

The relative delay in bringing intersectional theorisations into the fold of Indian feminism is due to its non-engagement with Dalit-Shudra and non-Brahman movements advocating the radical restructuring of Indian society (Omvedt, 2011). Brahminic feminism (also termed Savarna feminism) was and is the most accepted form of feminism within Indian academia and gender movements, viewing gender issues through an oppressor caste lens, thereby primarily catering to the needs of oppressor caste women and excluding oppressed caste women (Rao, 2003). The absence of a collective cultural memory without caste inequalities within the Indian subcontinent for hundreds of centuries has normalised casteist worldviews especially through exclusion and omission further enabling brahminical supremacy. Dalit feminism is regarded as by and for the oppressed caste community while 'Indian' feminism, along with its stamp of neutrality, is earmarked for brahminic feminism (John, 2015; Arya and Rathore, 2020). Moreover, focusing solely on women's oppression risks overlooking the ways in which caste hierarchies shape masculinities; as Lakshmanan (2004) demonstrates, Dalit men negotiate their identities under systemic caste oppression, highlighting that both male and female subjectivities are structured by caste. Ignoring these dynamics reinforces Brahminical normative frameworks, which then extend into the diasporic context, where the engendering of Indian communities is largely framed around oppressor caste norms, nostalgic cultural preservation, and idealized notions of the Indian pasts (Chayani, 2018; Purkayastha, 2019). This single axis analysis of gender within an Indian postcolonial framework erodes the possibility of further discussions and solidarities which could benefit subaltern communities within India and across regions (hooks, 1992; 2015).

Defining a Dalit Decolonial Feminist Standpoint

Foremost, decolonisation as an active project need to be defined to support the specific nature of colonial and regional specificities which structure Indian gendered identities (including diasporic identities) in relation to Europe. Therefore, decolonial projects require intentional and deliberate acts which strive to recognize post-colonial social

categories, hierarchies, and relations as products of an entangled social core of regional power structures (brahminism), and (neo)colonialism. Decolonial scholars should practice research informed by histories of oppressions across and within cultures. While keeping the definition of decolonial project broad to ensure applicability across cultures, it is necessary to build a theoretical framework which can remain focused on the particularity of India.

Subaltern schools in general, and decolonial discourses in particular, are currently implanted within larger frameworks which share histories of Dalit and gender oppressions. This echoes Aloysius's observation that Indian nationalist thought displaced the social struggles of the oppressed castes into the background, denying them participation in defining the modern nation (2007). These discourses struggle to theorise anti-caste feminist epistemologies due to a disjunct between the dominance of neo-colonial and brahminic stronghold on spaces of theory creation which attempts to theorise decolonial subalternity which escapes subaltern perspectives. In addition, Dalit feminist and decolonial theorisations are scattered across disciplines and have not been yet institutionalised as a school of thought in either Indian or Euro-American academes. Due to the multiplicity of theoretical schools across disciplines of feminist and decolonial studies, it would be more appropriate to develop a standpoint to undertake this task as opposed to a novel theory.

Defining a Dalit decolonial feminist standpoint necessitates a critical departure from the epistemic terrains of both postcolonial and feminist theories that have historically failed to account for caste as the meta-structure of social and intellectual life. Dalit feminist standpoint is not an extension of identity politics but an epistemic and political intervention that redefines the very conditions of knowledge production and its legitimacy. As Patil (2013) asserts, Dalit feminism must be understood as a reflexive, anti-caste praxis rather than an extension of identity politics. Drawing on Marx, Mignolo, and Oyěwùmí, she repositions Dalit women's location-based knowledge as an epistemological intervention within feminist thought, rather than a peripheral or experiential supplement to it. The standpoint introduced here builds on such insights offered by anti-caste theorists—from Ambedkar to Patil—as a methodological framework that operates as a dynamic reference point accompanying the researcher's inquiries. Therefore, drawing from and contesting Dalit and transnational feminist theories, I attempt to define a Dalit decolonial feminist standpoint which seeks to uncover brahminic-colonial thoughts which create and sustain local and transnational gendered experiences. It aims to forge solidarity across outcastes to resist (in short term) and restructure (in long term) cognitive apparatus in lieu of a decolonial future. Specifically, I have developed four central pillars which will function as reference points in the process of theory making and research analyses. The central tenets are briefly described below:

Subaltern Experience as Relational and Initial Point of Enquiry

Over recent decades, scholars have increasingly recognised that Indian subalternity in its most intense form is embodied in the lived experiences of oppressed castes.

Yet these experiences are still often treated as merely local issues, rather than as integral to broader theorisation. At the same time, the marginal space accorded to racialised subalterns in the West generates a reluctance within diasporic communities to acknowledge their own relative privileges. Nevertheless, multiple studies and legal cases have reaffirmed the persistence of caste discrimination within global diasporas (Dalwai, 2016; Adur and Narayan, 2017; Pratibha, 2021; Yengde, 2022; Mégret and Dutta, 2022). Such evidence unsettles diasporic denials of caste, while exposing how global caste discourses are frequently dismissed as regressive or exaggerated, thereby complicating projects of postcolonial solidarities. This reluctance is also compounded by an inadequate conception of subalternity as a fixed or absolute position. An intersectional perspective, by contrast, insists that subalternity is contextual and relational, constituted through shifting configurations of caste, race, gender, and class.

Keeping in mind the complexity of subalternity, this standpoint starts from the initial condition of gendered caste oppression to make sense of the world. Gopal Guru puts forth Dalit discourse as a sharp contrast to the derivative and *desi*¹⁰ discourses governing nationalist thought by imagining India based on a negative language foregrounding itself in the local configuration of power suggesting a parallel problematic which is marginal, different in style, and socio-politically 'beyond' (Guru, 2011). Dalit-Shudra thought which shapes the category of beyond centralises the experience of untouchability which remains theoretically underused. In his construction of beyond, the foundation in the local configuration of power is conceptualised as an initial condition capable of going beyond its own particularity.

Furthermore, feminist and race scholars have been using standpoint theory as an epistemology, methodology and/or approach advocating that particular social and political locations, often marginalised, encourage the growth of knowledge (Harding, 1986; Collins, 1989). Scholars pointed out that standpoint as a methodology enables stronger objectivity by centralising marginalised positions putting forth novel and excluded, nevertheless distorted, starting points of inquiry emphasising the significance of context of theoretical discoveries (Haraway, 1988). Standpoint theories centre on social relations, lived experience, and differences, emphasising the interconnectedness of power inequalities to overcome epistemological ignorance emerging from dominance of a particular worldview. However, standpoint theories are often misinterpreted advocating for essentialist visions and separatism by privileging experience as the sole criterion for theorising the subaltern(s).

Dalit discourses extensively tackle the role of experience in thinking and knowing which paves an understanding of subalternity as experience which shapes the notions of self and community (Guru and Sarukkai, 2019). Guru affirms that universalism,

¹⁰While derivative discourse of nationalist thought is thoroughly discussed by western and challenged by subaltern scholars, Guru highlighted the *Desi* strand of thought which sought to reverse the logic of orientalism making the west an object of inquiry while being self-referential. According to Guru, *Desi* thought which developed as a response to the colonial epistemology required 'the west as a negative reference point' for its own 'authentic articulation' and acquired partial autonomy through its 'privileged access to Sanskrit providing necessary vocabulary for developing an alternate theoretical thinking' which was unavailable to the oppressed castes.

which is often tied to colonality of power, is lost in the domain of experiences. It highlights that conceptual approximation depends upon experience(s) which hinges on reproduction of spaces that are structured along different and intersectional axes (economic, colonial and discursive) producing fragmentary forms of experience. This resulting differentials in the realm of experiences for the privileged is a political condition necessary to maintain domination and becomes inherent in their theory-making leading to the effective objectification of the marginalised (Guru and Sarukkai, 2017). This objectification emerges out of systemic inequality and is often beyond the control of individual theorists. Charles Mills and Rich Benjamin have tackled this theoretical issue within the concepts of racial contract and whtopia in their exploration of racial dynamics and white supremacy (Mills, 1997; Benjamin, 2016). However, this argument does not claim experience as the sole grounds for theory making. It advocates the recognition of the value of subaltern experience within research, especially theorization.

Experience becomes an epistemic resource at the hand of subaltern as an initial condition which needs to be revisited using concepts, and theories to arrive at the essential condition of theorisation. Everyday social through routine habitual practices and interactions influences engagements with the structural social and thus, can lead to varied and multiple consciousness within social groups. Dalit women are recognised as unique social organisms built in contradistinction to 'woman' in mainstream Indian feminism and 'Dalit' in Dalit politics (Pan, 2018). Dalit women inhabit the process of worlding as a removed subject(s) of brahminised colonial power structures (Ramesh, 2020). This helps them to critically understand the legitimised aesthetics, metaphors, and phenomenology involved in theory making as particular to and of the dominant rather than inhabiting a social vacuum. A decolonial Dalit feminist standpoint originating at the initial condition of Dalit gendered lived experience empower development of theoretical explanations contesting given knowledge as best beliefs of privileged cultures. It interjects the neutrality afforded to the privileged exemplified in their power to represent and not to be seen. This standpoint entails an awareness of the tendencies of knowledge circuits to restrict Dalit feminist discourses to narratives and life testimonies of pain, suffering and violence emerging out of patronage of brahminical and western (Euro-American) schools of thought (Rege, 1998; Arya and Rathore, 2020).

Furthermore, starting at the Dalit experiences of colonialism encourages to pay attention to regional specificities, and to the dynamism and reproduction of a spectrum of gendered subaltern experiences compelling to envision decolonialisation and brahminisation as single endeavour towards freedom. Therefore, it initiates a deliberate reshaping of theoretical space(s) by focusing on diverse ways of Dalit knowing to the end of theory-making complimented by empirical inquiries. Within this standpoint, intersectionality becomes a crucial methodological element that aids in navigating the entanglements of distinct socio-economic and political categories. Through an interrogation of the ontology of alienation, under fulfilled citizenship and permanent displacement to the margins, Dalit decolonial feminist standpoint should

inculcate a strong grasp of connectedness of various oppressive systems through the initial starting point of Dalit experiences. However, the organic intersectionality it offers must be considered as foundational but not sufficient in itself to produce theories to understand the why(s) and how(s) of subaltern being. This necessitates transitioning from the local (Dalituality) to transnational (subalternity) to synthesis experiences of outcastes across regions, languages and situatedness.

Recognition of an Entangled Core of Modernity of Brahminic Patriarchy and Colonialism

As discussed throughout this article, the precolonial Hindu social order characterized by the brahminic oppression was both recognized and exploited during the colonial period. This interaction of imperial oppressive systems to-date controls the socio-economic and political hierarchies in South Asian societies. It is actively powering the systems of gender, religion, sexuality, race and class. This entanglement of oppressive ideologues privileges and disadvantages caste groups by controlling the social experiences of individual and communal identities. It is, therefore, necessary to recognise the inseparability of modernity of brahminic colonialism from every day and structural social to understand the (post)coloniality of power reproducing inter and intracontinental inequalities. This requires decolonial Dalit feminist standpoint to directly address the brahminic-colonial influence which hovers over decolonial theorisation and its tendency to universalise the category of post-colonial Indian subaltern.

Scholars and researchers engaging with and/or using this standpoint will benefit from being sensitive to the long histories of oppressions along the lines of caste, gender, race, religion and class within and across cultures which have solidified inequalities by engaging in deliberate acts to build trust. In particular, categories of oppressor/ oppressed castes, man/ non-man genders, cis-hetero/ queer sexualities, and Hindu/ non-Hindu religious followers created through brahminic-colonial interactions have also long histories of frictions which need to be acknowledged and addressed within decolonial-debrahminical resistance. From this vantage point, engagement with Dalit theories in relation to transnational feminist theories will be a requisite to trace micro and macro level intersections. The act of trust building between communities with different and even oppositional histories will require conscious continuous effort. This precludes solidarity between groups from being based on essentialist commonalities but rather a product of dissent against oppression rooted in difference. In short, intentional social solidarity need to be prioritised in lieu of incidence of natural solidarity.

With regard to this standpoint, the research enquiries need to intentionally seek and present the brahminic-colonial stimulus behind contemporary ways of being. An active resolve to centre difference of colonial experiences with regional specificities will help to explore nuances within the concepts of indigeneity, race, modernity, and decoloniality resulting in fruitful debates and cross-pollination of ideas to tackle the other possible entangled core(s). By creating a framework which blurs the distinction between 'local' (such as brahminism) and 'transnational' (such as colonialism)

configurations of power, it forces recognition of power structures which hamper decolonisation typically ignored and thus, outside the purview of transnational theorisation.

Discourse of 'Unthought'

Untouchability is mostly addressed as an Indian casteist practice, wherein, severe forms of segregations among the castes are practised to the extent of prohibition of touch and thus, sharing of close spaces between sub-castes (Omvedt, 1994). It is important to note that the practice of untouchability was practised against the lower ranking castes by the upper castes true to the nature of caste system and its graded inequality. For example, brahmins could not mingle with Kshatriyas and below, Kshatriyas could not mingle with Vaishyas and below and, so on. Brahmins, the topmost varna, were the sole group exempted from being discriminated within untouchability. Untouchable castes (Dalits) embodies this practice by being considered the most impure social beings capable of spreading pollution under untouchability. In certain regions such as Kerala, untouchability was accompanied by unapproachability where the outcastes were prohibited to be sighted by the oppressor castes (Devika, 2005). In modernity of caste, the illegality and impracticality of untouchability has shrunk and latched itself to the Dalit community.

Guru engages with the concept of category of beyond as products of discourses linked to the experiences of untouchability (Guru, 2011). He conceives unthought as emerging out of the failure to accommodate untouchability within the existing conceptual vocabulary of the decolonial, nationalist and philosophical thoughts. Thus, he presents the alternate Dalit socio-political thought which accounts for social and political freedom within colonial studies linked to anti-caste leaders such as Ambedkar and Phule that expresses itself in difference, defiance and dissonance forming the category of beyond against desi and derivative discourses within anti-colonial theorisations (Ibid.). However, the idea of a discourse of unthought grounded in the experiences of untouchability both in its precolonial and postcolonial manifestations deserves further attention and development as a theoretical concept.

Untouchability was and is essential to the maintenance of brahminism which is closely associated with the notions of purity and impurity. The untouchables arouse a pre-verbal affect response in the negative (disgust, shame, savagery, trauma etc.) personifying caste taboos. The absence of a collective memory of castelessness and social freedom within Indian societies have normalised inequality. In such a social system, freedom in itself (especially to DBA communities) is part of unthought and outside of communal experiences. Due to relational nature of social categories, the one who refuses to touch (oppressor castes) ironically turns into the untouched-deprived of touch. Touch as a fundamental way of encountering and relating to the Other invariably shapes our thought (Sartre and Sartre 2006). Though most severe in the Indian context, from transgender exclusionary spaces to ghettoisation, forms of untouchability can be seen in modern societies across regions.

The experience(s) of untouchability provides an experience of being neither/nor rooted in a history of negation. Modernity of brahminism presents to Dalit communities, the experience of existing and moving within a spectrum of belonging and unbelonging (in-between) according to one's intersectional positionality. For example, Dalitness can be identified as an existence which experiences being indigenous and outcaste, Hindu and impure, citizen and oppressed, labour and undervalued and so on. An integration of faithful accounts of untouchability will help to explore partially shared and unshared histories and ways of knowing and being. The experience of untouchability is seldom approached as theoretical avenue to tackle decolonial, feminist and race issues. This is due to the limited access (a form of 'untouch') confronting Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi scholars to adorn the hat of a theoretician outside caste studies. The unspeakability of the subaltern and the failure to read the silences as a sign of epistemological ignorance have led to this omission. Moreover, the history of trauma and stigma associated with the practice of untouchability and caste slavery makes it a difficult concept to be theorised. However, unthought is a powerful epistemological framework and an approach to centralise the mind, body and affect as sites of resistance against the normalised practices of oppression.

I conceptualise 'Un-thought' as an intellectual discourse and practise encouraging theory and praxis rooted in subaltern experiences. It encompasses revelation of a historical process of negation (un-) and active process of thinking (thought) within Dalit communities. It offers a critical perspective on established theories and bodies of knowledge, recognising them as caste-inflected knowledges that emerge from endogamic epistemic networks—often in conjunction with, or in isolation from, other such networks. In doing so, it actively encourages reflection on what remains unthought, as well as on who is permitted to engage with, or "touch," these silences in order to enrich the field of research. It points towards the vast array of un-thought arenas within the postcolonial Indian societies which helps to reproduce and maintain the brahminic-colonial confluence.

It centralises contact as phenomenological experience and epistemological method. Moreover, within this standpoint, spaces of unthought is broken through examination of brahminic-colonial hegemony maintained through a state of normalised unfreedom. Therefore, it is important to centralise discourses of unthought through an archaeology of power to drill through the opaqueness to speak about the unspeakable and by actively thinking about the unthought. It helps to mould the decolonial Dalit feminist discourses into a transitional epistemology and approach, wherein, the truth and power does not emerge from the same social locations by moving beyond the boundaries to expand spaces of in-betweenness to push out the binaries.

Caste as Meta and the Category of Gender-Caste

Caste-controlled patriarchies are institutions unique to the sub-continent which may resemble but varies significantly from patriarchal practices and beliefs followed in other regions of the world. Caste works through the constitution and reconstitution of endogamous groups (in its being, inter-generational economies, living practices and

marriage choices) prescribing gendered roles to caste imprinted individuals. Women of these endogamous groups survived with far lesser rights and privileges than their men. However, it is difficult to compare Dalit women experience as being closer to either Dalit men or oppressor caste women. The non-human existence imposed on Dalits and sub-human experience of oppressor caste women simultaneously manifests in the Dalit women experience. The weight of Dalit women experience has been theorised as a compounded experience of their caste and gender positions within intersectional feminist and critical caste studies. However, Dalit women experience cannot be solely viewed as an additive result of Dalit and women experiences robbing them of distinct consciousness. Nevertheless, the main issue with this framework of gender and caste analysis is its separate and often oppositional positioning.

Caste and gender are recognised as categories which occupy the position of the Other of the ideal Hindu oppressor caste man. Drawn from critical race theories, double burden and intersectionality are superimposed on theorisations of Indian gendered experiences. However, within Indian context, caste oppression cannot be pinpointed to a historical point such as transatlantic slavery or colonisation as in the case of creation of race and racism exacerbating and expanding gendered oppression. Historians have put forward plausible explanations for the development of *varna-jati* from ritual/occupational guilds to a social order and have traced its emergence approximately to the period between the decline of Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 2600 BCE to 1900 BCE) to Later Vedic Period (c. 1000 BCE-600 BCE) (Thapar, 2019). This presents a long *durée* history of caste which makes it one of the oldest social categories. Therefore, a separation of caste from historical and contemporary conceptions of gender is flawed. Theorisation of gender experiences in the Indian sub-continent as separate with intersections with caste have produced strong feminist interventions. However, it is important to explore the possibility of caste being a causation to the contemporary gendered experiences within the subcontinent.

Dalit feminists have tried to emphasise the importance of foregrounding differentials within gendered experiences, of not just oppressed caste women but of all genders, as being mediated and controlled through brahminic forces. Therefore, it is imperative to recognise caste as the meta which not just influences but creates (through permissibility) gendered roles, expressions and performance. This necessitates a new method of looking at gendered experiences and recognising it as 'gender-caste'. In addition, gender-caste as a category helps to focus on the undercurrents which determine the gender roles based on the mutations of caste over time. Caste is a malleable and adaptive oppressive force which has surpassed economic, social and cultural systems effectively changing modality of gender as practice, roles and expressions. However, changes in the functioning of gender-caste affect experiences of caste-sub groups in non-linear and discrete ways.

For example, misogynist taboo over menstruation were practised by several oppressor caste communities by isolating menstruating women from the presence of other pure bodies during menstrual phases (Gold-Watts et al., 2020). This practice was largely absent within the Dalit communities (Sowjanya, 2019). Menstrual taboos and

the resulting isolation have been explored as a phase of untouchability (temporary) experienced by oppressor caste women (Chatterjee, 2021). While Dalit women have referred to caste as their ‘period’ which is permanent and without escape (Sukumar, 2020). In the past decades, the modality of menstrual taboos has been reorganised to facilitate co-habitation of menstruating women with others to fit nuclear and middle-class daily routines predominantly in urban areas (Shah, 2005). In addition, several Dalit women have started practising this new modality of menstrual taboo as a method of social-caste mobility practice as an attempt to achieve ritual parity aided by relative economic freedom across regions in South Asia (Baumann et al., 2021). This shows how a single caste custom such as menstrual taboo is practised and used by women belonging to different castes with such divergence to exert their specific gendered caste roles.

Thus, the organisation of Indian societies is predominantly based on caste and its intersection with other identities such as gender, sexuality, religion, and class. Therefore, gender-caste as a separately named category which recognises caste as ‘meta’ defies the western understanding of social organisation. An acknowledgement of the coagulation of oppressive systems and its embodied volatility can be traced through naming of categories. The pervasiveness of colonial and capitalistic values in modern South Asia allows to read and interpret social categories through a western lens to an extent but is neither sufficient nor appropriate. A decolonial analysis of gender by centralising caste and paying attention to the evolution of social categories becomes a more insightful approach to understand gendered experiences and spaces. A hyphenated category of ‘gender-caste’ can be used to signify the interlocking of categories within a non-Northern framework to reimagine and reconfigure gendered worlding by centring intersectionality. This helps to view social categories as a synthesis of oppressive systems and undermines biological essentialism by helping to focus on the process of making of the categories. Therefore, admission of gender-caste as a vocabulary within decolonial Dalit feminist standpoint helps to shed emphasis on the role of caste as what makes and breaks gender based on caste differences.

Conclusion

The focus on the diverse and heterogenous nature of gender categories and experiences often causes anxiety regarding potential conflicts. Social justice movements, feminism in particular, deals with an array of intersectional issues which need to account for differences within agents and the cause. Feminist theory and praxis have moved away from viewing differences as barrier to mobilisation to discarding sameness as a necessary condition to invoke solidarity. Dalit decolonial feminist standpoint intrinsically linked to gender-caste theorizations can offer new modes of transnational connections by linking different experiences of slavery, displacement, and negation, which moves beyond universal essentialist categories to target subalternity within domains of experience. This article should be received as a call to transnational feminist scholars to engage with the Dalit decolonial critiques and the category of

gender-caste as a heuristic devices which offers an unromantic view of the past and strong critique of neo-colonialism.

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Researching with Dalit Women Activists: An Intersectional Feminist Social Work Approach

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Abstract

Aligning with an intersectional feminist social work approach in a simultaneity of process and praxis, this article traces and attempts to create an agenda of research that foregrounds how 'Dalit women's lives matter' in feminist research and mobilization at the grassroots. Through critical and participatory engagement with Dalit women activists via the initiatives of the National Council for Women Leaders collective, this article elucidates the experiences of sexual violence faced by Dalit women in India. While framing the intersectional feminist research agenda, it centralizes Dalit Woman activists and their shared experiences on sexual violence in society through cross-case/context analysis of sexual violence against Dalit women across thirteen states in India. The article argues for an intersectional feminist social work research and practice, while working and intervening in the lives of Dalit women.

Keywords

Dalit Women Leaders, Intersectional Feminist Research, National Council for Women Leaders, Social Work Research and Practice

Introduction

Feminist research and mobilization in general have increasingly become visible across the world through the initiative taken by different groups of women coming together with experiences of shared pain, shared stories of oppression and resistance, and most of all, a shared strategy to defy the oppressive patriarchal and other social structures which challenge them and deprive them of a dignified life (Kumar, 2011; Menon, 2012; Patel and Khajuria, 2016). This implies that there is no single way of capturing women's experiences, and ways of negotiating the world of patriarchy, race,

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caste, religion, and, numerous other stratifications that govern their lives. Women's subjectivities are intrinsically linked to their family of origin, and their caste locations play a major role in the control over their bodies, sexuality, and labor. The specificities of their lived realities are interwoven in the intersectionality of the social stratifications that provide a space for the 'privilege' or 'oppression', depending on their location in the hierarchy of this stratification.

In the case of women from marginalized social groups like Dalits (who are from Scheduled Caste Communities)¹ in India, women's participation in mainstream women's movements and mobilizations has had a peculiar trajectory of 'being in them' and yet 'being invisible within them' (Hartmann, 2009; Omvedt, 2009; Paik, 2014). This trajectory reveals that at several points of time in the history of women's movements and mobilization in India, the core issues such as violence, deprivation, and denial of rights are related to those of women belonging to Dalit communities but often get subsumed within the larger interests of the woman in general. The mobilizations and movements have usually failed to include and address the specific Dalit women's contexts of violence and denial of rights, their agency and voice within those movements, and the nature of the oppression faced.

This becomes even more challenging when women's struggle is seen on the premise of 'personal is political' (Talpade, 2013, 971) which raises questions of 'what happens to the key feminist construct of the personal is political' when the political (the collective public domain of politics) is reduced to the personal? Questions of oppression and exploitation as collective, systematic processes and institutions of rule that are gendered and raced have difficulty being heard when neoliberal narratives (Talpade, 2013) disallow the salience of collective experience or redefine this knowledge as a commodity to be consumed. If all experience is merely individual, and the social is always collapsed into the personal, feminist critique and radical theory appear irrelevant—unless they confront these discursive shifts. From a postcolonial perspective Talpade (2013) & Spivak (1988) have questioned the hegemony of Western ideas and theorizing of feminism having 'othered' the realities of 'third world women' and have argued that women are a heterogeneous category. Yet there has been little acknowledgement of caste and gender axis which create a different form of oppression and reduce the knowledge of Dalit women and their realities in the peripheries. On the other hand, decolonial theorists, academic and activists like Freire (2017), Said (1994), Smith (2022) discourses enable an analysis of oppression and oppressiveness of the coloniality and its aftermath. The question of who produces knowledge keeping the

¹Dalit is a term that means 'oppressed' and 'downtrodden'. It was first used by the Dalit Panthers in India to denote those men and women belonging to the outcast social groups which include Scheduled Castes in India. They are considered untouchables in the country and subjected to extreme forms of social exclusion and violence. Under the Constitutional Order 1950 certain communities have been notified as Scheduled Castes and have provisions for affirmative action and protections (Articles 341 & 342) [https://socialjustice.gov.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/CONSTITUTION%20\(SC\)%20ORDER%201950%20dated%2010081950.pdf](https://socialjustice.gov.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/CONSTITUTION%20(SC)%20ORDER%201950%20dated%2010081950.pdf).

geography of experiences, the power of one form of knowledge over others has been questioned by these theorists. For acknowledging and understanding the experiences of Dalit women, these theories provide a direction of analysis which brings us to locating the gender and caste axis and the conspiracy of caste-based patriarchy which impacts the lives of Dalit women. Brahmanical patriarchy (Chakravarti, 2003) explains this axis and specific ways in which Dalit women's life experiences are impacted. These realities of Dalit women's oppression and experiences of violence as systemic and continuous throughout their life cycle have been articulated by Dalit women themselves in their autobiographies (Bama, 1994; Moon & Pawar, 1989; Viramma, 1998; Baby Kamble, 2018). These autobiographies are pathbreaking and forge an entirely new epistemic of Dalit feminist scholarship. Such writings constitute a new historiography of Dalit women's contexts and lives and as Kapadia (2017, p. 32) has reiterated that, "the multi-modal praxis of Dalit subaltern women that is challenging and transforming their subalternity."

Dalit feminist research informed by Dalit feminist theorization enables a different 'voice' borrowing from Guru's (1995) approach of 'difference'. This has the strength to create social change which is transdisciplinary and paves a pathway to critical research methods (Reinharz, 1992). This article is based on research that adopted an intersectional approach to understanding discrimination and violence as propounded by Crenshaw (1991) and a Dalit feminist approach (Rege, 2013; Paik, 2014, 2021; Patil, 2013). According to the intersectionality approach, people experience multiple barriers when gender discrimination intersects with other forms of discrimination (e.g. discrimination based on race, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.), and/or other barriers (e.g. poverty, rural residence, etc.). The term "axis" describes identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, caste, poverty, etc. The terms "multiple" discrimination and "compound" discrimination are also used to describe this axis.

This article, while locating sexual violence within the axis of caste, gender and class uses the Dalit feminist theorizing to bring their situated knowledge and their experiences through research and mobilization in India. Dalit feminism (Paik, 2021; Rege, 2013) positions caste at the center of all epistemic interrogation not just in the form of 'Brahmanical patriarchy' but as inimical to Dalit women when it comes to sexual violence as a tool and means to keep caste power and privilege in place by dominant caste groups.

Aligning with an intersectional feminist social work approach in a simultaneity of process and praxis, this article traces and brings out 'how Dalit women's lives matter' and requires specific analysis and interventions. It is based on a study undertaken to explore the reported sexual violence against Dalit women in 13 states of India. This research was undertaken under severe constraints due to the pandemic and the Dalit women activists utilized technology and social media tools (telephonic, WhatsApp, and Instagram) to interview survivors/victims of sexual violence and other stakeholders

working with them as well as mobilize to advocate for their rights and access to justice. The research methodology used was participatory action research (Cornish F, Breton N et al., 2023) using a feminist intersectional approach to highlight the specificity of the nature and forms of violence experienced by Dalit women. In the first part of the section that follows, the article dwells on earlier historicity of sexual violence faced by Dalit women and some research undertaken to bring out this form of violence. The second part describes the simultaneous emergence of a national collective of Dalit women activists from the grassroots and the Dalit intersectional feminist research agenda. In the third section of the article, the research findings showcase the specific and unique nature and forms of violence which Dalit women encounter while living in the margins of the society. It covers the cases of sexual violence from the years 2015-2020. The article ends with a discussion section that emphasizes the need to utilize a feminist intersectional approach by social workers to locate and address Dalit women's situations and violence faced by them.

Caste-based Sexual Violence Against Dalit Women: A Literature Review

The nature of violence against Dalit women came to light through a major watershed case reported in rural India in 1992 (Murthy, 2013; Gupta, 2012). The case for the first time brought out the specificities of identities as 'Dalit' women for feminist mobilization and the need to approach violence against Dalit women from an intersectional and anti-caste feminist epistemology. This nature of the judgment by the sessions court brought out the deeply embedded institutionalized casteism. The sessions court acquitted the perpetrators observing that "Indian culture has not fallen to such low depths that someone who is brought up in it, an innocent rustic man, will turn into a man of evil conduct, who disregards caste and age differences" (Kannabiran, 2012). The case also led to the Supreme Court of India's landmark proclamation of the Vishaka Guidelines which in turn became the basis for the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act of 2013. A detailed study by Mangubhai, Irudayam & Lee (2014), comprising narratives of 500 Dalit women in four states of India also highlighted the systemic violence and denial of access to basic resources. The all-pervasive caste and gender discrimination has percolated into systems and created an enabling environment for the continued perpetuation of violence and inequality. This study played a significant role in highlighting the situation of Dalit women in India. Similarly, a later study by AIDMAM-NCDHR (2018) reflected caste discriminatory practices in schools, access to government programs, and land and livelihood programs. A study by Deshpande & Ramachandran (2020) indicates that almost 16 per cent of the workforce from Scheduled Caste communities are engaged in informal labor and most of these are women workers. Other studies (Guru, 2010; Paik, 2020; Surepally, 2020) have also shown how Dalit women, their identity, and their location as women within specific communities have been overshadowed and lost in the entire discourse for justice.

During the pandemic, Dalit Human Rights Defenders Net (DHRDnet, 2020) documented several cases of sexual violence in seven states of the country. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2015 & 2020) data showed that there has been a 45 per cent increase in the number of rape cases against Dalit (Scheduled Caste) women and girls registered between 2015 and 2020. Further, the National Family Health Survey-4 (NFHS-4) showed that sexual violence was the highest among women from Scheduled Caste communities (7.3 per cent), Scheduled Tribe communities (7.8 per cent), and Other Backward Caste communities (4.5 per cent). This is just the tip of the iceberg as this data comprises only reported cases, numerous cases of sexual violence are never reported anywhere and hence are not covered by the data.

Since the author was connected to most of these activists and all were working with Dalit women victims/survivors at the local levels, i.e., in villages and marginalized localities in towns and cities, there was a need expressed for collective action and advocacy. Online conversations and WhatsApp sharing led to the idea for a social media campaign and research on what they clearly could identify as caste-based sexual violence and state impunity. Denial by police stations to lodge FIRs, denial of medical treatment, lack of sensitivity from medical personnel, threats, and intimidation by the perpetrators all seemed to be uniformly used to deter the victims and their families from seeking help, redress, and justice.

Given this situation, aligning with an intersectional feminist social work approach in a simultaneity of process and praxis, this study was operationalized into participatory feminist action research and mobilization at the grassroots. It assumed that the non-recognition of the intersectional discrimination faced by Dalit women within a heterogeneous and unequal society has resulted in a greater increase in institutionalized discrimination and prejudices. The specificities of Dalit women and their contexts of life, living, and struggles against oppressive socio-political conditions, institutionalized intersectionality of discrimination, stereotypes, and sexual violence faced by them needed to be brought to the visible arena of feminist politics and agendas.

Research Methodology and Approach

For long Dalit women activists across India have been engaged in redress, advocacy, and providing support services to Dalit women, especially those facing sexual violence. These activists have developed a clear language and theory of anti-caste and intersectional approaches, articulating the same in their languages. But conducting research together to bring in empirical evidence was a new venture for all of us. The study involved National Council for Women Leaders (NCWL), a coalition formed by Dalit, Adivasi, and Bahujan women activists (author included) in India which was initiated after an infamous rape case where a young Dalit girl was brutally raped (TOI 2024). The following diagram explains their consistent conversations and the approach of the research.



Fig. 1: The Research Process: Feminist Intersectional Participatory Action Research

Deep Conversations (Online and Offline)

There was a clear identification of the problem, i.e., escalation of sexual violence against Dalit women in 13 selected states (Maharashtra, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Chhattisgarh, Kerala, and Gujarat) and the failure of the criminal justice system to address and redress the aftermath of the violence, provide succor and help to the families. Community support was mired in the power dynamics of the caste system and often the survivors/victims were threatened and intimidated rather than supported when they tried to reach out to the justice system.

Dalitness and Gender Intertwined

The discussions revealed that the vulnerability of Dalit women in these states had heightened as they had to work outside their homes due to financial constraints, some of the younger girls had to work in the farms of the dominant caste people, and their mobility was subject to everyday surveillance and harassment by the youth of the dominant caste communities, while even small children were not spared. This was mainly during and because of the lockdown when existing preventive and protective mechanisms were suspended. This emboldened the dominant caste men and youth to assert their dominance in the form of sexual violence.

Need for Collective Action

The research underwent a cyclical process beginning with a six-month social media campaign with the Dalit Women Human Rights Defenders. The activists shared their work (through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) with the victims/survivors, their challenges as Dalit women and their engagement with the police, medical fraternity,

and the legal systems, discriminatory instances, familial constraints, and the consistent navigation of the state systems to secure services and justice for the victim/survivors and their families.

Research Approach and Process

This was followed by a need to conduct detailed research and utilize the findings to develop a strategy to help the survivors/victims and deepen redress for them. It was clear that such a research required an intersectional feminist approach to bring out the specific context of the sexual violence experienced by Dalit women. Vulnerabilities were exacerbated due to their location in the communities as Dalit, as women and living in poverty and peripheral geographies, which were isolated. The following steps informed the process of the research as an emancipatory and participatory process:

- (a) Conversations for defining what aspects to be covered in the research and how
- (b) A list of 50 cases was drawn up with a purposive sampling technique and were selected for interviews.
- (c) Training activists for data collection, ethics, and simultaneity of providing all possible help to the victims/survivors.
- (d) Collating case studies, filing of Right to Information inquiry in police stations, the study of First information reports (FIRs), and collating secondary data on violence against women specifically from the National Crime Records Bureau, a government database.
- (e) Recording the narratives of the activists and their understanding of the cases they were working with on the ground.
- (f) Gathering factual data on the incidents of sexual violence, the background details of the victim/survivors, the status of their complaints with the police, medical status, and access to counseling and other services.

The study, a cross-case/context study (state-wise), enabled Dalit women leaders from the grassroots (villages and urban peripheral localities) to frame, develop and research sexual violence against Dalit women. It gave the Dalit women activists the opportunity to document their experiences in the interconnections between, caste, gender, and violence and the typical nature and forms of violence perpetrated against Dalit women and girls.

The next section of this article explains the findings and analysis of this study. The data was thematically organised and categorized along four major themes, namely, Nature and Form of Violence, Intersectionality of Caste and Gender, Indifferent and Discriminatory Criminal Justice System, and Community Pressure on the Victims and Assertion and Violence.

Thematic Findings

Nature and Form of Violence: The Intersectionality of Caste and Gender

The research revealed some very disturbing trends that sexual violence is being used by those in dominant positions as a weapon to assert power and reinforce existing hierarchies. Most perpetrators of caste-based sexual violence against Dalit women and girls belonged to dominant castes. Of the 50 cases studied for this research, details of the caste of 36 male perpetrators are available: eight perpetrators each were from Yadav and Other Backward Caste communities; four were from the Rajput community; three each from the Jat and Muslim communities; two perpetrators were from the Sikh community; and one each from the Prajapati, Maratha, Brahmin, Vaniba Chettiyar, Vanniyar, Gupta, Thakur and Gujjar communities.

The study showed a concerning feature that in over half the cases (62 per cent) men and boys of dominant caste groups have targeted Dalit girls under the age of 18 years. The patterns of violence varied based on age, where victims-survivors live, their vulnerability, and the working relationship that families have with perpetrators' households. These parameters converge to create conditions wherein Dalit girls are routinely stalked by these sexual predators. The socio-economic and political power accumulated by the dominant caste groups and families is based on control over land, property, and other economic assets, which in turn is interwoven with political, legal, and administrative power through networks of kinship and influence. This makes the caste system extremely resilient and resistant to change.

Dalit women and girls are often subjected to more severe or aggravated forms of sexual violence, such as gang rapes or rape with murder, and there is often a collective nature to these crimes, with offenders from dominant castes acting in groups to commit offenses. It was clear that Dalit women's bodies were being projected as markers of their Dalit identity and sexual violence was a tool for the exercise of power and subordination of Dalit women. This use of power and dominance is also flowing into the criminal justice system, where impunity is rampant among the very stakeholders duty-bound to provide justice—the police, judiciary, medical functionaries, and others—as was apparent in the well-publicized case during the lockdown due to COVID-19. Institutionalized casteism and discrimination are apparent when the victims/survivors of caste-based sexual violence struggle to obtain justice within India's legal system.

Indifferent and Discriminatory Criminal Justice System

Many cases are not reported or under-reported and as a result they do not reach the criminal justice system. Those who do manage to move through the complex and unfriendly police and judicial systems have low conviction rates. The study revealed that in one case the first information report (FIR) was not filed by the police and in 7 of the cases the report of the crime was not filed under the special law meant for crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Moreover, 22 survivors reported a delay of 5 days to 3 months as the time that made evidence-building and conviction possibilities challenging. Several survivors also reported that the police would refuse

to lodge the report and instead intimidate them with abuse and physical violence, which deterred them from insisting that an FIR be filed. Further, as soon as a case was reported the perpetrators and other dominant groups activated channels of influence within the police system and subverted adequate evidence gathering.

Regarding the cases which finally found their way to the courts, the discriminatory attitudes and bias of the judges and lawyers was another barrier which the victims had to deal with. They were often treated with suspicion and had to go through long pending trials. Out of the 50 cases, 42 remain pending in the pre-trial phase of the courts or during police investigations.

Community Pressure on the Victims

In 37 out of the 50 cases studied, the survivors or families of victims received threats from the accused, their family, or other members of the community members and were pressured to either not complain or to withdraw or compromise. Often, these intimidation tactics were employed to silence victims/survivors and their families, contributing to low conviction rates in rape cases. There was a lack of support from their community as they were themselves living in oppression, fear, exclusion, and poverty. They were also dependent for their livelihoods on the families of the perpetrators.

Assertion and Violence Continuum

Another pattern that emerged is that caste-based sexual violence is perpetrated when Dalit families begin to earn well, buy assets, and send girls for better education and jobs. The stigma of caste sticks like a stamp forever, gender and caste a higher form of discrimination and violence embedded in structures of caste, gender, and labor. The nature of public violence and its shape and form is directed not only on the 'body' and its dignity but also on defilement and violation as a 'community' and caste symbol. Private violence is equally immense, and the triple jeopardy faced by Dalit women intensifies their deprivation. However, this does not deter any of them from the dogged and determined fight for justice and emancipation. In each of the stories of sexual violence lies the triumph of Dalit women survivors determined to become leader activists for justice for many more. A new vocabulary of feminism and struggle is being written out as they also counter the hegemony of *savarna* (dominant caste) feminist approaches towards undoing the patriarchy, gender-based injustice, and violence. The new narratives are interwoven into the lives of the Dalit activists and their emancipatory work with other survivors. As one of the activists shared, "Our fight is against caste-based sexual violence. This fight is for our rights and our self-respect, and we will continue to fight till our women and girls get their dignity and rights. Our fight is for justice."

It is in this spirit that the interventions by activists and social workers have been towards immediate relief, counseling the survivors/victim and their families, supporting the redress process with the criminal justice system, and ensuring compensation for the violence faced by survivors and their families. In tandem with this work has been the

advocacy and campaign work done at a national level to ensure better accountability and response by the system to the needs of the survivors.

Discussion

Towards Dalit Intersectional Feminist Social Work Practice

For long Dalit women activists across the country have been engaged in redress, advocacy, and providing support services to Dalit women especially those facing sexual violence. These activists have developed a clear language and theory of anti-caste and intersectional approaches, articulating the same in their languages.

For the author as a researcher and academic activist, this research meant a consistent use of feminist reflexivity and a conscious engagement with herself. Being aware of the power that she has being an academic and a lived reality as a woman of a dominant caste, she had to make consistent efforts not to drive the agenda of the research and the process of developing it with the activists. Feminist intersectional social workers in India must follow a forked pathway wherein they have to choose between working with the state systems to facilitate services for those left out or working towards changing the unjust social order which ‘marginalizes’ certain social groups and individuals based on their identity (caste, gender, religion, ethnicity, ability, and sexuality among the few of the diversities). They must locate themselves in any one of these two pathways or work with both. Often this is a challenging and dilemmatic situation where to get some form of justice one must return to the same system which often shuts the doors of redress and support to Dalit women survivors. It is frequently a painstaking, determined, and painful process.

Intersectional feminist social workers must move beyond and outside of the system increasingly coming from locations of the margins, where they have faced oppression throughout their life experiences and that has intertwined and enabled them to become leaders of what we can explain as structural and feminist intersectional social work. Structural social work links individual “problems” to broader societal injustices. It holds an analysis of the social structure at its core, which views social inequalities, rather than individual deficiencies as the root of people’s problems (Mullaly & Dupre, 2018). For Dalit women’s activism, a huge source of inspiration and strength has been the writings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (Rege, 2013, p. 145). He was acutely aware of the intimate connection between caste and patriarchy and the role that they played in women’s subordination in society. Ambedkar’s writings in the *Mooknayak* and *Bahiskrut Bharat* brought out the ills of the caste system and continue to inspire these Dalit women to unite to organize and agitate, as it did during the independence movement.

The research and its findings brought forth the systematically institutionalized form of casteism and discrimination that Dalit women face in their everyday lives. The threat of violence to sexual violence as a continuum increased during the pandemic. The challenges in accessing the criminal justice system, other services for support like legal aid and counselling and entitlements like victim compensation. This research

comes as an urgent clarion call for feminist social workers to address and highlight this form of intersectional discrimination and violence faced by Dalit women despite strong laws in India.

As a feminist intersectional social work educator and activist, the engagement with sexual violence against Dalit women has meant disrupting knowledge claims, reclaiming, and mainstreaming, marginalized knowledge as ‘mainstream’ knowledge. It is also an iteration of praxis from academic to field learning, enabling voices and listening, creating spaces for dialogue and discourse, and walking with and then walking behind. The intersectional social worker challenges the self and is being challenged constantly. Therefore she/he/they must consistently take steps towards change through leadership building, capacitating, research, advocacy, partnership, treading the unknown, conquering fear, the warmth of solidarity and reassurance, acceptance, and sisterhood, as well retain a constant check on the use of power, reflexivity, falling and picking up.

Conclusion

The unraveling of the lived reality of Dalit Women challenges the rhetoric of ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ that hides the everyday lives of Dalit women citizens at the margins. The life of Dalit women questions the persistence of caste-based discrimination and the use of violence as coercive power to keep them subordinated. This study highlights the hidden and oppressive ground reality of how everyday ‘humiliation’ and sexual violence are used as a tool against Dalit women to deprive them of a dignified life. It suggests that sexual violence is an exercise of power over the women and the communities to which, they belong, and it is used to generate fear as a tactic to deny access to education, health, forest, land, water, and other citizenship rights that Dalit women are entitled.

In particular, the study underlines the need for Dalit feminist researchers and social workers to understand how intersectional feminist standpoint research can capture axis of sexual violence against women in society—a process of unpacking and acknowledging newer possibilities of ‘feminist’ understandings from Dalit women’s perspectives. Research in this context becomes an emancipatory project in the context of the micropolitics of consistent engagement with families, women and, with local police, media and, medical fraternity creating an enabling situation for Dalit families in the margins. It entails keeping faith in the Constitution of the country and the vision of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar that Dalit women activists continue to articulate and bring to the forefront the systemic denial of justice and strive towards opening the very same system for demanding and ensuring justice.

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Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* as an Anti-Caste Manifesto

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Abstract

This essay will focus on the theoretical and political importance of anti-caste writings, taking Dalit feminist author Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2009). It proposes that such Dalit writings need to be considered manifestos as they have an important role in advancing *manuski* or the human rights of Dalits. Anti-caste literary writings are critical foundations of the field of Dalit studies and enable Dalit theory to articulate and uphold the historical and contemporary conditions of Dalits' oppression. Such manifestoes are thus documents for a radical future that shape the field of social studies, political theories, and social movements.

Keywords

Anti-caste Writings, Dalit Literature, Dalit Feminist, Manifesto, Baby Kamble

Introduction

The anti-caste philosophical and literary tradition by Dalits is a rich epistemology of social thought and conveys the situated knowledge (Haraway, 2016; Harding, 2004) of oppressed people, whose experiences counter the dominant knowledge systems. It examines how it shapes alternative power structures to resist oppression. The history of anti-caste philosophy includes narratives of social injustice, suffering, and pain. It critiques the cultural systems of oppressors and the discrimination that these systems perpetuate through caste practices and prejudices. Over centuries, anti-caste writings have taken different forms, such as novels, short stories, poems, and critical thought that speaks against widespread casteism and cultural discrimination against Dalits. Carr (2003) mentions that the philosophy of history is the process of reconstitution of the past, where truths are often neglected in selecting and interpreting facts. He finds

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history is never ‘pure’ since it is always refracted through the minds of the recorder (11) and what he chooses to write. The past few centuries have been instrumental in entrenching the caste system. It is natural to ask what importance the philosophy of anti-caste thought has for anti-caste thinkers and philosophers. Why does a historical and philosophical tradition of anti-caste thought continue to be deprived of recognition? What are the aspirations and struggles within this philosophical tradition, and what might marginalized theories of knowledge have for radical, emancipatory projects?

As a field of writings, voices, and activism of India’s erstwhile untouchables known as Dalits, it is argued that the anti-caste writings based on the lived experiences of Dalits should be considered as “manifestoes.” Manifestos are public, political declarations that demand action and mobilize the masses for a particular purpose, ideal, or intention. I take this cue from Smith (1998), who mentions writings focusing on life as “autobiographical manifestoes”. Anti-caste writings centre the lived experience of Dalits and advance theoretical and political positions within existing disciplines. Such writings explore various forms such as autobiographies, poems, short stories, memoirs, letters, narration, testimonies, and critical thought from below. This essay will focus on the theoretical and political importance of anti-caste writings as manifestoes and their role in advancing *manuski*, or the human rights of the Dalits. Anti-caste writings are critical foundations of the field of Dalit studies and enable Dalit theory to articulate and uphold the historical and contemporary conditions of Dalits’ oppression. Such manifestoes are thus documents for a radical future that shape the field of social studies and social movements. Anti-caste praxis and theory counters institutionalized and historical casteism and authorizes underrepresented sections, such as Dalits, to become oppositional and powerful subjects to claim their agency back from their oppressors. These writings portray the dark horrors and inhumanities of the caste system, expresses the dehumanization of Dalits, and reclaims the agency to confront casteization.

The works and writings of the anti-caste philosophical tradition identify the political goals of liberation and emancipation and initiate the philosophico-historical production of anti-caste knowledge that can maximize the analysis of the lived experiences of the marginalized. Dalits’ lived experiences entail theorizing these epistemological, empirical, and ethical erasures that never become part of the mainstream history or disciplinary canon. Such anti-caste traditions of writing and thought suggest the relationship between language, knowledge, and power, which are sites of contestation for marginalized groups. To provide an account of the histories of tormented and tortured lives, language and writing often provide the expressions for conveying the inscription of bodily bruises, hurt, harm, and injuries, as well as the psychological interiority of oppressive living conditions in caste dehumanization. The issues of death and the dehumanization of Dalits are intimately related to everyday survival and identity. Caste discrimination and the persistence of caste violence are reciprocally connected and integrated, leading to casteization and categorization (Yengde, 2023). Discrimination and violence along caste lines have consistently been

highlighted at the global level, and numerous international agencies have called out Dalits' persecution and denial of human rights.

Conversations on caste at the global level are now amplified by anti-caste writings and narratives that gained pace in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The brahminical Hindu religion and its scriptures are yet to liberate the Hindu masses, and modern, secular minds are still imprisoned within this brahminical vision of the caste and varna system. Anti-caste writings and anti-caste movements provide a radical decolonial idea to question the dominant order and to rethink, reconceptualize, and reconsider the conventions of society and history (Omvedt, 2006). These writings and their movement-based struggle mark an important reconstruction of politics and power from a marginalized perspective, a perspective that rises from the bottom, looks beneath, and digs deep to expose and explore multidimensional oppression. Critical anti-caste epistemology and pedagogy use words and books (Pan, 2022). Education and language thus remain central to disseminating information and knowledge in an otherwise oppressive and exclusionary world that distances Dalits from education and empowerment. Education for Dalits is essentially an exclusionary field, a field reluctant to admit Dalits within its fold, given the brahminical institutional orientation. Marriage remains another institution to launch love jihad to maintain endogamy and punish Dalit individuals for inter-caste weddings. The politics of marriage in India undergirds various manifestations of violence, one of them being caste (Sathi, 2023). The field of labour, too, is infested with the centuries-old traditional birth-based assignment of hereditary and caste-based duties and professions. Discrimination and dehumanization through labour are deadly and result in violence and the death of Dalits (Madheswaran & Attewell, 2007).

Anti-Caste Writings as Radical Manifestoes

Anti-caste writings express the discriminatory effects of caste and casteism that result in unequal human development, inequality, atrocities, and injustice against Dalits. It demonstrates that the history of caste persecution and caste-based discrimination has legitimized a social life of violence, which Ambedkar found was resulting from the absence of social endosmosis within the Hindu religion (2015). The presence of caste hate and the lack of endosmosis render Dalits as lesser than humans, much lesser than animals, excommunicated and exterminated as disabled, inferior, and unworthy creatures. Anti-caste writings are written in the tradition of civil and secular rights to combat and counter caste oppression. International human rights law has taken cognizance of caste as a transnational force of oppression and violence similar to race. It has recognized protective safeguards—legal, political, and social for addressing casteism (Waughray, 2009, 2010). While caste confers a historical disadvantage to Dalits, it offers a historical advantage to the privileged dominant caste. Mosse mentions that caste effects are not locational; they travel from village to city and into all areas of life. He further finds that caste and development, along with their discrimination,

allow opportunity hoarding by privileged groups but humiliation and violence against subordinate caste groups (Mosse, 2018).

Anti-caste writings, one among which is the autobiographical or life narrative, strengthen anti-caste perspectives among educators, students, and practitioners (Maske, 2023). Critical anti-caste consciousness is an epistemological situatedness that provides crucial insights into how caste domination works, and anti-caste writings invoke resistance consciousness among the masses, leading to activism, opposition, and social justice. Such narratives produce anti-caste critiques and develop legal and political discourse of anti-caste interventions in various fields and disciplines to effect change and initiate critical awakening.

It is proposed that anti-caste writings need to be considered as “radical manifestoes.” These writings signal the vision of looking towards the future, even when the narratives often retrospectively look back to the past. At other instances, it reflectively engages through memory to articulate the histories of torture and discrimination. Such narratives are hypervigilant, documenting the historical persecution, futuristic concerns, and possible directions for Dalit lives. The narratives are, thus, manifestoes because they offer scope for addressing questions of caste by highlighting the experiences of the most marginalized and oppressed. Such standpoint epistemologies are crucial, and as manifestoes, their importance in guiding global history and politics is urgent and critical in nature. Manifestos are expressly political and mark the revolutionary will, desire, and ambition to transform societies and the structures from dehumanization and destruction. As a radical project, the anti-caste manifestoes draw language as a signifier of caste oppression and confer the oppressed with the agency to break the cycle of repetition. By insisting on the moral agency to write back, Dalits anti-caste thinkers resist the colonization of language and marginalized cultures by brahminism. These narratives redefine the boundaries of literary, historical, and political discourse and contextualize Dalits’ denial of humanity in the past, present, and future as a critical concern for society at large. It invests them with the authority to assign action and responsibility and command democratic principles of tolerance, love, freedom, and equality from all sections of society.

Anti-caste manifestoes are testimonies. It articulates testimonial accounts of oppression and discrimination expressed by survivors, victims, and oppressed people of caste. They are written to evoke outrage and induce guilt among those who legitimize and perpetuate these oppressions (Rege, 2021) or remain silent as mute spectators. The word “*testimony*” originates from the Latin word “*testis*,” meaning to bear witness and testify to the truth of some fact. A philosophy of anti-caste resistance through writings, thought, activism, and social movement offers radical alternatives to envision the global future, an inclusive future different from the oppressive past. It evidences and affirms the truth of history, memory, and knowledge of Dalits’ lives. The past is not necessarily a route to repress historical memory but to relive and release the trauma of suffering and agony (Smith, 1990), without which the movement towards radical emergence and intersectionalist future cannot unfold. The history of caste injustice and its continuation in the present show the violence of casteized

dehumanization and indignity that subjects Dalits to a debilitating and degrading life. The dignity of Dalit personhood is intimately related to subjectivity and agency, and indignities' iniquitousness reveals the denial of rights and recognition as human worth (Guru, 2009, p. 2). Anti-caste writings confer personhood, recognition of rights, and respect for Dalits by documenting the processes through which Dalits create new meanings of life under oppressive cultural and historical conditions. It provides aspirations to the Dalit community and society, dignifies the labour they perform and the social practices they generate and creates new ways of living Dalit sociality that can counter dehumanization, sustain, and survive near-death experiences on a daily and deadly level.

Critical anti-caste philosophical tradition systematizes knowledge, inquiry, and interpretation from the marginalized perspective of Dalits. It transforms experience into sites of critical knowledge and translates it into practice to rewrite historical events, accounts, and investigations. Such narratives take different forms, such as stories, inscriptions, oral accounts, artefacts, life writings, poems, and documents, to provide a critical historiography of anti-caste discourse.

Anti-caste radical engagements foreground Dalits' historical exclusion. It maps the diversity and differences in anti-caste assertions to annihilate caste oppression. Understanding marginalized lives and their pasts draws attention to the political and cultural mobilization of their histories and identities and, thereby, their resistance to the dominant caste system. Cultural, political, and historical writings on the philosophy of anti-caste thought offer epistemological, empirical, and experiential ways of knowing social systems that remain marginal and peripheral. It invokes the tradition of protest and politics that overcomes the eclipsing of histories from below by dominant and hegemonic brahminical traditions. Deconstructing the interconnections between marginalization and disempowerment, such narratives assert power and challenge cultural determinist assumptions about marginalized lives (Grosz, 2000). Radical anti-caste manifestoes thus raise urgent and reflective questions for the future of anti-caste agendas and the continued investigation of dominant caste politics.

Ambedkar's Anti-Caste Philosophy

The history of anti-caste discourse in India has come to represent the ever-continuous and unrelenting struggle for justice and equality by Dalits. In its articulations, several anti-caste thinkers have left the most profound imprints behind, of which Ambedkar's remains unparalleled and central. What is India as a nation to an untouchable? How can one understand the terms of being an Indian citizen, but more precisely, what does it mean to be an untouchable or a Dalit as an Indian? Ambedkar's thinking through these questions of caste from his discriminatory birth to the ebbing stages of death and disease pushed him towards transformative struggles to bring "effective freedom" to Dalits. He emphasized the critical role of education and writing he received in India and abroad (Stroud, 2023). Ambedkar envisioned a radical egalitarian order through his conception of *Prabuddha Bharat* (inclusive India). At the same time,

his predecessor from the Sant tradition, Guru Ravidas, wanted to name his ideal society *Begumpura* (a city without sadness). In light of Ambedkar's philosophical contributions, Stroud places him as a pragmatist philosopher whose position, in the light of global philosophical thought, must be addressed and made known. In *Evolution of Pragmatism in India* (2023), Stroud explains that one of Ambedkar's contributions is the philosophical tradition of pragmatism in India, which has reconstructed the Dalit experience as knowledge. Ambedkar's pragmatist thinking has critically shaped the field of anti-caste thought and anti-caste studies through his works, speeches, and activism by offering reconstructive codes for reimagining the idea of inclusive India. Confronting the violence of casteism, Ambedkar and his philosophical thoughts contributed to the creation of anti-caste philosophy.

Language and writing have an intimate relation with the social tyranny of caste. Ambedkar pointed out the violence of brahminical books and their interpretations in his numerous works. His idea of a nation and its history was to be imagined through modern institutions of law, education, state, and constitutional democracy. Such a language of constitutionalism in everyday practice, he thought, would remove the unconstitutional dominance of caste privileges within the society and in the day-to-day governance of India's political and social history.

History has a unique place for Ambedkar because nations were created through modern historical changes. History also aligns the study of nations and communities with their future prospects. History and the future are co-created through complex knowledge, ideologies, and identity projections. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936, 2015), Ambedkar mentioned that a Swaraj with slavery was unacceptable. Swaraj or freedom as an idea of history and nation-making, was of utmost importance to Ambedkar because of its relationship with Dalits' past, present, and future, and how it shaped their lives. It is the social and political emancipation of untouchables from historical slavery that national independence was to be imagined and articulated. Interpretation of history went along with social changes and social movements for Ambedkar. It is not only through theoretical history but "doing history" and "writing that anti-caste history" that the inauguration of social changes against historical injustices can be experienced, expressed, and articulated. The Mahad Satyagraha (1927), the burning of the Manusmriti (1927), the Kalaram Temple Entry (1930), and his conversion to Buddhism (1956) are means of "doing history." He also separated social history from the category of political history and foregrounded the radical history of untouchables and outcastes. His method articulated a modern conception of political history and freedom by altering or defying the existing conventions of caste social history. The social history of caste was a multiplication of a system of various castes. Ambedkar radically changed and shaped political history through his writings to bring a different vision of social history that was formerly non-existent and impossible to imagine.

In the *Annihilation of Caste*, it is emphasized by Ambedkar that social democracy is more important for him than political democracy because it is the social endosmosis

needed to effect change in a regressive social pattern of caste. This social endosmosis is the intermingling of various kinds of people and their social histories and was to be politically imagined through enlightened ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Ambedkar's conceptualization of history from the perspective of marginalized, downtrodden, untouchable people makes him the a central figure in the important philosophical tradition of anti-caste radical thought. Through everyday construction of radical social changes in laws, policies, activism, social movements, and anti-caste writings, change will be possible. This essay thus traces the continuation of such anti-caste thought through the literary work of Baby Kamble and considers '*The Prison We Broke* (2009) as a political manifesto. The work offers insight into the Dalit experience and traces the figure of Ambedkar as an anti-caste philosopher who has provided Dalits with a transformative journey to resist caste oppression. Coming before him, the Phules had been fighting against caste oppression, but Ambedkar transformed the entire untouchable movement into an anti-caste pedagogy, a domain of knowledge whose critical stake in the creation of a anti-caste blueprint can emerge.

Anti-Caste Consciousness in Babytai Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

Dalit feminist writer Babytai Kamble's novel *Jina Amucha* or *The Prisons We Broke* (2009) is one of the earliest women's autobiographies, first published in a Marathi women's magazine, called *Stree*, in 1984, then later published as a book in 1986, and further translated and published in English by Maya Pandit in 2008. The book has also seen a wider reception and became increasingly popular as a Dalit novel, writing not only about the existence of the Mahar community but also providing a critique of patriarchy within the Dalit community. It foregrounded the period of the 1930s when Dr. Ambedkar's anti-caste struggle was shaping ideas of *samaj* (community), *sheel* (courage), *satwa* (truth), and other human virtues that were generally not ascribed to the Dalits, considered outcastes and untouchables. Translated into many languages, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, French, Spanish, and English, Babytai's novel continues to demand critical attention from the caste public when she mentions that "their time would come one day" (30) to claim the human rights that the caste-dominated public and the private world of the brahmins have denied to them. Thus, Kamble's novel posits claims on behalf of the rights of the oppressed by writing for the oppressed. Also, as Guru (1995) writes, Dalit women's experience of oppression comes from their experiential worlds. *Jina Amucha* records the horrifying inhuman condition and the experiential worlds of Dalits—the nakedness of religious rituals that oppress people within the community, but which are also supposedly believed to liberate and make them forget the everyday inhuman existence of poverty, death, pollution, and outcaste life.

Jina Amucha claims to be a biography of the oppressed. In the Introduction, Maya Pandit is of the view that Kamble's autobiography is a sociography, as it has ardently

made efforts to express a picture of the Mahar community and not just one particular individual. Through such an attempt, Pandit is of the opinion that Kamble goes beyond the auto-self-I to the socio-other-we. She gives a picture of how the Mahar community lived and, thus, represents the history of the truth of Dalits. As Kamble herself expresses, her idea is not to distort and self-fabricate a narrative of oppression but to uphold “the picture as it is” so that it contributes to a clear understanding of why certain religious rituals, labour practices, and everyday lives of Dalits were practised in a particular way and the reasons why they were practised. The existence of certain goddesses and gods in the Dalit community, such as *Kalubai*, *Wadjai*, *Katjai*, *Laman Pathan*, *Yetal Sahib*, *Mad Malhari*, *Margi Mata*, *Mari Aai*, *Laxman Aai/Lakhi Aai*, *Agya Vetat*, *Sat Asra*, *Satwai*, *Hadal*, and others, reinforces Hindu religious cults and idol worship. As Kamble shows, these gods take up much narrative space and also the social space in the lives of Dalits, which becomes the pretext for oppressive practices such as dedicating young sons to deities known as *potraja* and the celebration of possession of women in the month of *Asadh* (monsoon), as well as the occasion of the *rede jatra* (buffalo fair). Women are made to become the sacrificial objects of the community and, through the idea of possession, become bearers of oppressive traditional practices through which the material and spiritual well-being of the community is believed to be ensured and maintained.

The customs of applying *kumkum*, *haldi*, and sandalwood on the foreheads of *potrajas* and women who became possessed indicate the close association of religious rituals and practices with the Hindu religion. However, on a metaphorical level, religion and faith, customs and practices, as seen from this basic use of *haldi*, *kumkum*, sandalwood, and some wildflowers like *kanher*, exposes the hypocrisy of Hindu religious worship that had maintained a stronghold on the Dalits even when no god came as a saviour to these people when the community experienced plagues, diphtheria, malaria and other severe diseases. The marks of *kumkum*, *haldi*, and sandal are auspicious marks of devotion and worship, yet when it came to survival and everyday existence, there was no auspicious grace that gods and goddesses bestowed on these poor folks. In multiple instances, Kamble mentions the common assumption to treat diseases through this superstitious religious worship. She writes that whenever people in the community would suffer from terrible diseases, instead of taking the person to a doctor, the person was believed to be possessed and ritual purification through priests and possession was the usual recourse to remedying illness. Crude ways of treating the patient, either by making ash concoctions or offering lemon, chillies, and salt to the gods and goddesses, were methods adopted by the community. The absence of material resources such as food, medicine, clothes, cooking utensils and even bare necessities like clean water, bathing soap, and shampoo depicted in the narrative were rare. She describes instances where a woman had brought a piece of coconut, chewed the coconut inside the mouth, and after mixing it with the saliva, applied it as shampoo on the head of children to remove lice and clean the hair. It evokes not only an imagery of disgust but also conveys the truth that Dalits have been pushed out from a life of cleanliness, health, and hygiene, education, and employment.

The Trope of Possession

Possession plays an important role in the Dalit community. *Jina Amucha's* narrative exposes the double bind of possession—first, being possessed by the false notion of Hindu gods and goddesses, and second, a kind of symbolic possession where caste slavery and caste ownership of Dalits' lives by brahmins reigned supreme. As these Hindu gods and goddesses possessed these Dalits, so were these Dalits ideologically and psychologically possessed by the brahmins who controlled and determined how Dalits should lead their lives in utter depravity. Kamble constantly critiques the façade of religious worship through her narrative, and counters the criticism of her community members, arguing that she was only attempting to depict the community's real picture. The narratorial voice often concludes at the end of each chapter (2, 3), with commentaries on labour and living practices that have been beastly, barbaric, and superstitious because of the overarching framework of caste-induced poverty, depravity, and ignorance. The fact that these rituals have an important place in the community and tend to induce forgetfulness about their inhuman existence is a cunning continuation of traditional and spiritual, hence religious and cultural practices of caste. Underneath these practices were hidden the centuries-old oppressive structures of the brahminical Hindu religion.

In the beginning, the narrative presents us with the tale at *Veergaon*, Kamble's maternal grandmother's place, where Kamble's maternal grandmother, *Aaji*, prays to *Kalubai* to give her daughter a boon of having an offspring. Soon, Baby Kamble is born. However, when she is only one and a half years old, like the other three daughters who died one after the other, Kamble's health also worsens, and the villagers assume she is dead. When her *Aaja* starts reading *Pandav Pratap* (a brahminical book) that narrates the lives of Pandavs and Krishna, the child is shown to have regained her life in the early hours of dawn. Kamble's family provides thanks to the goddess of *Veergaon*, *Kalubai* offers a sacrificial hen in the burial ground dug as a reward to please the house goddess. *Pandav Pratap* is a Hindu book on religious and mythological deities. It depicts Dalits' faith in the Hindu religion until Ambedkar is shown in the latter half of the narrative, foregrounding the discarding of these religious books and the necessity to speak out against the degraded nature of the Hindu religious system.

During possession and festivals as well, stones and rocks of various sizes decorated with *kumkum* and *haldi* were kept on raised platforms in the houses. Kamble mentions,

"The size and shape of these platforms indicated the status and prestige of the householder: small size, small status. Big size spelt out prestige! Big-sized gods would be placed on these large platforms. The god was a huge, round, smooth stone weighing two to three kilos, painted saffron, with long lines of bhandara and kumkum drawn on it. Some stones also had two large protruding eyes and huge moustaches painted on them. A blood-red piece of cloth would be spread in front of the gods, on which lay neem twigs with leaves gone crackling dry and a heap of green bangles." (22)

The existence of such gods to rationalize the status and popularity of families in *Maharwada* and to remain in constant fear of the wrath of gods and goddesses to avoid the calamities of hunger, poverty, and disease, which afflicted them, angers Kamble. She explains that it was as if there was a competition to have numerous gods and the tendency to hide realities instead of introspection and reflection, absent in the *Dalitwada* due to the lack of education and employment. Further, these practices also validated cult worship even in homes that did not have these items. Blind faith in these rituals of possession and numerous such religious practices attracted practitioners, viewers, and participants, and it became the routine of their everyday lives and the explanation for unseen calamities. Kamble writes,

“Old people listening to this talk would nod reverently and add their own pearls of wisdom, ‘Yes, yes, young man, you’re right! The parents must have earned a lot of merit, that’s why holy spirits like Laman Pathan possess their son. That god won’t possess just anybody out there.’” (23)

Such traditions were, in fact, glorified and faithfully followed by the Dalits and being possessed was a boon and blessing for the entire family. Ambedkar’s speeches had, in fact, warned against the worship of Hindu religious gods, which needed to be stopped because it is in the name of Hindu religious gods and under which exploitative practices have been furthered and sanctioned to maintain dominance and hierarchy. It had created a culture of exploitation and discrimination of Dalits by the brahmins. Looking up to gods and goddesses and searching for a metaphysical explanation of their inhuman existence made them unaware of caste realities. Kamble narrates the journey of self-realization initiated by Bhimrao Ambedkar and the importance of education in creating that consciousness. She observed that generation after generation of Dalits perished by worshipping these stones and living their lives in utter misery. The imagery of stones here indicates the hardship Dalits have to endure, the stone-like cold existence of their lives, and their suffering in extreme poverty and hunger.

In one instance, she mentions how the god *Laman Pathan* had to be offered a *suti roti* and an opium pipe when he possessed any young man, even if there was no food in the hut. Similarly, there is *Yetal Sahib*, known for black magic, and women are not allowed to bow to him. There are instances of how a man was possessed by the *Yetal Sahib* and refused to leave, so *Margi Mata*, a goddess, entered the young man’s body and fought a terrible battle with *Yetal Sahib*. Thus, one day, when a thorn pierced the young man’s foot, the narrator describes:

“Immediately, Margi Mata entered his body and possessed him. She and Yetal Sahib fought a fierce battle over him; but who’s heard of Margi Mata losing to anyone? Around sunset, the young man fell down frothing at the mouth. How shall I describe the victory of the other? The young man’s tongue hung out like a goat’s and he breathed his last.” (24)

Such episodes narrate the reality of Dalits' existence who lived in perpetual fear of these gods and goddesses and also sought an explanation for things they did not understand—such as sudden changes in weather, crop failure, illness and disease, and lack of food and resources in the family. Towards the end of the novel, Kamble's voice sounds optimistic when the community comes under the leadership of Bhimrao Ambedkar. Thus, Kamble believes that the gods have fulfilled their community prayers, which have not gone in vain. Babasaheb is hereafter imagined as a god to the entire Dalit community.

Depictions of Corporeal and Spatial Untouchability

Baby Kamble's narrative shows the plight of the Dalit community and the villages they inhabit. The *Maharwada* at *Veergaon* and *Phaltan* mostly had desolate houses without proper civic facilities like water, sanitation, or employment opportunities. *Jina Amucha*, or the *Prisons We Broke*, exposes the multiple cages and the prisons that the fourfold caste system, or varnashrama dharma, had created for Dalits. The cages and prisons symbolize the stark poverty of the homes where there is only hard, stone-like *bhakris* (dry bread), mysterious illness and death as curse from gods and goddesses, and the oppression of Dalit women by their mother-in-law, called *sasu*, and their father-in-law, called *sasra*. Kamble's sociography also points towards the discursive and material marginalization, isolation, and alienation of Dalits who lived outside the social imagination of dominant castes (Pandit, 2008). The *Maharwada* is situated outside the social imagination of caste Hindu society as well as lives at the edge and outside the village topography.

In the narrative, there are descriptions of each Dalit house having only some clay pots and pans. Poor houses had barely two or three pots and pans. The Mahar of the sixteenth share, or the Yeskar Mahar, who begged for food in return for the services each Dalit household carried out for brahmins, would have more like five rows of pots and pans. In one instance, Kamble highlights how the relationship between brahmins and Dalits was inhuman and undemocratic. Dalits were almost regarded as beasts and animals by upper-caste people. Snot-nosed boys, lice-infested bodies of Dalits, grime and sweat, puss and blood of animal carcasses on their hands, which the Mahars had to take care routinely, evoked images of beastly, uncivil life without dignified existence to the brahmins. The irony of the slave consciousness that the Mahars had ingrained in their minds without questioning the authority of religion, gods, and brahmins is critiqued and described in the following lines by Kamble:

"Appasab, could you please give this despicable Mahar woman some shikakai for one paisa and half a shell of dry coconut with black skin? The shopkeeper's children would trickle into the courtyard for their morning ablutions. He would teach innocent children social behaviour. Chabu, hey you, can't you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Now don't you touch her. Keep your distance." (26)

The Mahar woman would immediately caution the children not to touch her and would call them little masters while spreading out her *pallav* (end part of her sari) to receive the things from the shopkeeper. However, when she offered the money, the shopkeeper would touch and take it without considering it polluting.

Thus, inside the Mahar's hut, all the Mahar had was a small makeshift *chulha* of three stones. Broken pots and pans were covered with leaves, while one big clay pot, one mud bowl, and a cracked coconut shell with a piece of wood nailed to it served as a spoon. This was all the wealth that a Mahar had. The oppressive structures of untouchable existence also lay bare the despicable quality of food that Dalits were forced to consume. Having no alternative, most families had to go to the town and beg for food. They came back with bags overflowing with rotten and decaying food. After putting all the rotten food in the big clay pot and the stone-hard *bhakris*, the mixture was then made to boil. Due to its sour quality, it was known as *ambura*. However, after it was cooked, it was known as *ukadala*. Kamble mentions this as their daily routine, and the Mahars feasted on the rotten food as some kind of delicacy.

Mahars were also routinely called to clean shit, carry the news of the death of upper castes to their relatives, beg from house to house, and clean animal pens. The *Yeskar Mahar*, or the Mahar of the sixteenth share, had this special duty. A particular *Yeskar Mahar family* was required to serve for six months. Thus, it was a popular notion that a *Yeskar Mahar* was relatively well-off because he could get a regular supply of leftover food in the form of stale *bhakris* at the end of the day in return for his services, unlike the ordinary Mahar. However, what was the role of the *Yeskar Mahar*? The *Yeskar Mahar* had a staff, a stick with a bell, and he had take it along with him every day during his caste duty. When he was about to reach the village, he had to ring the bell on the stick because his voice was considered to pollute the brahmin households. One is reminded that Dalits are not only untouchable but also unseeable, unapproachable, and unhearable (Ambedkar in Rodrigues, 2002).

During times of animal diphtheria, every Dalit family would wait for animals to die so that they could lay claim to the animals once they were dead. When such plagues arrived, these Mahars were called to remove the carcasses and clean the pens. The animal pens often had maggots, blood, pus, shit, animal secretion, and a putrid smell, which Mahars cleaned with their bare hands. However, these Mahars would do these tasks excitedly because they now had lots of food. The animal pens takes on the symbolic representation of caging, not only the presence of the animals within it but also metaphorically and realistically the cage-like existence of the Dalits, who were considered worse than animals. As eaters of dead animals and cleaners of dead pens, they were pushed away from and outside the respectable worlds that brahmins enjoyed. Kamble describes the condition of dead animals that Mahars considered delicacies. Horrifically, the dead animals were anything but life-threatening and poisonous to eat.

"The Mahars considered animal epidemics like diphtheria or dysentery a boon. Every day at least four or five animals would die. The internal organs of the dead animals would decay in stages. In some animals, organs like the liver,

for instance, would be as hard as stones; whereas, in other animals, the organs would be nothing but mush, like overcooked rice. The inside of some animals would be putrid, filled with puss and infested with maggots. There would be a horrid, foul smell! It was worse than hell! But we did not throw away even such animals. We cut off the infected parts full of puss, and convinced ourselves that it was now safe to eat the meat.” (89)

The images of rotten organs of animals, some as hard as stones, others as mushy as boiled rice, evoked feelings of disgust. But that disgust is outsourced and supplemented onto the Dalits, who are forced to eat and clean these dead animals. This cultural and ontological “supplementation” (Sarukkai quoted in Guru, 2009, p. 50) of disgust arising out of the stench of the dead animals, transferred onto the bodies of Dalits as stigmatic and untouchable like the animal carcass therefore, gets displaced and supplemented from the dead animals to the Dalits. It perpetuates further aversion of Dalits as untouchables from the brahmins. The smell of putrid, rotten carcasses filled with pus and maggots, the dead meat, and maggot-filled pens takes on symbolic overtones of the stench of the caste system, but also the pus-filled maggot-like existence of brahmins who feed like parasites on the bodies and labour of the Dalits. The caste system, worse than hell, had kept Dalits like animals and beasts and made them eat carcasses. Forced to eat and consume poisonous, leftover, stale, and rotten food and considered untouchables, the Mahars, Kamble writes, continued to live the lives of animals and beasts, distanced from horizons of emancipation and without an understanding of their oppression. Descriptions of Dalits running like kites and vultures to collect such carcasses to sustain their lives creating elaborate stories of gods and goddess worship and living on the fringes and peripheries, somewhat started changing in the 1930s. Kamble’s narrative foregrounds this communitarian change in the *Maharwada* that started flowing in the air with the coming of Bhimrao Ambedkar and his message of social emancipation and liberation.

From Bestiality to Humanity: Ambedkar and Hope of Emancipation

Kamble’s narration records the Mahar community’s historical movement and its journey of facing oppression through various phases of community consciousness. Initially, the narrative focuses on the struggles of daily existence without food, clothes, and material necessities, and its engagements in different superstitious practices. Such traditions, however, should serve as a critique of Brahminical Hindu religion, which embeds the structural and material conditions of caste within it to perpetuate exploitation and injustice. *Jina Amucha*, Kamble proposes, acts as a cultural repository of Dalit community practices, sheds light on Dalits’ cultural and material existences, and exposes the hypocrisy of Brahminical domination. The critique of such religious practices shows the context of the exploitative nature of the caste system that remains

in the background and through which these cultural and ideological practices have become entrenched as part of the daily lives of Mahars.

The narrative in the concluding sections takes a different turn when the *Maharwada* receives the news of Ambedkar's arrival from England. News of Ambedkar's role in expressing and articulating the plight of Dalits rapidly leads to the collectivization of the entire *Maharwada* around issues of untouchability, rejecting eating dead animals, degraded labour, illiteracy, and slavery. Schools, campaigns, and meetings begin in *Maharwada*. Kamble describes Ambedkar as a plant, a sapling that has taken root in the Dalit soil. It has grown into a large tree to give shade and shelter to the oppressed Dalits. The botanical image of a sapling growing into a tree can be symbolically interpreted as the growth of the Dalit community under his leadership. His ideas branched out to various community sections and contributed to the spread of liberal ideas of fraternity, civic association, humanity, and respect for fellow humans. The lines from Kamble's work describe him as a figure of transformation and change.

"The tiny sapling of hope was reared in their hearts, too. It grew tall, drawing strength from the iron in their souls." (24)

"And then a small sapling grew out of this enriched soil. It went on to become a huge tree of light and truth. It gave shelter to millions who were suffering. The tree transformed the beasts into human beings. This tree was that ideal human being, our very own Buddha. From 1930 onward, his name started reaching villages like a gentle breeze that brings succour in the scorching sun. Our Bhimraja decided to awaken his people who had sunk to the level of subhumans." (69)

The theme of hope recurs through dreams, saplings and birth. In one instance, Ambedkar is likened to the awakening sunrise that will end the dark presence of a long, fearful night.

"We ate dry husk and told ourselves we were eating rich food; we considered our huts great mansions; we considered our terrible poverty the golden peak of affluence. We dreamt and floated among the clouds, waiting for one little ray of hope to lace our dark dreams." (47)

Hope occurs when the sapling emerges despite human deprivation. The image of a mother giving birth to a precious son like Ambedkar is also reiterated. Kamble's anti-caste sensibility and critique of the caste system come from Ambedkar's crucial role in mobilizing and engaging Dalits in the anti-caste struggle during his time. The entire *Maharwada* changed overnight. People gathered at the *Chawdi*, the shared meeting place, to discuss issues raised by Ambedkar. The first meeting of Ambedkar with Dalits at *Jejuri*, where God *Khandoba* is worshipped, was welcomed enthusiastically by the community, although Kamble mentions, there were dissenters. Having come from far-off places, devotees waited for Ambedkar to speak, who arrived in a car wearing an English suit. The new sight of a well-dressed, educated man from such an

oppressed community brings new hopes and visions of a different future. In his speech at *Jejuri*, he declares:

"Discard all such customs that strengthen our ignorance. My poor dear brothers and sisters, do not eat carcasses any more. Don't clean the filth of the village. Let those who make the filth clean it up themselves. Let us teach them this lesson. This slavery, which has been imposed upon us, will not disappear easily. For that we need to bring about a revolution. Let three-fourths of our people die in this endeavour; then, at least the remaining one-fourth will be able to live their lives with dignity. At least, their future will be better. I appeal to you, my mothers and sisters, be the first ones to step forward for reform." (71)

Reminiscing about the earlier times of darkness and commenting on the change in the present time of illuminated consciousness, Kamble writes:

"But now we have learnt how utterly worthless your religion is. And the one who has taught us this, the one who has transformed us from beasts into human beings, is the architect of our Constitution—that shining jewel of sheel and satwa, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar." (63)

Education becomes an important instrument for social change. Messages of Bhimrao Ambedkar are circulated to take charge of their own lives by educating their children. Dalits of *Maharwada* open hostels, schools, and colleges and Baby Kamble also gets enrolled in a girls' school along with other upper-caste students. Meanwhile young men in the Dalit community composed songs and performed *jatras* (performing troupes) to convey the social message of Ambedkar. Crucially, Ambedkar's call to discard social markers of caste, including degrading food and eating habits, clothes and copper ornaments, shaped a space for critical anti-caste consciousness within the community. Celebrations of *Ambedkar Jayanti* in the *Maharwada* during the period 1938-1940 testify to the transformation the Dalit community underwent during those days. Instead of having *Guru Padva* as the Marathi New Year, Dalit activists, leaders, and people in the community started celebrating *Ambedkar Jayanti* as the New Year of their community. *Jina Amucha* records the social transformation when Dalits joined the Ambedkar movement, giving up eating dead animals, cleaning filth and shit, and educating themselves. Babasaheb, Bhimrao, and Dr. Ambedkar became holy chants for the Dalit community (107). The community headed towards a new dawn of social empowerment in the Ambedkarite period.

Despite the social awakening by Bhimrao Ambedkar, Kamble finds that the prison house of the caste system continued to hover over the ontological space of their lives. *Jina Amucha*, or *The Prisons We Broke*, needs to be considered as a social and political commentary on the enslaved existence of Dalits in the caste system. The historical consciousness of Dalits that began to emerge with the figure of Bhimrao Ambedkar marks a crucial transformative shift in ushering in the meanings of dignity, freedom, self-respect, and humanity. Baby Kamble's narrative in portraying her life trajectory from a Mahar girl to a social activist and a Dalit woman writer expresses the

progress of her own life, despite all odds. Kamble finally opens a school for socially backward students at *Nimbure* in *Phaltan* and continues to address numerous Dalit women's meetings and rallies, spreading the message of Ambedkar far and wide. Her writings have thus become the source and medium to communicate the experiences of oppression of Dalits and also contributed to the language of constituting a radical politics of resistance by Dalits.

Conclusion

Anti-caste manifestoes drawing from the philosophical traditions of Ambedkar and anti-caste writings are thus "action manifestoes" and indicate epistemological and political directions for anti-caste/Dalit studies. It is a term that I draw from Charles C Diggs (1972), who provided crucial policy recommendations on several African countries to the U.N. Considerations of the effects of caste and improving the lives of Dalits are existential and immediate political responses that Dalit and anti-caste writings seek to establish. It aims to provide crucial paradigms for anti-caste resistant and activist tradition (Guru, 2004), which can initiate action and strategies to combat casteism. The writings engage in a free-flowing exchange of ideas and record the connections and relations between survival and dignity. The untouchable as an embodiment of the inequities of caste, exposes the violence of being born in a brahminically ordained, superior world. Dalits' existence in that world is a violation of that order, and the penalty that they face as outcastes continues to provide legitimacy for the upper caste and dominant privileged people to augment new modes of outcaste life. Anti-caste writings break the violence of these ongoing structures by creating radical consciousness and a deeper analysis of the phenomenology of violence that surrounds them. It integrates an examination of the evolving position of Dalits. It provides attention to identity, self, and free will that can be conscious of the society Dalits hope to create for survival. Consciousness and society, history and existence have meanings for present and later generations, and the radical writings of anti-caste thinkers and literary writers like Baby Kamble explore and foreground such questions in their writings through the changing manifestations of caste violence and untouchable existence.

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Reproduction of Caste Privilege in Elite Educational Institutions

Ravneet¹

Abstract

This article, embedded in empirical work in two colleges of a central university in Delhi, focuses on how caste privilege is legitimized and reproduced within elite higher educational institutions. Unlike non-elite educational institutions, these spaces claim to anchor themselves in notions of social justice and equity. These institutions claim progressive pedagogical processes, meanwhile obscuring upper caste dominance in college as well as in the curriculum. Scholarly insistence on looking at caste only as a form of marginality within the discourse of education also conceals the way in which *caste privilege* is reproduced through curriculum as well as college culture. The paper also centres absence of caste in curricula and how dominant epistemology sidelines caste-critical knowledge. Taking critical caste theory as a theoretical framework, the study aims to look at caste relationally to explain how students navigate these institutions.

Keywords

Caste, Privilege, Higher Education, Critical Caste Theory, Curriculum, Capital

Introduction

Shagun,² 18 years old, is a Dalit³ student in a college at a central university in Delhi. I interviewed him in February 2024 on his college campus. He wears big spectacles, is fashionable and speaks fluent English. He is part of a queer collective in college and is assertive of his Dalit identity. When asked about his experience in college, he painfully describes how his hope from college died the very first day. He reminisces the day of the

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²All names have been anonymized.

³The term Dalit refers to a community of people in India who have been historically marginalized and were considered outside the fourfold caste hierarchy. Etymologically, the term translates to oppressed. However, Ambedkarite groups have reclaimed the term to assert their identity.

orientation when some of the students called him *Chakka* (a derogatory term used for transgender persons or non-heteronormative men) only because he sported long hair. He shared another incident in which a student sneeringly asked him, '*tum jaise kitne mein bikte hai.*' [how much do you charge for your sexual services]. When I queried the caste of those students and whether they were aware of his caste identity, Shagun confirmed them as mostly upper castes and OBCs and the person who made the latter remark was aware of his identity. Derogatory utterances hurled towards a Dalit person are also a way of asserting one's masculinity rooted in caste superiority. This is one of several other instances of experiences of Dalit, tribal and minority students across spaces of higher education. As crude a form of humiliation as the vignette above might not be a common occurrence in elite educational institutions, however, subtle forms of discrimination and humiliation continue to persist. (Kumar, 2016).

This is where my research question also emerged from. There is vast scholarly work delineating marginalized students' experience in elite educational institutions and subsequent humiliation and exclusion (Sukumar, 2023; Sharma, 2019; Kumar, 2021; Donald, 2019; Kumar, 2016; Deshpande, 2006). Academic work on privileged students, in terms of caste, has been sparse in the Indian context (Pathania and Tierney, 2018). However, there is an increased interest in understanding privileged students' *habitus* and the way it helps them stride through college. Western scholarship has dealt with reproduction of elite lives and elite institutions as engines of inequality (Khan, 2012). In her recent work, Subramanian (2019) traces the trajectory of engineering students and how their proclaimed merit is, in fact, rooted in caste privilege. She situates her work in an engineering college in South India which is popularly called 'Iyer-Iyengar¹ Technology' because of the predominance of a brahmin student body. Subramanian argues that the institution known for its academic excellence does not however make any claims regarding its inclusive nature. Affirmative policies within the institution are seen as regressive, something which hampers national growth. She looks at merit, traces its genealogy and how it has been situated in the Indian context, especially when it comes to affirmative policies, and explores how upper caste students' *habitus* reproduces their lives as modern casteless beings who reach premier institutions and consider it a result of their merit. Nonetheless, scholarly work on caste privilege in the context of institutions which are known primarily for their social science courses becomes difficult, as well as interesting because of the values such institutions claim to uphold. Students are trained in ideas of social justice and are aware of politically correct vocabulary. What needs to be seen is whether those ideas translate into academic and cultural praxis. Privilege has been understudied in the Indian context, caste privilege more so. Thus, this is a probable opening which, I argue, needs to be engaged with.

This article, a descriptive narrative, is based on empirical work which considers the social, educational and economic background of students of elite educational institutions to see if it helps them navigate college. Taking inspiration from Critical

¹Two brahmin communities living predominantly in Tamil Nadu, India

Caste Studies,² I aim to look at caste relationally. In my work, I intend to reverse the epistemic gaze to understand reproduction of privilege in spaces of higher education. Critical Caste Studies and Bourdieu's trifecta of *capital*, *habitus* and *field* inform my understanding of how power is played out in the context of higher education in general and elite educational institutions in particular.

There is a myriad of literature cataloguing the paradoxical character of higher education. Even though it promises mobility especially to hitherto oppressed groups, it continues to disguise ways in which it leads to structural inequalities. Higher education in general and elite educational institutions in particular have been spaces which reproduce privilege (Khan, 2011; Howard and Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010; Maxwell, 2015; Van Zanten, 2015) while simultaneously claiming to favour excellence and merit. Merit as a category has been unpacked and dismantled to unveil a synthesis of social, cultural and economic capital (Khan and Jerolmack, 2012) which supposedly produces a meritorious student. However, the term still hasn't lost its constituency and continues to surface during debates around the efficacy of policies regarding affirmative actions (Deshpande, 2006; Iliaah, 2006; Subramanian, 2019). The importance of looking at elite educational institutions as exclusionary spaces or as spaces which reproduce caste privilege lies in the fact that these institutions symbolize (or higher education in general) as gateways of aspirations, mobility and success. Narratives of progress, equality (especially after implementation of affirmative actions in admission/ recruitments and seemingly increased visibility of students coming from historically oppressed backgrounds), open dialogue, social justice, etc., continue to revolve around such institutions even after a sustained critique, both academic and political, overturning the same (Guru, 2002; Kumar, 2016; Mahanad, 2016; Madhukar, 2016).

Method

I use the term elite for the institutions I traversed not only because of their high National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) ranking but also because of their respective institutional histories. I chose a central university's two colleges which I would refer to as college A and college B. As part of a qualitative research framework with an ethnographic sensibility, I spoke to students who largely came from affluent, upper caste backgrounds with necessary cultural capital to not only know how to gain admission in elite colleges but also how to traverse the terrain comfortably. Exclusive practices during school, as Bhopal and Myers (2023) note, guaranteed their progression into elite universities. They further note how socialization during school years plays a significant role in preparing students for college. Using Bourdieu's framework of field

²Critical Caste Studies (CCS henceforth) is an emerging framework which aims to expand how caste is viewed and conceptualized. Gajendran Ayyathurai (2021) underlines the importance of looking at caste relationally; firstly, as a form of domination, secondly, unpacking counter-caste practices of women, children, men and movements of subjugated Indians. The need to form a new subfield, as he claims, is because of the failure of South Asian academia to pin down caste as the "the self-privileging groups' invention and imposition of social supremacy." The field's aim is to centre caste power as well as see anti-caste, casteless praxis.

they discuss, ‘how the field of elite schools intersects with those of elite universities and by doing so maintains the status and dominance of some groups within ‘a state of power relations’ in which individuals and institutions engage in a struggle to redistribute and accumulate capitals’ (Bhopal and Myers, 2023, p. 32). Ambivalence of experience, if at all, eventually turned into a sense of belonging in college. Progression from the school to college almost seems like a natural continuation as students are prepared not only academically but in terms of extracurricular activities as well. This sense of belonging, however, did not happen for students coming from oppressed backgrounds.

Access to the field was easier as I had prior acquaintances in both the colleges. I took necessary permissions before starting the field work which started in January 2024 until March 2025. 35 interviews were in person at college campuses while the balance 10 were conducted through video conference. I spent extended periods of time in both the colleges to understand the experiential geography. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Languages used were Hindi and English. All respondents were asked beforehand if they were comfortable with their interviews being recorded. In college A, I used the snowball method to identify participants. There is, however, a limitation to this method as one may not find participants outside the circle of the current respondents. To avoid this, in college B with the help of a colleague who teaches at the same college I shared a google form with the students; asking for their caste background, their parents’ annual income and their course of study. I kept the column of caste background optional; however, all students filled it out. I also approached students in canteens, foyers and during the cultural events which helped in keeping the sample heterogenous. Since in college A, I had not shared any google form, I did not directly ask participants’ caste background during the interviews. Nonetheless, during the interview, all shared the caste background they come from, barring one participant. I primarily wanted to speak to upper caste students to understand their journeys from their respective schools to college, their experience in college and how they navigate different counters of a college life. So, I made sure that my sample size remains dense with such participants. Yet having a diverse set of samples in terms of caste helped me enrichen my analysis. The interviews were semi-structured with a set of 20 questions which ranged from asking their family background, their schooling, college experience, participation in cultural societies and their expectations from the college. Taking a cue from ethnographic methods, I wanted to situate myself within the everydayness of the college. I could inhabit the space without any constraints as I could pass off as a student. By the 40th interview, no new themes were emerging, but I did five more just to make sure data reaches saturation. The analysis was done simultaneously so that themes could be cross-checked across interviews rather than towards the end. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes. In the table below, I have mentioned the gender and caste demography of the respondents.

Total No. of Respondents	Men	Women	SC	ST	OBC	Upper Caste
45	19	25	8	5	7	22

Insider or Outsider?

I entered the field with two questions in mind as to how does one understand reproduction of caste privilege in higher education and who has access to the opportunities which the college claims to provide equally? Initially, there was a reluctance/confusion to situate myself; was I an insider any longer? Or perhaps since I left college a long time ago, am I now an outsider? Would my past experiences be still considered valid enough to understand how privilege and discrimination work relationally? This disjunction of positionality, nonetheless, helped me be cautious of how I approached the field. This liminal space, I argue, helped me to be reflexive of my potential biases, the impact that my ideological positions may have on the way I inhabit the field as well the influence my own privileged position (not only in terms of caste and class but also seniority with respect to students) may have on my work (Hamdan, 2009; Hertz, 1996; Dodgson, 2019; Pillow, 2010; Finlay, 2002).

There is always a dilemma as a researcher that knowledge which might be evident to an outsider seems mundane to me if I am part of the group I am studying. However, being an insider also opens the possibility of recognising cultural practices, gestures and lifestyles. This rhythmic trajectory between an insider and outsider (since I am no longer an undergraduate student) influences the way I situate myself as a researcher. I also try not to create a dichotomy between these two statuses as the movement between these two is almost fluid. Dwyer et al. (2009) discuss the *in-betweenness* of the position of a researcher. They urge to move beyond the dichotomy between insider-outsider to state that the duality is not simplistic. A dialectical relationship between outsider and insider status preserves the complexities of similarity and difference. The fluidity of a researcher's position as in-between outsider and insider can help comprehend the complexities of human experience. However, Asselin (2003) articulates the need of the researcher to work with their eyes open and assume that they don't know anything about the phenomena being observed. For example, during the field work I ended up taking certain comments for granted. It was later while listening to the interviews again I comprehended the intensity of seemingly banal comments. This process of continuous self-awareness, strict vigilance is what forms the foundation of a reflexive praxis in research in general and knowledge production in particular. However, I was an outsider when it came to students who came from marginalised locations. I could not say that I understood their struggles in terms of identity. Even though I could relate to their sense of alienation as I felt while I was in college. Nonetheless, my goal was to centre their voices first, by listening to them intently and second, writing their stories how they expected me to. Interpreting data did not only mean writing down their experiences in a vacuum, but to situate them in the larger anti-caste critique of institutions of higher education and gain insight into their experiences as students at elite colleges.

Researcher Positionality

All students agreed on how social and economic background affects one's access to college as well as how one navigates it. One of the things I wanted to look at was their

respective *journeys* into elite universities. I have also been trying to figure out how to place my upper caste identity within the work on caste. I also thought it to be my responsibility as an anti-caste activist to look at caste not from the lens of discrimination but from the lens of privilege. My own privileged location opens the possibility of unpacking how privilege manifests itself through institutions. My own experience in one such elite college influences the way I pose questions. My experience, both as a student with privilege in terms of caste and class, and disprivilege in terms of past lack of cultural capital, dictates the kind of questions I ask. When I say disprivilege, I mean to underscore my journey from a small town in Haryana to a premier college in Delhi. There is a duality in my experience as a person who had economic and social capital to reach Delhi from a small town, though subsequent alienation because of the absence of requisite cultural capital to navigate an elite space. Inability to speak English became a major impediment. I remember one experience where a teacher, in front of an entire class chided me for not being able to write well. What such instances do is that they mark off a student as lacking the necessary skills to be considered a good student. It did not matter if I read Anna Karenina in Punjabi, what mattered was that I did not read it in English. This duality, as I argue, of despite knowing the importance of knowing a famous book did not put me in an advantageous position as it did not follow the *rules of the game*. Such experiences, nonetheless, became the starting point of how I entered the field.

Theoretical Framework

Privilege

Privilege is often associated with something positive, something one has but is also legitimate. For instance, the privilege to attend a university of one's liking, or the privilege of getting a dream job. Privilege seems legitimate, harmless even. It is also easy to weave privilege with merit. One's 'privilege' of attending a university is then anchored in their respective merit. It is merit which helps a student accrue privileges. In a neo-liberal economy, 'individual' success becomes the benchmark against which everyone, as if a homogenous mass, is graded. Success then becomes individual. Thus, privilege is individuated. The notion that one's privileges are contingent on how much effort one puts into their work is detached from the fact that one's social position decides who has access to resources and who does not. Caste, or gender, or religion become a sieve through which those at the margins are 'filtered' out. Anti-caste, anti-race and feminist interventions have helped carve out a space where conversations around social positions' role in access to resources (or lack thereof) have been held. It is an accepted norm within identity-based movements to acknowledge one's privileges (by those who are at power positions because of their identity) to be considered an ally. It is an important exercise, one which forces an *ally* to introspect themselves and the way their privileges remain unseen.

Peggy McIntosh's (1989) work on privilege became a popular entry point to explore privilege as a conceptual category. She started with understanding unacknowledged

male privilege and the way it stays naturalized as well as invisible. She notes how her white skin earned her privileges which remain oblivious to her. Her work became an entry point into anti-racist work and the way in which oppression is hyper-visible, but privilege (gender or race-based) remains invisible. She further notes that invisibility of privilege is structurally enshrined. Privilege, in a stratified society, is—more often than not—based on ascriptive categories. Race or caste becomes the ground on which privilege as well as oppression traverse. McManimon (2021), however, argues that white privilege is not a *cause* of racial oppression but an *effect* of white supremacy, ‘a social, economic political, legal, cultural and historical construction of domination on the basis of what we now call race, enacted over hundreds of years of laws, regulations, policies, practices, and beliefs’ (p. 499). The *cause* and *effect* of white supremacy, she notes, are collapsed. She argues that the *why* of white privileges need to be kept in mind while acknowledging one’s privileges. She further posits that continuum between white supremacy and white privileges needs to be maintained. Otherwise making a check list of white privileges would be a futile exercise. It might work as a cathartic endeavour but does not do anything to end racial oppression as it reduces privileges to the individual. It is, thus, consequential to understand how privilege maintains systems of domination.

Critical Caste Studies

In the context of Indian higher education, Critical Caste Studies plays a significant role as it does not only conceptualise caste in terms of discrimination and exclusion but also privilege so as to build a continuum between caste-based privileges and caste supremacy. Caste privileges, accrued over generations, eventually not only help students with knowledge of the *rules of the game* (Bhopal and Myers, 2023) to move ahead but also tightly secure their dominant positions within the *field* (Bhopal and Myers, 2023, p. 65) of a college. Unpacking the trajectory of privilege, as McManimon (2021) notes, will help unravel systems of continued domination and power. Thus, laying bare the trajectory of caste privileges becomes a crucial exercise to how caste supremacy is consolidated.

Capital, Field and Habitus

Higher education is an important site to understand reproduction of caste privilege while also to see how elite institutions privilege the already privileged. The inequity in achievement in terms of caste can be explained with Bourdieusian trifecta of capital, field and habitus. Bourdieu describes field as a relational structure which binds agents, or people with institutions to struggle/compete to acquire resources or what he calls capitals. (Bhopal and Myers, 2023, p. 46). For instance, a playground can be understood as a field. The players compete, keeping in mind the rules of the game, to win the game (Calhoun, 2003). Education, for example, became a field, much like culture, or the housing market, etc. (Bourdieu, 1988; 1996; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Thompson, (2008, p. 69) explains field as formal or informal norms governing a sphere of activity. The individual’s habitus, and its relational dynamic

with capitals decides their position in the field. Capitals, according to Bourdieu, can be fundamentally divided into three parts—economic, social and cultural. Economic capital is convertible, social capital refers to social connections and cultural capital is embodied, objectified and institutionalized (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). Habitus, Bourdieu explains, are dispositions of individuals with which they inhabit the world. Habitus and capitals are interrelated as a secure position within the matrix of capitals moulds one's habitus. Bourdieu's framework helps understand how privilege fundamentally relies not only on ascribed identity but also the position one inhabits in a field and vice versa. For instance, caste privilege, or lack thereof, will decide the position one inhabits in the field of education which further moulds one's dispositions. The importance lies in not to look at these concepts as separate but as interrelated.

Contextualizing the Field

When I decided my field location, I was sure of what I would do. I thought I knew the kind of students there would be, I was expecting upper caste, visibly rich, English-speaking students strutting with confidence. However, the college as an institution had changed. The 'arrogance of entitlement', as Khan (2010) puts it, was replaced with an 'ease of privilege' (p. 10). This was an indication to reflexively unpack one's biases, to step out, even for just a moment, from the location of a former student to a researcher who would not see things within binaries. To create a sense of familiarity, I remember being chirpier and using slangs to develop a rapport with the students as the kind of questions and the way one poses questions can influence the outcomes (Hamdan 2009). There is a way affluent students speak, which I have learnt over the years being in elite institutions of Delhi. I knew which students to speak to with a certain accent as language plays a significant role in boundary making (Drewski, 2023). I made sure that I dressed well because it warrants not only attention but respect. There was a discernible difference in the way students spoke, dressed and went about their lives. Even those privileged students who were critical of their own privileged subjectivities carried an air around them which was indicative of their cultural capital, if not economic. Being an insider helped me understand certain gestures which are specific to privileged upper caste culture (Hardman, 2009). I knew how language becomes refined; however, the underlying meaning remains problematic. Hefty vocabulary can barely mask everyday casteist remarks.

Narratives from the Field

Frustration in the Field as a Methodological Space

Not restricting one's field analysis just to audible spoken data opens the possibility of incorporating details which do not necessarily come within the rigid conventional process of data gathering. However, making meaning from such instances remains slippery and requires a continuous observation of events in the field. Nairn et al. (2005) note that "attention to other forms of data regarding embodiment, laughter and silence may provide a richer set of data" (Nairn, et al., p. 236). I want to look

at *frustration*³ in the field as a methodological space to locate students' responses as emerging from their caste entitlement. Even though initiation into the field was easy, however trying to get ahold of students proved challenging. Students, especially from privileged locations, would not respond. Or, if they did respond, they would take days to finalize a date to meet. These instances can be ignored as contentions from the field, however what I noticed throughout the course of my field work was that those students who were indecorous and who took time to respond overwhelmingly came from upper caste locations. I want to place my own experience here, not only as a student at such colleges, but also having been around students (primarily upper caste since my own friend group constituted only upper castes) who felt superior and entitled to be critical of not only students but of teachers. However, this sense of superiority stemmed from the forms of capital they held; their speech and language, their clothing, the music they listened to came from not only generational wealth but also histories of education. I do not want to dismiss, if not assert vigorously, the possibility of upper caste students' behaviour as caste entitlement.

Trajectory From School to College

The chasm between differential trajectories which students take to reach elite institutions is glaring. The annual school fee of a respondent whom I spoke to was 18 lakh rupees. This was one extreme end but even other students who may not have attended fancy international schools received support from schools as well as parents. One respondent, Aparna (Political science Honours, 1st year, college A), who mentioned that she went to a convent school described at length the opportunities the school provided. The school, an Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE) board (which is popularly considered to be posher, elite and remains mostly restricted to schools in metropolitan cities), encouraged extra-curricular activities along with academic rigour, which entailed participating in state as well national level sports, debate competitions and theatre amongst other opportunities. She positioned herself as a casteless middle-class student and situated herself in Kerala's progressive politics which has done away with caste-based hierarchies. The fact that they did not use their caste names meant she also did not associate with her caste. On the other hand, however, were students who were made to sit at the back of the class in school because of their identity. Riya, a 'first-generation female Dalit' (History Honours, 1st year, College B) narrated her experience in a private ICSE board school, as to how she always sat in the back of the class even though she performed well. "I had a back-bencher topper-image." Initially, it struck me as a choice (which was indicative of my inability to see caste dynamic at play), but I was soon corrected that all SC (Scheduled Caste) students in her class in school sat (or were made to sit) in the back. She notes something similar but more subtle in college. She said the moment people get to know about your caste, they start behaving differently, their behaviour gets 'weird.'

Ambedkar (2013) describes caste-based division as graded inequality where the four classes (he translates Varnas to class) are on "the vertical plane. Not only different but unequal in status, one standing above the other" (p. 107). The gradation

of students within the classroom gets replicated in college as well. Native-speakers, Dalit or Adivasi students, students from the north-east are reduced to small clusters within the space of a classroom (Goswami, 2021; Sharma, 2018). Another example was of a Dalit student, Sapna (Physics Honours, 2nd year, College B) who mentioned that she wasn't even aware that College B was a women's college. Whereas, not even most, all upper caste students I interviewed not only knew which college they wanted to attend, but which subject would be good for their career. Besides families, they had access to remarkable school infrastructure as well as teachers who were aware of which subject would align with the student's interests. This is also an indication that elite educational institutions, despite having affirmative policies, constitute primarily of students who come from, if not economic, substantial cultural and social capital. It is also indicative of the fact that not only they came from histories of educational wealth but also *dispositions* which will eventually help them fare well in college as well as the job market (Deshpande and Newman, 2009). This helps in further securing one's dominance in a college space, of which a strong representation in student bodies is a result. The idea of looking at the trajectory from school to college is to study the continuation of privilege, a smooth transition to see how students from upper caste backgrounds settle in college and later in the labour market with ease.

Everyday Casteist Practices

The demography of colleges has changed drastically over the years. There is an increased admittance of native speakers from rural backgrounds. Even during the field work, respondents frequently remarked on the increase in the number of students from the north Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Such arguments, though, weren't backed by any statistical data. However, this acknowledgment was followed by a tinge of bitterness as according to my respondents, these students affected the *vibe* of the college. What was surprising was that *vibe*, considered to be a personality trait, came up a lot during the interviews. President of the debating society at college B, Aanchal (English Honours, 3rd year), mentioned they also match *vibe* while selecting a candidate. When asked as to what she meant by it, she did not have a concrete answer. But after several interviews it became clear that *vibe* was almost exclusively meant, what Bourdieu (1972) calls, *dispositions* which were in fact markers of caste and class privilege. For instance, a shared interest in mystery novels of Agatha Christy marked boundaries of who can be let in a cultural society or a group of friends. *Vibe* can also be understood through the concept of *cultural matching* (Rivera, 2012). In the context of hiring at elite professional service firms, Rivera shadowed the hiring managers to understand the basis on which new recruits are hired. She argues that apart from good colleges and grades, cultural fit played a significant role in the hiring process, at times more than the grades and institutional affiliation. The idea of merit, then, can also be problematized with this. Merit as *passion* and *hard work*, as described by my respondents becomes contested when overridden by the cultural insinuation of *vibe*. Another example of cultural matching was seen in other cultural societies as well. For instance, English or Hindi dramatics society at college B are the most rigorous and difficult to

get in. Whereas at college A, photography society and the women's development cell are the most sought after. The heads of the photography society did not agree to speak to me. So, the one student who agreed to talk, Abhimanyu (B.A. programme, 2nd year, college A), I did an exercise with him to know the caste background of the position holders of the society. The core membership was constitutive of ten students, the rest were non-core members, and the decision-making power lay with the core, as is the case with all societies. I asked him to list out last names of all the core members. Out of ten students, seven students were from upper caste backgrounds (which he claimed to be a diverse pool of students as they came from different regions of north India). I could not place the caste background of the rest of the three students as they were not from north India. He further recalled how the hiring members of the photography society asked students whether the applicants are comfortable with doing drugs or if they can bring in sponsorships for society events? Upper caste students did not only fill up most of the seats, but they also devised ways to keep the society an exclusive club through marking boundaries in the name of selecting those with resources. Getting sponsors, for instance, would mean having personal connections who can donate money or put one in touch with someone who can. Caste dominance, in terms of access to resources such as education and financial stability, has historically put upper castes in a favourable position. Their upper caste dominance is, thus, reconstituted through cultural matching.

Caste in the Classroom

A Dalit student, Priya (Sociology Honours, 3rd year, College B), mentions how there is no caste-based discrimination in her department. It doesn't mean, however, that there is none in others. Nonetheless, she narrates a story of how a professor once asked her, "You must be a brahmin, no?" since she excels in academics. This idea that only a brahmin can be intelligent or do well academically is hinged on a relational idea that a Dalit cannot perform well. It is this everydayness of casteist practices which go unnoticed, hence also exceedingly difficult to delineate. She also takes a jibe at upper caste students' casteist projection of Dalit students, she says, 'Ye log abhi bhi sochte hai ki hum ghade se paani peete hai,' (these people think that we still drink from earthen pot) and laughs.

These two institutions which claim to have progressive legacies proved to be what Sukumar (2016) calls 'modern agraharas.' Chand, an Ambedkarite second year undergraduate student from the sociology department at college B narrates an anecdote of a classroom discussion. The conversation during a class on social justice turned towards whether affirmative policies are socially just. A debate arose between Ambedkarite (which constituted only students from marginalized background) and upper caste students and rather than letting the conversation to reach its conclusion, the teacher, who also belonged to an upper caste location, ended the discussion abruptly without critically engaging with the issues raised. Chand narrates that even though Ambedkar's writings are taught, there may be classes on social stratification, but the pedagogical process does not critically engage with caste and rather obfuscates casteist praxis.

Kain (2022) argues that absence of caste in curriculum furthers caste in pedagogy. She analyses Delhi University's undergraduate syllabus of women's/gender studies and feminist writings of the department of sociology, political science, etc. She posits that caste remains invisibilized in academic curricula, however it manifests itself through teacher-student relationship, classroom dynamics, etc. She underlines that even if anti-caste, Dalit writings are included, let's say in English or sociology department, the engagement remains tokenistic. In my own empirical work, I discovered through interviews with Dalit students, that teachers tend to dissipate conversations on caste or affirmative policies. The sociology department at Delhi University has Ambedkar's writings in its syllabus, however students pointed out that engagement with Ambedkar remains cursory and its always taught towards the end of the semester when there is barely any time left for critical engagement. Mittal (2020) argues, in the context of implementation of National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005 and the way it is perceived and taught in classrooms. In her empirical work in a government school in Delhi, she posits that students' and teachers' caste identities dictate the way conversations on caste through curriculum takes place. Even though NCF tried to address entrenched caste hierarchies in the curriculum and foster critical thinking, however it did not translate into pedagogical processes. Structural changes, she underlines, are required for a change in curriculum to be successful. Thus, who does or does not see caste depends on which caste location one inhabits.

Upper Caste Students' Claim to Marginality

There is also a tendency, I saw, to claim some form of marginality amongst upper caste students. When they situate themselves as middle class, they eventually go on to underline how their success is a result of their merit. Subramanian's (2019) work underlines how upper caste students continue to invoke merit as an empty category. Their claim to marginality, I argue, is a way to assert their superiority over their 'reserved category' peers. The popular perception of EWS, however, stays elusive to such a branding. It is only after prodding do they come to think of students from the EWS category as reserved category students. One respondent shared an interesting anecdote while talking about admission in college A, the role of affirmative policies and upper caste students' behaviour towards her availing reservations. She chuckles and says, "I understand if those who aren't availing any reservations judging us or feeling hurt. You won't believe students who avail EWS quota, who have scored even less than us, also judge us." She goes on to recount another instance where her classmates complained that they are considering studying abroad because undeserving candidates have hogged all the seats. Upper caste resentment, as well as hurt against affirmative policies, is made palpable through numerous ways. For example, having no contention with EWS as an affirmative policy and a call for castelessness is an indication of two things, amongst others a) Collapsing EWS with upper caste, hence deserving students; b) upper caste insistence on maintaining caste hierarchy. Caste privilege as a way of life has been naturalised, is all pervasive and invisible. Caste capital has been converted to economic and social capital, hence the call for castelessness (Deshpande,

2014), or a call to discontinue reservations. Claiming castelessness or saying 'I don't believe in caste' is in fact a reiteration of caste privilege.

Caste Beyond Classroom

College space is like a microcosm where students from various religions, castes, class and ethnicity are supposed to form a community. College does not happen only in classrooms, but also in the field, in canteens, in the foyer, in cultural societies, etc. Cultural societies play a significant role in any college culture. This central university is known for, apart from academic rigour, its seemingly vibrant cultural societies. Everyone 'seems' to stand a chance to participate, grow and 'make connections.' However, the process of entrance which is projected as transparent is an insidious way of gatekeeping and maintaining upper caste dominance. The process of induction heavily relies on accrued forms of cultural capital. For example, women's development cell (WDC) needs to be mandatorily present in all colleges. It doesn't have an active presence in all colleges; however, it is quite active at college A. I spoke to then president of the cell, Niharika (Political Science Honours, 3rd year, college A), and asked her about the induction process. It entailed a written exam as well as an interview—all conducted in English. I asked her if English can be an obstacle to which she replied vaguely, 'Oh but it is difficult to manage in any other language because there are students who speak other languages also.' The questions in the written exam are complex and required special training. It was tantamount to what privileged students received at their schools, which they eventually replicated in college. Niharika, for instance, went to an international school. She came from a wealthy family. However, she called herself middle class even though she came from an upscale residential area in Delhi where the cost of a house is usually in millions of rupees. Her father worked at a prominent position in a national bank of India. She came from a family which constantly reminded her to 'padhai theek se karo' (study well). She mentioned how her entire family is academically oriented. "Do it well" is a constant reiteration in her interview. The school she went to has all sorts of extra-curricular activities. She was part of a team which created a gender cell, she attended meetings of Model United Nations which she continued while in college. What we see here is a smooth linear trajectory of a student who was prepped in school to succeed in college and eventually in the labour market. When I asked her that why is there a need for an entry process in the first place? She replied that the right wing needs to be kept at bay is the reason why written exam is a prerequisite. I asked her opinion on the reason of dismal number of Dalit, Adivasi, OBC and minority students in cultural societies. She replies that maybe they do not have enough exposure to sit for the interview. So, shouldn't the process be more democratic, I asked? We cannot do their work for them, she responded hesitantly. There is an ambivalence in Niharika's responses. Even though there is recognition of her own caste and class privilege which afforded her access to elite schools, however, there is a reluctance to accommodate students within the ambit of WDC who do not carry the same cultural capital as she does. Niharika comes from a 'progressive' left-wing politics. WDC, during her tenure, claims to be constituted

primarily by women/queers/non-binaries from oppressed locations. However, the leadership was constitutive of upper caste heterosexual women/non-binary persons. There was gendered diversity in terms of sexuality but not in terms of caste. Linguistic capital became a boundary marker to create an exclusive club. It is, however, not to say that students from marginalised backgrounds did not become members but they did not climb up to the leadership position as easily as their upper caste peers did.

Dalit, tribal and minority students haven't had any stakes in the power in Indian higher education. Most Ambedkarite student groups across various institutions have been critical of not only the right but also liberal/radical left of not giving students at the margin the opportunity to come forward. First, the selection process works as 'filters' so that students with pre-approved cultural capital can be chosen. Second, they require students to have had the training to be considered for membership. Training, again, requires not only money but an awareness as to what is more fashionable. For example, playing a violin would garner more attention and an increased possibility of getting into the music society than let's say dholak (a folk percussion instrument). The current president decides who the next president would be (which is mostly their own friends or cousins) and that decision remains final.

Membership in cultural societies puts one in proximity of the seniors which can help navigate college, exams and other opportunities. It also gives exposure to other students across the university which extends the web of connection. Since the same process of selection is replicated in all societies across the university, they become dens of upper caste privileged students. It's almost like small clusters of cultural societies constitutive of upper caste students which later amalgamates into a larger web of connection. Habitus can be used a framework to understand characteristics and dispositions of students which they claim helped them be successful in college. These predispositions are shaped by past experiences which influence their current social world (Bhopal and Myers, p. 38).

Conclusion

One thing was clear during the field work that according to upper caste students, the 'meritorious' is always an upper caste even though caste is claimed to be anti-thetical to modernity as well as merit (Subramanian, 2019). Higher educational institutions by reinforcing the idea of merit imbue upper caste students with a sense of worthiness which is supplemented by the popular narrative on merit. Everydayness of caste is often overlooked and collapsed with class. It is not caste discrimination as long there is no violence, or no overt mention/invocation of one's caste. Caste is marked on a body only when it is violated or if it avails affirmative policies. Affirmative policy might serve as inclusionary measures; however, it does not necessarily translate to representation in informal settings such as cultural societies. There are Ambedkarite study groups in university colleges, but their place remains marginal. Groups formed for SC/ST/OBC students, like Equal Opportunity Cell, remain defunct in both the colleges; their work is merely perfunctory. The universities need to rigorously work

towards making such groups active, make it necessary for colleges to robustly build redressal cells. Those spaces which remain outside the purview of affirmative policies need to be vigilantly audited to assess diversity across caste, ethnicity and gender.

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From Lhasa to Dharamshala: Statelessness and Identity in the Tibetan Exile Diaspora

Sara Kohar¹, Naresh Kumar²

Abstract

The article examines the forced migration and stateless existence of Tibetans due to China's invasion of Tibet in 1950. As per the demographic survey conducted by Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in 2009, approximately 80,000 Tibetans fled to neighbouring countries like India, Bhutan, and Nepal after the 1959 uprising against the Chinese government. It studies how exile has catalysed the formation of a transnational Tibetan identity. Drawing from diaspora and transnationalism theories, particularly the works of Clifford, Brah, and Schiller, the article analyses how these diasporic networks sustain a collective Tibetan consciousness. It then examines how Tibetan exile communities have used internet activism, education, religious continuity, and cultural preservation to maintain their identity and rally support from around the world. It interrogates India's nuanced involvement in the Tibet issue, striking a balance between geopolitical realism and historical links. It contends that the tenacity of the Tibetan diaspora, which is based on political optimism and cultural memory, represents a distinct diasporic formation in which statelessness serves as a means of belonging as well as a political statement.

Keywords

Tibet; Diaspora; Statelessness; Social Exclusion; Government-in-exile; Transnationalism; Identity

Introduction

In the study of identity formation, transnationalism, and forced migration, the Tibetan diaspora offers a unique situation. Following the 1950 annexation of Tibet by the People's Republic of China (PRC), which resulted in the 1959 rebellion and the subsequent exile of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Tibet's contemporary political

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history was drastically changed. Following the Seventeen-Point Agreement, which was drafted in retaliation to the Chinese invasion under communist regime, Tibet was granted autonomy within the PRC. Tibetans, however, continue to challenge the legality of this agreement because it was supposedly signed under intimidation and the committee sent to Beijing lacked the authority to sign such a pact. Thus, the relevant period of Tibetan history begins in 1950, with Chinese army forcefully entering the Tibetan area of Chamdo. The three major provinces that made up ancient Tibet, namely Amdo, in the northeast, Kham, in the southeast, and U-Tsang, in the west lost their independence and self-government. These provinces are dominated by the ethnic Han majority, which makes up 91 per cent of China's inhabitants along with non-Tibetan minorities (MacPherson et al., 2008).

When speaking of Tibet, China refers to it as Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), which is physically equivalent to the former province of U-Tsang. Amdo and Kham, the two last major Tibetan provinces, have been administratively split up and merged into other Chinese provinces. Amdo has been merged into Qinghai and portions of Gansu, while Kham has been divided between Yunnan and Sichuan. The historical boundaries of Tibet were drastically changed by this reconfiguration, as shown in Figure 1, which scattered its cultural heartlands throughout several Chinese administrative divisions and reduced the official Tibet to a small portion of its original area.

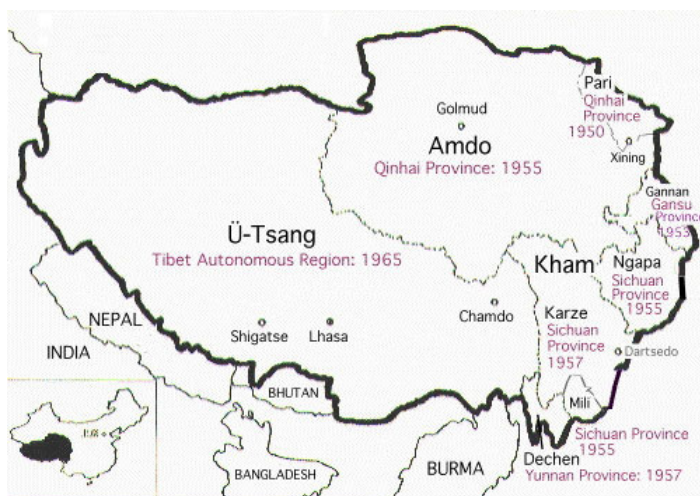


Fig. 1: Map of historical Tibet and its current administrative divisions under the People's Republic of China. The map illustrates the three traditional provinces—U-Tsang, Amdo, and Kham—and their present-day incorporation into the TAR, Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan.

(Source: <https://www.himalayas-trek.com/Country/Tibet.php>)

In 1959, His Holiness the Dalai Lama fled the capital city of Lhasa and founded Tibet's own government-in-exile in Dharamshala leading to the formation of a large diaspora across India. A majority of Tibetans have maintained their stateless refugee status in India and Nepal as a reminder to themselves and the rest of the world that Tibet is under the Chinese government's unlawful occupation and that they intend to

return home eventually (Hess, 2009). Upon reaching India, Dalai Lama felt the need to establish a proper functional government that could represent the exiled population, so he inaugurated the CTA with working offices in 10 countries that operate as de facto embassies for the administration's cultural and informational bureaus, providing Tibetans with consular services. These events led to a process of identity renewal and maintenance that is consistent with diaspora theorists like James Clifford (1994), who contends that diasporas are groups that actively negotiate their identities over time and space. In a similar manner, Avtar Brah's (1996) concept of the "diasporic space" emphasises how cultural memory, shared political goals, and lived experiences all influence identities.

The formation of CTA marked a significant shift in the Tibetan cause serving the diaspora in numerous ways, including education, scholarships, and rehabilitation. It has incorporated modern democratic ideals in preparation for a free Tibet in the future. Since it has no authority over any geographical region or population, it mobilises national and worldwide support through an effective communication network and by giving incentives to people to remain committed to the cause of a free Tibet. Tibetans in India have overwhelmingly opted to be stateless, eschewing the practical benefits of citizenship and thereby staying exiles. DeVoe writes "For the exiled Tibetans, refugee status is indicative of a cultural, ethnic, and a common national identity, a devotion to the past, and a dedication to Tibet's future liberation" (Goldstein, 1978). After years, the campaign for an independent Tibet has achieved international recognition. Many activists have established online forums and groups to promote the freedom of Tibet at the same time as the Internet is becoming more widely used and accessible. These internet forums provide platforms for the expression of identities and ideas that constitute a global political discourse.

Using these theoretical perspectives, this study examines how Tibetan exiles have constructed a transnational political and cultural identity. Through an examination of transnational activism, institutional analysis, and historical context, the study makes the case that Tibetan statelessness has evolved into a framework for community resilience as well as a symbol of resistance.

Tibetan Migration to India and Historical Context

Understanding Tibetan migration to India requires an understanding of the mid-20th century's larger geopolitical changes, particularly the end of colonial control in South Asia and the establishment of Communist China. Looking at the history of Tibet, the territories identified as part of it were characterised by the high-altitude ecology and the ethnic Tibetan population. The Han Chinese and Indians or Nepalese were agricultural people who resided in the relatively low grasslands stretching from the Tibetan highlands to the foothills of the Himalayas. Tibetans lived semi-nomadic on the green steppe plains up to the plateau along Tibet's eastern border with China. Between the sixth and sixteenth centuries, the Great Wall of China was built to keep

Mongolian, Uygur, and Tibetan nomads from conquering China along Tibet's northern frontiers (MacPherson et al., 2008).

The circumstances that forced Tibetans to migrate in large groups dates back more than a century, when Tibet was persuaded to ally with Great Britain, which during that time controlled India. Tibet operated as a buffer state between colonized India and China in return for defence against the Chinese. With the collapse of British administration in India in 1947, China became excessively interested in Tibet, asserting that it had always been a part of China. The then Chinese leader Mao Zedong invaded Tibet in 1950 with the purpose of "liberating it for the Chinese motherland" (Shakya, 1999; Levinson and Christensen, 2002). Tibet was important to China for strategic and security reasons due to its geographic location. Subsequently, the Indian government began to take the required procedures to establish administrative authority over the Himalayan areas of Ladakh and the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). India had no alternative but to engage the Chinese government diplomatically to create an agreed-upon border between India and Tibet. All these goals were met in the 1954 agreement between India and China. Even though this accord allowed China a free hand in Tibet, the Dalai Lama remained hopeful that India would assist Tibetans (Sikri, 2011).

Stages of Migration

The large inflow of Han Chinese into Tibet altered the region's demography but had little influence on Tibetan ambitions for sovereignty or a separate identity. Consequently, in early March 1959, mass demonstrations against Chinese control took place in Tibet's capital of Lhasa. Tensions were at peak since the capital city had been overpopulated for some time by Tibetans fleeing from eastern districts of Kham and Amdo. Approximately 30,000 Tibetans protested China's occupation by defending the entrances of Norbulingka, where the 14th Dalai Lama was residing now. On March 17, the first rounds were fired by the Chinese troops which resulted in the death of at least 80,000 Tibetans. This came to be known as the "Lhasa uprising" after which the Dalai Lama escaped to India, where he was granted shelter and permitted to organize an in-exile administration (Pherson, 2003).

In the 1980s, China's policy of opening Tibet to Chinese trade and tourists and increase in political persecution resulted in the second wave of Tibetan migration. Over 25,000 additional Tibetan refugees arrived in India between 1986 and 1996, mostly via Nepal, boosting the country's native Tibetan population by over 25 per cent. Most of the time, India gave permission to Tibetans to enter through Nepal. Those who attempted to enter across the highly disputed borders of Sino-India were sent back because of the dire security situation there.

This wave also represents what Robin Cohen (1997) refers to as a "cultural diaspora," which is characterised by the desire for spiritual continuity and cultural preservation in addition to relocation. Around 44 per cent of the second wave of migrants was nuns and monks. The number of short-term pilgrimage travellers from Tibet rose significantly. For instance, up to 100,000 Tibetans from Tibet took part in

the Kalachakra ritual at Sarnath in 1990. According to UNHCR, the Indian government allows these “newcomers” but prohibits them from participating in political activities.

Furthermore, many of the newest immigrants were denied residency permits, and existing Tibetan villages became congested since they were not permitted to grow. This wave can also be termed as an education-forced migration by families of children seeking a full Tibetan education at Dharamsala’s residential institutions (MacPherson et al., 2008). This type of “education-driven migration” strengthened the idea that international movement is essential to maintaining cultural identity and gave the story of Tibetan exile a new dimension. As Appadurai (1996) notes, such educational exchanges are important processes in the reproduction of diasporic subjectivity, especially in stateless groups. These migrant waves have combined to create a dynamic Tibetan presence in India that blends cultural resiliency with political resistance and keeps evolving in an increasingly transnational context.

Establishment of the Central Tibetan Administration

With a large population of Tibetans in India, Dalai Lama felt the need to establish a political entity which could represent the people of Tibet and ensure their rehabilitation and welfare. The Indian government not only provided shelter to the exiled population but let Dalai Lama establish his own government-in-exile on Indian soil. Though this government is not “officially” recognised by any country including India, it receives substantial financial assistance from countries and international organisations across the world.

The Dalai Lama founded the government in exile on 29 April 1959 and came into being in 1960 with a vision of an independent Tibet in the future. The first task the CTA took upon itself was to rehabilitate Tibetan population and provide the youth a proper education. From the beginning, it inhabited the principles of a democratic state in preparation for a free Tibet. The administration now has every department and feature of a free democratic government. The Dalai Lama has long pushed for the political democratisation of Tibet. The invasion of China put an end to the changes that he had even begun in Tibet.

In his 1960 Bodhgaya address, the Dalai Lama made clear his desire for the development of a democratic state, proclaiming:

Even prior to my departure from Tibet in March 1959, I had come to the conclusion that in the changing circumstances of the modern world, the system of governance in Tibet must be modified and amended so as to allow the elected representatives of the people to play a more effective role in guiding and shaping the social and economic policies of the State, I also firmly believed that this could only be done through democratic institutions based on social and economic justice. (*TPiE*, 2022).

The CTA has become more democratic throughout the years. The first direct election for Kalon Tripa (now known as the Sikyong, or President) took place in 2001. The

Dalai Lama reaffirmed his long-standing commitment to democratic values in 2011 by formally handing up all political authority to the elected authorities. The current government-in-exile is not meant to assume control of Tibet after its independence. In his manifesto for a free Tibet in the future, titled the *Guidelines for Future Tibet's Polity and Basic Features of its Constitution*, Dalai Lama stated that “the existing exile administration in power would be dissolved and dismantled as soon as freedom is restored in Tibet” (CTA, n.d.). He asserted that Tibetans who have been living in Tibet, not members of the exile administration, will head the government of free Tibet as it will ensure accountability and transparency. According to him, a transitional administration shall be created, led by an Interim-President who he will select or appoint.

The CTA's responsiveness, vision, and democratic values have given it legitimacy despite its lack of geographical control. According to Basu (2013), it has been succeeded in establishing a “representational space” that enables Tibetans to preserve a common political vision beyond national boundaries and symbolically reaffirm their nationhood.

Preservation of Tibetan Identity and Culture

Following the dispersal of the Tibetan community from their country, the only thing that binds them together in exile is their shared culture, history, and struggle. According to Avtar Brah (1996), the imagined homeland and the current circumstances of relocation are both factors in the construction of diasporic identity. This place of exile, especially in India, has become a place of both rebirth and bereavement for Tibetans. Majority of Tibetans participate in the revival of their culture and identity since they feel it is significant to stay attached to one's roots. Educated Tibetans try to preserve and represent their heritage by preserving local languages such as Bodhi. CTA produces and publishes all kinds of books (textbooks, cultural, religious) in Tibetan language as it is being aggressively eroded and children are forced to learn Chinese in Tibet. One crucial policy CTA assigned itself from the beginning of its establishment was to relocate Tibetan refugees and restore Tibet's freedom and identity. The rehabilitation agenda includes programmes like a) providing education to Tibetan youth; b) creating a strong democratic state; and c) making Tibetan people self-reliant in every field (CTA, n.d.).

The Dalai Lama recognized in his early years in exile that the wish to return to their homeland might not be realized in the immediate future and therefore, emphasized the need of rebuilding Tibet's monastic institutions in exile, preserving cultural traditions, and instilling Tibetan principles and values in the younger generation through education (Harris, 1999). Tibetan culture and identity are strongly linked to Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhist precepts and religious practise are commonplace for most Tibetans. Important guidance and teaching are given to their communities by monks and nuns. They routinely participate in initiatives designed to protect and

advance Tibet's environment, language, and culture. Buddhism came to Tibet between the seventh and ninth centuries. In terms of theories, rituals and religious institutions, it is drawn from Mahayana Buddhism in India. Tibetan Buddhism fell during the ninth century AD's period of fragmentation in Tibet but resurfaced stronger than ever during the eleventh century AD's Buddhist renaissance. Its teachings have gradually extended and acquired popularity outside of Tibet throughout history, notably in Mongolia, Bhutan, and Nepal (Wang, 2022).

Tibetans living in exile feel it is important to preserve and represent their religion and traditions that have been threatened with extinction in Tibet. This emotion is linked with a strong dedication to survival, which is further cemented by the Dalai Lama's resolve to preserve a fundamental cultural identity. Since 1959, Tibetan exiles and Chinese authorities have been engaged in a "confrontation of representations" in which the two sides have fought to legitimise their separate views of Tibetan past and current events. Tibetan exiles recognised the need of conserving Tibetan Buddhism not just as a significant set of rites, but also as the foundation for re-establishing a Tibetan identity in exile. As Basu (2013) says, "To keep the prospect of returning to Tibet alive, the memory and lived experience of 'Tibetan-ness' must be preserved in order to maintain the sense of loss and hope." Tibetan exiles are taught to remember the experiences of others when they are born in exile (Basu, 2013).

According to the Dalai Lama, Tibet's young generation holds the key to Tibet's and Tibetan culture's future. As a result, training them is critical to the survival of the Tibetan way of life. Conditions were terrible for the early phases of Tibetan refugees, who struggled with high levels of starvation and a lack of opportunities for education and jobs. For little to no money, the earliest arrivals engaged in difficult physical labour such as road building, farming and other construction works. The Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) was founded by the Dalai Lama in 1960 with the goal of developing a self-sufficient and a sustainable community that would allow Tibetan diaspora and culture to revive itself and flourish.

In a 1962 speech at the inauguration of the first refugee school in Mussoorie, Dalai Lama asserted:

It is even harder for children than for adults to be uprooted and taken to an entirely different environment...We had to do something drastic to preserve their health - and their education was also a matter of great importance. We know that our children in Tibet are being snatched away from their parents and being brought up as Chinese Communists, not as Tibetan Buddhists....So in the next generation, the children in India may be very important people, a nucleus of the peaceful religious life we wish to retain. (Dalai Lama, 1962)

Through religious organisations, community projects, and educational programs, the Tibetan diaspora in India has maintained a thriving cultural life that goes beyond exile. These initiatives, which guarantee that Tibetan identity is visible, vital, and powerful

even in the absence of geographical sovereignty, are not only sentimental; they are acts of political resistance.

Leading a Global Free Tibet Movement

In 1992, Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton coined the term “Transnationalism,” which refers to social networks that cross national boundaries to connect migrants with network members who are still in their place of origin. Information is exchanged within these international networks. Technology has made it possible for migrants to communicate with family and friends back home, which may be considered as an informal transnational exchange of human and social capital (Schiller et al., 1992). The way that people communicate with one another and with governments is changing because of the usage of emergent media technologies. With access to the Internet, people are better able to keep up with events in other nations, maintain links to their own countries, communicate with other diasporas, and in some cases, build global communities of like-minded people. The potential for online spaces to develop into places of resistance where people may voice their political disagreement in ways that were previously impossible in offline groups is at the core of this phenomenon (Chan, 2008).

The establishment and preservation of links and networks beyond physical, cultural, and political boundaries, as well as the interconnectivity and cohabitation of the local, national, and global, are all recognised as transnational spaces. The transnational reinforces the potential for meaningful interactions and social structures emerging across borders and via the building of dense networks. The transnational is more important than the global because it recognises both the potential of networks and communities to cross national boundaries and the continuing role of national borders in structuring and restricting social activities and meanings (Myria, 2013).

After guiding his people to a secure foothold in exile, the Dalai Lama have been travelling outside of India to educate the world on the issue of Tibet and the atrocities Tibetans have been facing over the years. The various NGOs, Tibet Support Groups, or the global Tibet movement, remain the world’s most persistent non-violent movement. Throughout, the Dalai Lama worked with the Chinese government to encourage it to adopt a more tolerant, peaceful approach toward the Tibetan people. Tibetans in India are also making extensive use of the internet to raise awareness about their cause. It also aids in the networking of the Tibetan Diaspora across the world, the organisation of protests, and the collection of support from countries all over the world. An online website called Phayul.com was started in 2001 by Tibetan refugees in India which is distributed in English from Dharamshala. It is a leading news website that disseminates information and commentary about Tibet and Tibet-in-exile.

The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan diaspora founded more than fifty Tibetan communities across North America, India and Nepal in the decades that followed. The preservation of Tibetan culture through the continuous use of the Tibetan language and continued allegiance to the various sects of Tibetan Buddhism is crucial to these

diasporic groups. Several NGOs were established in the early years of exile to aid the growth and development of a civil society for Tibetans that promote self-help efforts. The two most significant NGOs are the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) and the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA), both of which were founded in Dharamsala, and have branches all over the world. Political activities, health, welfare, and social service programmes, environmental activism and community development, educational activities, cultural activities, and religious activities are just a few of the things that these NGOs do (MacPherson et al., 2008).

A group of Tibetans, students, and supporters in New York City founded Students for a Free Tibet (SFT) in 1994. It was established on the principle that youth and students have always been crucial allies in liberation struggles. Since then, it has grown into an international network of people in over 35 countries, including students and non-students. SFT has spearheaded efforts that have cost the Chinese government billions of dollars to win the safe release of several political prisoners (SFT, 2022). The organization stands in solidarity with Tibetans in their fight for independence and freedom. Young people and activists from all around the world are now connected through a worldwide network. Through outreach, community organising, and nonviolent direct action, they fight for Tibetans' fundamental right to political independence. The mission is to empower and teach young people to be leaders in the global social justice movement. In his Holiness the Dalai Lama's (2015) words: "The achievements of Students for a Free Tibet show that non-violent action does work."

These groups make up what Noakes (2012) refers to as "transnational advocacy networks"—organizations that work internationally to compel moral commitment, exert pressure on strong states, and hold governments responsible. Such networks may last for decades, maintain international involvement, and provide legitimacy for a community that lacks a state, as the Tibetan situation illustrates. Crucially, political campaigning is only one aspect of the international Tibetan movement. It also includes environmental action, spiritual outreach, and cultural diplomacy.

Policies of Central Tibetan Administration towards China

According to the Dalai Lama, the Tibet issue must be settled amicably via deliberations based on the aspirations of the Tibetan people. He established contact with the Chinese Army in Lhasa shortly after China invaded Tibet in 1951, and in 1954, he engaged in discussions with leaders including Mao Zedong and Chou En-lai to avert confrontations and unnecessary violence. His Holiness remained an advocate for a peaceful negotiated resolution even after witnessing the bloody repression of the Tibetan national uprising in 1959, but the Chinese leadership was unwilling to engage in dialogue during the years of radical communist reforms and the infamous Cultural Revolution.

Consequently, the Dalai Lama ceased advocating for the restoration of Tibetan independence after several failed efforts and instead suggested a partnership-based

resolution rather than breaking away from the People's Republic of China. However, China's answer to his request was hostile and included critical remarks about His Holiness. This led to large-scale protests in Tibet, which the Chinese military once more forcefully put down. With the imposition of martial rule in March 1989, the cycle of oppression and resistance reached its height. His Holiness continued his attempts to talk to China despite the worsening circumstances in Tibet. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, and the overwhelming response which was demonstrated on the international stage as the world recognized and supported his undying devotion to pursue a peaceful negotiated settlement to the Tibetan people's suffering.

The CTA has attempted to use digital channels to elevate Tibetan voices, build strategic partnerships with governments, NGOs, and rights-based groups, and mobilise global civil society in response to this intransigence. This tactic fits with what Keck and Sikkink (1998) refer to as "boomerang politics," in which non-state actors use transnational advocacy networks to gain power while avoiding state channels. According to the Dalai Lama's political and ethical beliefs, the CTA has opposed demands for either complete independence or violent opposition. Rather, it has advocated for a strategy based on negotiation and compromise in an effort to reconcile China's territorial concerns with Tibetan ambitions.

The Middle Way Approach

It is an approach that Dalai Lama proposed as a compromise for the Tibet problem. It was designed to establish stability and peaceful cohabitation between Tibetan and Chinese people based on equality and reciprocal assistance as well as to amicably resolve the Tibet problem. Proposed in the late 1980s and formally endorsed by the CTA in 1997, the policy marks a change in strategy from calling for Tibet's complete independence to pursuing true autonomy within the parameters of the Chinese Constitution. The current condition of Tibet under the Chinese rule is rejected by the Tibetan people, and they demand independence. Complete independence is, however, seems nearly impossible that is why Tibetans have deliberated on a strategy to grant autonomy to all Tibetans residing in the three provinces i.e., the TAR region within the framework of the policies of the Chinese government. This approach takes a moderate stance as it wishes to protect the interests of both the parties involved in the conflict. For the Tibetans, this means protection of their cultural heritage and religion, and a distinct national identity. Whereas for the Chinese this means preserving and securing its border and territorial integrity (CTA, 1997).

The goal of the Middle Way is to persuade the world community that it is an ethically and politically sound position by providing a compromise. According to experts like Anand (2000), the Middle Way is a post-nationalist tactic that is based on ethical governance, human rights, and cultural autonomy rather than assertions of state sovereignty. Additionally, it aims to reassure China that the aspirations of Tibet do not pose a danger to national unity. The Dalai Lama has continuously presented

this strategy as a “win-win” option that addresses China’s territory and security concerns while preserving Tibetan dignity. However, China has adamantly rejected this approach, seeing it as a sneaky attempt at “semi-independence,” despite its accommodative tone and international endorsements, notably by the US, the European Parliament, and many countries. Since 2010, Chinese authorities have refused to resume formal negotiations with the Dalai Lama, accusing him of applying unfair treatment. However, the CTA still maintains the Middle Way as its primary foundation for policy, prioritising communication above conflict.

India’s Stand on the Tibet Issue

The current border dispute is a result of Chinese Communist colonisation as Tibet functioned as a barrier between the realms of influence of the British, Chinese, and Russians in the Asian region. However, despite Tibet’s long history of autonomy, both Chinese Nationalists and Communists have viewed it as an essential part of China. Chinese invasion led to the presence of Chinese forces near the McMahon Line, which became a possible subject of contention with India. Ultimately, in 1951 the “People’s Government and the Local Government of Tibet” signed the Seventeen-Point Agreement (Shakya, 1999). It essentially served as a declaration of Tibet’s surrender.

After Dalai Lama’s forceful submission, to strengthen communication with Tibet, China aggressively commenced road construction projects. It also began trying to erode Tibet’s long-standing trading links with India and Nepal, remove extra-territorial rights excised by India in Tibet, and establish India’s legitimacy of China’s occupation of Tibet. The 1954 Trade Agreement between India and China succeeded in achieving these aims. India passed up an opportunity to secure unambiguous and unequivocal acknowledgement of India’s boundaries with Tibet from China at a time when it had some geopolitical influence. In the following years, mutual mistrust and hostility between India and China grew. The Aksai Chin Road between Xinjiang and Tibet was finished in 1957, and China’s stance became increasingly hostile (Sikri, 2011).

In the following years, China and India began to engage in the deadly games that hostile states frequently engage in as the internal developments took shape after 1959. The Chinese believed that India was using the Dalai Lama as a negotiating tool in order to bolster its border claim and shame China. The Indians believed that China was utilising its superior geo-strategic position in Tibet to exert pressure on India’s frontiers and damage its international standing. It evolved into a fatal cycle that drove India and China to war in 1962, with Tibet serving as the connecting link (Norbu, 1997). As a result, India’s stand on the Tibet issue is limited as there is a threat to India’s border security as well. India has provided Tibetans with a place to reside and prosper but it cannot hold a staunch position in favour of Tibet as it needs to maintain cordial relations with China.

Since then, strategic prudence has guided India’s Tibet policy. In its diplomatic interactions, India has formally acknowledged Tibet as a part of China, even though

it has continued to accommodate the Dalai Lama, the CTA, and more than 100,000 Tibetan refugees. India has mostly avoided internationalising the Tibet problem and refrains from openly criticising Chinese policy in the region. Although diplomatically helpful, this ambiguity has frequently put India in a precarious situation where it upholds Tibetan rights in practice while restricting political speech in public diplomacy.

India is reluctant to take a more assertive stance for several reasons:

- The ongoing boundary issues with China, particularly those pertaining to Aksai Chin and the McMahon Line;
- China's expanding influence in the Indian Ocean and its strategic partnership with Pakistan;
- India's ambitions for both global economic integration and regional stability;
- The fear of China's retaliatory actions, such as increased military pressure or isolating diplomatic ties.

As international awareness of Tibet's issue has grown and China's global assertiveness has increased, scholars and analysts have called for a reassessment of India's Tibet policy. It should, consequently, make India take a strong stand for Tibet as it shares historical and spiritual ties with Tibet. India has been extremely kind to the Tibetans as it had allowed thousands of Tibetans to live in exile in India. However, the challenges Tibetans in India face such as the status of being legally stateless should be addressed. Since they have no legal right and certainly no permanent status, it becomes an obstacle in their growth.

Conclusion

A compelling case study in diaspora politics, stateless identity, transnationalism, and cultural survival may be found in the Tibetan exile experience, which was moulded by historical rupture and maintained via transnational resilience. This article has looked at how the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), the Dalai Lama's leadership, and the active involvement of Tibetans around the world have helped the Tibetan diaspora grow from a population of displaced people to a globally recognised political and cultural community.

Tibet's desire for self-determination should be seen considering His Holiness the Dalai Lama's repeated statements that he doesn't want Tibet to become independent from China but rather to reach a peaceful resolution. As a result, Tibet is currently seeking a peaceful settlement as well as the genuine restoration of its autonomy through the removal of the factors that have hampered it. The Chinese have recently pushed their will on the Tibetan people while assuming the rights that belong to Dalai Lama, even in a purely religious matter like the nomination of the next Panchen Lama. This only proves that Tibetan autonomy is a myth today.

In the middle of Tibetan people's extraordinary hardship and misery, the Dalai Lama's call for restoring Tibet's independent status in its true form is a logical and

ethical argument. By assisting him, India would simply be fulfilling a responsibility that has been weighing on its shoulders for over half a century. India continues to play a crucial and contradictory part in this story. India has served as the Tibetan community's host country, offering them resources, safety, and a certain amount of independence. However, the limitations of realpolitik are reflected in its strategic vagueness and public silence. India's moral obligation and historical connections to Tibet may serve as the foundation for a more proactive and ethical approach to the problem in the future.

In the end, the Tibetan conflict encompasses more than just issues of sovereignty and territory. The rights to political voice, spiritual continuity, and cultural existence are at issue. A potent example of how displaced groups may express agency, oppose erasure, and redefine nationhood beyond boundaries is provided by the Tibetan diaspora, with its dedication to non-violence, democracy, and identity preservation.

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‘I’m an Upper Caste Myself’: Caste Identities in Negotiating Casteism

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Abstract

Caste is the single most important determinant of life outcomes in India (Pathania et al., 2023; Teltumbde, 2022; Yengde, 2019). Caste is pervasive—in our homes, friendships, places of worship, love and marriage, clothing, language, food, and more. Caste as a ‘system’ of oppression is, at its core, a means of organizing social groups and memberships. Social psychologists have examined inter-caste attitudes and possible reasons for discrimination (Jogdand et al., 2016; Prasad et al., 2020; Sharma & Jogdand, 2024) Sidanius, Bhardwaj, and Kumar’s (2014). What has been less examined is what it means for persons to engage with caste and casteism. In this article, I examine how individuals construct specific caste identities for themselves in addressing casteism. Using discursive psychology, I examined interviews with 20 students who were protesting the death of Rohit Vemula. Findings show that interviewees negotiated their positions on casteism through softening their attachment to caste identities. Interviewee accounts developed their own and others’ caste identities in ways that grounded these in contexts of higher education to downgrade or upgrade claims about prevalent casteism.

Keywords

Caste, Casteism, Social Comparison, Caste Identity, Discursive Psychology, India, Higher Education.

Introduction

It is wholly unsurprising that education is a core site for the production and enactment of oppressive caste practices. The historical ideas of the caste system treat Brahmins as tied to learning and knowledge, ‘lower’ caste groups as tied to labor, and those outside the caste system (Dalits) as tied to menial labor. For the latter sets of groups, education and learning are considered unbefitting (Pathania & Tierney, 2018; Sabharwal & Malish, 2017). This, of course, manifests in the composition of the

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university population: At higher-tier IITs and the IISc, 98 per cent of professors and more than 90 per cent of assistant or associate professors are from privileged/'upper' castes (Paliwal, 2023). This contrasts with many Indians who identify themselves as 'lower' castes (Center, 2021).

Historically, anti-caste activists and leaders had championed education—Savitribai Phule, for instance, was one of the first persons to start schools for Dalits and oppressed caste group members. Dr. Ambedkar similarly emphasized the role of education in enabling Dalits to achieve what they wish for. For researchers, such consequences of caste (Bros, 2014; Chauhan, 2008; Pal, 2015, 2020) mean that reservation in education and employment is necessary. The aim here is to provide quotas for various caste, religious, and tribal groups that were socially marginalized for centuries. As a program of social justice, reservations have largely been successful (Basu, 2021; Borooah et al., 2007; Weisskopf, 2004).

Despite this, several studies point to pervasive discrimination in educational settings. Various studies, including those by Patwardhan and Palshikar (1992), Neelakandan and Patil (2012), Rao (2013), Singh (2013), Ovichegan (2015), and official committee reports, shed light on the experiences of Dalit students in Indian higher education. Reports such as the Anveshi Law Committee report (2002) at the Hyderabad Central University, the Thorat Committee Report (2016), and the Mungekar Committee report (Gatade, 2012) at Vardhman Mahavir Medical College (VMMC) have concluded that caste-based discrimination is institutionalized. Subramanian (2015) highlights how discourses of caste and merit have interacted to produce new and more 'acceptable' forms of caste subjectivities in premier engineering colleges (cf. Deshpande 2013). In an ethnographic study on inter-caste relations in an elite university in Delhi, Pathania and Tierney (2018) examine interview accounts of students from upper and lower-caste groups. Their findings show that upper caste students avowed favorable positions towards Dalits and other caste members while shirking away from endorsing reservation (cf. Anant, 1978). For instance, Natrajan (2012) argues that caste groups have claimed the language of 'culture', allowing casteism to continue as a preference. In other words, prejudice is increasingly directed not at the 'other by blood' but 'other by culture'.

Researchers have pointed out how the fact of making use of reservations is routinely the reason for targeting Dalits and other lower caste group members. Individuals who benefit from reservations or quotas are often negatively labelled as 'reservation wale' or 'quota wale' (Thorat, 2006). Reservation beneficiaries may also be referred to as 'schaddu' or 'sarkar ke damad' (sons-in-law of the government) in a derogatory manner to diminish their achievements and emphasize that what they receive is viewed as 'charity and not parity' (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019). Kumar (2016) highlights instances at Delhi University where Dalit girls are subjected to humiliation with questions like, 'Have you come through the reservation, or have you come from the brothel?' The term 'reserved category' is used to denigrate, while those in the 'general category' are widely accepted and often perceive themselves as superior. Essentially, Dalits endure

a dual stigma—both for their caste identity and as beneficiaries of state provisions through affirmative action (Sukumar, 2023).

For most Dalit students, the classroom is a problematic space. Thorat (2006) argues that treating Dalits as deficient and undeserving of education results in feelings of insecurity and develops an inferiority complex. Sharma and Subramanyam (2020) argue that caste minority students facing discrimination often deal with emotional stress, fear of failure, academic disinterest, and low self-esteem. This discrimination distracts them from their studies, resulting in poor academic performance. Jogdand (2017, 2024) argues that the Indian classroom is often a site of humiliation for Dalit students. Jogdand identifies ‘caste blindness’ as a set of strategies that seek to isolate and marginalize Dalit students in the class. Dalit identity is marked by oppression and stigma, constantly brought up in classrooms to cause further humiliation. As Komanapalli and Rao (2020) argue, such experiences contribute to further stress and problematic mental health outcomes. Across these studies and findings, a common concern is about caste identities and their consequences for attitudes and perspectives on members in other caste groups, a focus that is central to social psychology.

Background: The Social Psychology of Caste

Recent social psychological studies on caste have highlighted two interrelated concerns: first, the vast neglect of caste as a topic of study in social psychology, and second, that this has resulted in neglect of an extremely interesting means of conceptualizing intergroup relations and prejudice. However, what is missing is examining the uniqueness of caste as a means of identification. In that, scholars have largely treated caste as similar to race, gender, or other ways in which identification might be done. Jogdand (2024) has argued that the social psychology of caste is missing an integrated focus and is plagued by Euro-American understandings. Some of the earlier work reflects this focus.

Early work on casteism and attitudes across caste groups used survey methods. Rath and Sircar’s (1960) work argued that ‘upper’ caste persons were more progressive and wanted change than those categorized as ‘lower caste.’ Other work of this time, however, was different. Sinha and Sinha (1967) showed that attitudes towards caste groups were shaped by broader stereotypes of caste. Anant (1970) shows that reported attitudes by ‘Caste Hindus’ towards Dalits and ‘Harijans’ followed legal guidelines on disallowing untouchability or restriction to temples and so on. However, reported attitudes were far more conservative when it came to more private aspects of life, such as friendship and marriage.

More contemporary work on caste and casteism has similarly employed techniques of social surveys and experiments. Sahgal et al (2021), for instance, find that while individuals identify with caste groups, they do not report witnessing much discrimination, although offering a preference for same-caste marriages. Sharma and Jogdand (2024), for instance, have shown that those who might glorify their caste identities will endorse caste prejudice. In other work, Jogdand has shown the limitations

of using constructs from Euro-American contexts to examine casteism without close attention to how caste is embedded in specific contexts (also see Hoff & Pandey, 2006). For instance, Khan et al (2016) have argued that the foundational variables used to explain racial and gender prejudice by the Social Dominance Orientation model are insufficient to examine casteism.

Social psychologists have examined the role of the oppressor caste groups and members in the prevalence of casteism (Pal, 2023; Pathania et al, 2023; Sophan & Nair, 2023). Scholars, however, have pointed to the absence of social psychological research that examines caste in terms of people's understandings and identifications (Fatima et al., 2024). Pal (2015) similarly argues that researchers should focus on the 'everydayness of caste'. Fatima et al critique extant research on caste given their distance from real-life contexts. A notable concern voiced by Fatima et al is the adoption of the four varna system by researchers instead of attending to the fluid ways in which caste identification is accomplished and negotiated.

To an extent, qualitative examination of caste and casteism has addressed this concern. Mukherjee et al (2023), for instance, document the various accounts of experiencing casteism and resistance. Pathania et al (2023) similarly offer a qualitative examination of university students and faculty from diverse caste groups in India with an explicit focus on experiences of stigma, discrimination, and opportunities for resistance. Their findings show that experiences of discrimination and humiliation in contexts, like higher education, where the expectation is that of fair and equal treatment, deepen the humiliation. For the authors, this aspect of casteism in higher education can lead to severe mental health issues, at times resulting in self-harm.

Research has also shown the internalization of caste discrimination and problematic 'lower status' (Bros, 2014). For researchers, this speaks to the 'power' and influence of the caste system that allocates and imposes oppressor and oppressed caste identities onto individuals, leading to problematic outcomes for those who see themselves as 'oppressed' (Thapa et al., 2021). In some social contexts, 'lower' caste members come to accept and reproduce social representations of their caste (Jodhka, 2004; also see Jogdand, 2024). For instance, acts of subordination, such as maintaining social distance and appearing passive, are noted for members of the oppressed caste groups (Judge & Ball, 2008). These findings raise interesting questions about the possible distinctions between 'caste' as a system of societal organization and oppression and caste as a source of identity.

Kumar (2022) argues that caste identities are fluid, especially in response to government policies, such as those on reservations, which classifications have continued since the British colonial rule over South Asia. The construction and negotiation of caste identities take place in relation to caste hierarchies imposed by the government. While this reconfiguration is easier for caste groups that are toward the top of caste hierarchies, it is hard for those who are towards the bottom (cf. Sambaraju & Sinha, 2024). Vaid (2014) similarly argues that considering caste identities as fluid is crucial in getting a grip on contemporary manifestations of caste. It is this aspect

of identities and consequent relations with and between groups that is the focus of discursive psychologists.

Identity and Exclusion: A Discursive Perspective

Discursive psychologists exclusively focus on discourse to examine discourse for how persons construct various versions of agents, groups, actions, and entities and their use in situated interactions to accomplish social action (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008; Potter, 1996, 2021). The primary focus is then to examine what it is that persons are doing in and with talk (or text). Such a focus on identities and exclusion has meant that discursive psychologists study how persons might construct their own or others' identities in asserting, minimizing, justifying, and/or challenging exclusion. Much work in this fashion has explored identities and exclusion in areas of gender (Stokoe, 2010) and uses conversation analysis to shed light on the location and design of, and responses to, suspects' category-based denials? that they are not 'the kind of men who hit women'. Two sections of analysis identify how, first, such denials routinely follow police officers' direct questions about violent behaviour, and, second, how they become embedded in extended narratives that are not directly describing violence. In contrast to other discourse-analytic studies of men's accounts of violence towards women, the article unpacks the component features that comprise what others might label grossly as the 'discourse of gendered violence'. Rather than see how such 'discourses' operate in interview contexts, it shows how suspects construct, in a high-stakes setting for a particular purpose, different categories of men, claiming membership in one (who do not hit women, race (Sambaraju, 2022), migration (Gibson & Hamilton, 2011), and refuge-seeking (Goodman & Burke, 2011)). However, barely any work has taken up a discursive focus to examine the construction of caste identities, caste group memberships, and their relevance for casteism (Sambaraju & Singh, 2024). Below, I offer a brief outline of what this form of scholarship can offer to an understanding of identities and exclusion.

Discursive research has shown that while identities are central to much of our social life, these are hardly straightforward matters (McKinlay & McVittie, 2011). In an early work on sub-culture groups, Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) show that interviewees were reluctant to readily claim identities of being 'punk' or members of a 'sub-culture'. Instead, they sought to present themselves as regular persons. Merino and Tileagă (2011) show that Mapuche ethnic group members in Chile might resist a ready ascription of Mapuche identities to manage the moral implications of belonging to a marginalized ethnic minority position. In other contexts, ethnic identities are shown to be constructed in contrast to the majority identities to seek a sense of distinctiveness (Sala et al., 2010). Constructions of 'who we are' are then bound to broader social projects but are variously constructed in ways that are salient to ongoing interactional concerns. For instance, Sambaraju (2020) shows how women who were disclosing traumatic experiences of sexual harassment during the #MeToo movement in India were made to account for their reports in the context of the movement. Women could

then flexibly draw upon their gendered identity in negotiating the genuineness of their experiences and reports.

Constructions of identities are used to affect and negotiate social exclusion. Stokoe (2010) shows how constructions of gendered identities were used to counter the implications of misogyny. Figgou and Condor (2007) show how constructions of Greeks as distinct from Muslims allowed for legitimating the exclusion of Turkish migrants. These and other findings show that in accomplishing and justifying exclusion, 'prejudiced identities' become salient and are negotiated (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) and looks at the ways in which some recent developments in literary theory, post-structuralism, semiotics and cultural studies might be applied to the social psychological study of racist practices; while Part II tries to exemplify our conclusions through our case-study of racist discourse in New Zealand. In focusing in this book primarily on discourse—on meanings, conversations, narratives, explanations, accounts and anecdotes—we do not want to suggest that the study of racism should be equated with the study of certain streams of talk and writing. . . . Our emphasis will be on the ways in which a society gives voice to racism and how forms of discourse institute, solidify, change, create and reproduce social formations. (PsycINFO Database Record (c. Billig (1988) has shown that a routine feature of prejudiced talk is the management of irrationality through denials of being prejudiced. Augoustinos and Every (2007) and Goodman (2014) have documented the various ways that the discourse of prejudice and exclusion, while seeming to be rational and liberal. Other work has shown that social identities are constructed and used in ways to perform anti-racism. Sambaraju (2022) shows that constructions of national identification as Irish persons are used in responses to migrant-others' complaints about exclusion, to effect inclusion and anti-racism. In these ways, discursive psychologists point to the centrality of identities for our social lives across various aspects. It is this that gives the focus for the present study, where the aim is to examine how caste-related identities are constructed and treated as salient for negotiating caste-based exclusion. I do so in the context of a protest in opposition to casteist practices in higher education in India, galvanized by the murder-suicide of a doctoral student, Rohith Vemula.

Present Study

Rohith Vemula, a Dalit research scholar at the University of Hyderabad in India, died by suicide on January 17, 2016. His death triggered widespread protests and discussions about caste-based discrimination in educational institutions. Rohith was identified as a Dalit, and his suicide note and subsequent statements from his family and friends suggested that he faced discrimination based on his caste. He wrote about feeling socially ostracized and spoke about the societal inequalities that Dalits face. Rohith Vemula's death had a lasting impact on discussions about caste discrimination in educational institutions. It became a symbol of the larger issues of caste discrimination and social inequality in India, leading to increased awareness and activism surrounding these issues within academic and societal contexts. In this context, the present study

aimed to examine how individual caste identities were salient and used to make sense of wider societal issues of caste-based oppression and discrimination, particularly in higher education contexts in India. The study then wanted to know how caste-based identities become salient in negotiating casteism.

Method

I conducted an interview study with members who were part of the protest in the aftermath of the death of Rohit Vemula on a South India Central University campus.

Data and Participants

The data for this study are from an interview study about student protests against caste-based discrimination in a South Indian university in January 2016. The interviews were conducted at the site of the protest with student-protestors in a context where caste was an expected topic of various interactions. I conducted 12 research interviews with student protestors ($f=8$; $m=12$). 15 of these were with a single interviewee, and 5 of these had more than one interviewee present at the time of the interview. In these latter, the interviews resembled a focus group insofar as interviewees were discussing points of interest guided by me as the interviewer.

I approached the interviewees as co-members in the protests. A combination of snowball and convenience sampling approaches was taken: interviewees were asked if their friends and acquaintances would participate in the interview. At times, co-present persons became interested in the interviews and approached me directly.

The interviewees were students, student activists, and 1 faculty member. They were diverse in their regional origin and apparent socio-economic backgrounds. The interviews ranged from 15 minutes to just over an hour in length and were captured on a recording device. They were conducted in English, Telugu, and Hindi-Urdu, and often, flexibly traversing these languages. Topics ranged from their views about the contemporary prevalence of caste, its various manifestations, and possible means of addressing the caste system.

Reflexivity

I am a Brahmin by birth. Although I'm not a practicing Hindu, my social situation as that of a Brahmin is salient, given my family's position and wider social organization in India and beyond. My caste privilege has allowed me immense socio-cultural and economic capital. I have had a longstanding interest in understanding and attempting to eradicate caste-based social order in India and its diaspora. The death of Rohit Vemula was a significant moment as it brought to light the prevalence of caste in an elite educational institution. I wanted to understand how it is that those in the university, in the first instance, make sense of caste and casteism. In conducting the interviews, I was conscious not to seek out and make connections between one's caste identity and their responses. None of the researchers were asked about their caste identities

or affiliations; these were made relevant in 15 of these interviews. At the same time, my identity as a Brahmin male was never explicitly stated. However, my position as a possible 'upper' caste member is extremely likely to be relevant in these interactions and conversations about caste will proceed along this identity gradient.

Coding

The interviews covered a range of topics related to caste, casteism, and protests. Interviews resembled discussions that were guided by the interview schedule (see Appendix I). For this study, I focused on those instances where interview identities were salient in articulating their positions on caste and casteism. Interviews were coded for specific practices such as identity construction and negotiation, descriptions and accounts of discrimination, and denials of casteism. These were guided by the specific interview questions. These instances were transcribed in line with the Jeffersonian transcription system (see Appendix II) (Jefferson, 1991; Poland, 2020) to enable a fine-grained discursive analysis. The study received Ethical Approval from the relevant university body's research ethics committee.

Analytical Procedure

The data were analyzed using discursive psychology (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008; Potter & Edwards, 2001), which focused on analyzing interview interactions as constructing specific versions of the caste system and speaker identities in ways that accomplished specific social actions in the context of these interviews (McKinlay & McVittie, 2011). Potter and Hepburn (2005) argue that interview data are saturated by social science categories and understandings. This, however, can be used to examine how some of these categories are understood by participants themselves (Sacks, 1995). In the present case, then, interview data were examined for how caste was oriented to as implicating interview identities. The analysis focused on the construction, ascription, and negotiation of specific caste identities for the interviewer and interviewees, and the social actions accomplished in the context of these interviews (McKinlay & McVittie, 2011). Alongside this, the analysis considered the potential concerns interviewees might have in talking about casteism as a form of prejudice (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Goodman, 2014). The analysis then closely attended to issues of managing possibly prejudiced talk (Sambaraju & McVittie, 2021). In so doing, the analysis examines discursive practices by which identities are implicated and subsequently negotiated in talk about caste and casteism.

Analysis

The findings are organized into three sections: outside of 'caste', explaining casteism, and comparing outcomes to indicate casteism. Across these three sections, a central concern is with how caste-related identities are treated as salient for negotiating

positions on caste, articulating casteism in education, and, interestingly, ostensible challenges to caste and casteism.

Outside of ‘Caste’

In the extracts below, the interviewees treat the awareness of caste as a matter of concern. Initially, in Extracts 1 and 2, interviewees present themselves as having realized about casteism only recently. In both cases, the interviewees offer some information about themselves in ways to indicate the out-of-the-ordinary nature of Rohit Vemula’s death and related casteism. Interviewees make their upbringings and social backgrounds salient to indicate that their lives are outside the caste system. Instead, interviewees develop accounts of their identities that moderate their relationship to their claims about caste and its persistence.

Extract 1 comes from an interview with a female student, and Extract 2 is from an interview with another female student. The two extracts are presented together to highlight how interviewees treat their identities as relevant in articulating their positions on caste. Both extracts are at the beginning of the interview recording.

1 – Realizing Casteism

- 1 IR So:: what are your eh thoughts on caste
1.0
- 2 IE uh eeh till I came to this university I never really believe that caste is an issue in
3 this country
- 4 IR yea
- 5 IE in my place people don’t differentiate on the basis of caste (())
- 6 IR wh- which er which is s your place
- 7 IE Kerala

2–‘Not’ Having to Think about Caste

- 1 IR so:: eh what are your thoughts on caste
(.8)
- 2 IE Honestly up until now I hadn’t had much thought about it because I’m a I’m an
3 upper middle class girl (()) never had to think about it and I’m a Christian so::
- 4 IR Hmm
- 5 IE for me: it was something that I always read in my textbook I NEver had to think
6 about (.) caste up until now
- 7 IR hmmh

In both extracts, the interviewer starts with a similar question, although it varies in its delivery. The question is noteworthy since, in attempting to initiate a discussion on 'caste', it carries implications for the interviewee (Potter & Hepburn, 2013; Sambaraju & Minescu, 2019). These could be around potentially having some form of opinion or view about castes, the caste system, and casteism, especially given that these are pervasive concerns in the Indian context. The responses are similar in both cases insofar as the interviewees offer something about themselves as implicating their relatively limited awareness of caste and casteism. Further, these are similar in treating ongoing issues of casteism on the campus and the protest as salient in their becoming aware of casteism.

In Extract 1, the interviewee directly associates their presence in the university with their awareness of the scale of the caste problem in India. This is supported by differentiating her presence in the university from another place that she had been before: 'in my place' (line 5). This latter place is described in relatively favorable terms, suggesting the absence of casteism: 'people don't differentiate on the basis of caste'. Her belonging to this place—place identity (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004)—is treated as a reason for her novelty in encountering caste and its problematic manifestations. This, of course, is notable and, in many ways, contrasts with the proximal events in the university and widespread casteism across much of India. It is this that the interviewer takes up at line 6: 'which is your place'. The response – 'Kerala' – is treated as sufficient, and the interview proceeds further.

In Extract 2, the interviewee starts with an 'honesty-phrase' (Edwards & Fasulo, 2006) we examine parenthetical uses of honesty phrases (HPs, which mitigates possible undermining of her position. The position she takes is noteworthy for indicating an absence of engagement with caste, which might indicate a range of possible inferences about her, such as that she is immune to problematic outcomes of caste or is perhaps unaware of matters about Indian society. Her subsequent account then mitigates such inferences through claims about herself. First, she claims for herself a class-based identity: 'I'm an upper middle class girl' (lines 2-3). This identity is treated as implicating a distance from caste-consciousness or awareness: 'never had to think about' caste (Sambaraju & Singh, 2024). The use of the extreme case formulation¹ (Pomerantz, 1986) ('never') indicates that immunity from caste concerns is related to her class identity. Second, she claims for herself a religious identity—'I'm a Christian'—which again is treated as distancing herself from considering caste. This latter connection is given at line 5, where caste concerns are constructed as esoteric matters that were only distantly relevant. All this, however, is contrasted with current goings-on where concerns of caste are primary: 'up until now'. In doing so, the interviewee treats concerns over caste as not so distant as they were earlier and presents herself

¹Extreme case formulations are discursive devices that formulate the extreme-ness of an event, action, or entity to address issues of accountability. The emphasis on the scale of what is being described treat it as routine and normal in ways that removes the need for an explanation (Pomerantz, 1986).

as engaging with caste and casteism. In response, the interviewer allows for the production of the subsequent account without explicitly asking for further information.

Two points are noteworthy: first, interviewees' avowals of caste-awareness are about the problematic aspects of caste and caste identities, instead of caste pride or glory. Second, interviewees' accounts indicate a distance from such problematic aspects of caste: they do not present themselves as in any way the perpetrators or targets of casteism. Together, their claims served as implicit reasons why their lives were removed from the atrocities of caste.

In both cases, the interviewees treat 'caste' and caste group membership as something that is external and is only received as information at some point in their lives, in that it is not immediately, readily, or naturally an aspect of one's life. Specifically, caste and related casteism are offered as problematic features that have only now become apparent. This relates to what Jogdand (2017) has identified as 'caste-blindness'. In doing so, interviewees treated themselves as possibly accountable for casteism.

Explaining Casteism

In the two extracts in this section, interviewees offer explanations of casteism. In Extract 3, the interviewee treats the state or a broader society as a source of 'caste labels' and identities, which then result in continued oppression. In contrast, the interviewee in Extract 4 nominates the use of reservations as the reason offered for discrimination, while treating this as inexplicable. In both cases, the interviewees are concerned with treating social status as derived from caste as bound to casteism. Extract 3 below comes from an interview with a male student.

3— 'Caste' Identity as the Problem

- 1 IR caste meedha mee abhiprayam enti
- 2 *what are your views on casate*
- 3 IE caste ante:: na tenth class varaku teelidu saar naaku caste ane
- 4 *caste means for me until tenth standard I did not know caste only*
- 5 *daani indians ki mostly k-valaa caste entanedi teliidu*
- 6 *to Indians mostly their caste they don't know*
- 7 IR hmm
- 8 IE kevalam governmentuu unna paristhi thulu maatrame phalana vyakthini
- 9 *only government and surrounding circumstances that this particular person*
- 10 *phalana caste ani cheppi*
- 11 *is of this particular caste they say*
- 12 IR R: hmmm
- 13 IE antanni anaga tokkuthunnai

- 14 *and oppressing them*
- 15 IR hmm
- 16 IE kevalam dannu valla maatrame ee voo ee caste naada anduvalla nenu:: ila
- 17 *only for this reasons this is my caste so I have to be*
- 18 undala ila undaala ani cheppi vallaku vallu classifications icheesukuntunarru
- 19 *like this like that they themselves give classifications to themselves*
- 20 IR hm
- 21 IE ade caste ana padam vaadiki teliyaka pote
- 22 *but then the term caste if he (diminutive) didn't know*
- 23 IR hmm-mm
- 24 IE ataniki teliyaka pote
- 25 *he did not know*
- 26 IR hmm
- 27 IE antanu free ga andharilo samanatva svechayanadige aavanni
- 28 *he will freely be others on equal terms with freedom and all that*
- 29 fulfill avuthaai kada
- 30 *will be fulfilled right*

The generic opening question at line 1 is being asked in the context of a protest against casteism. It is then unlikely that the response is going to wholly endorse caste, caste hierarchies, or casteist practices. Above, however, the interviewee constructs the concept of 'caste' in ways to treat it as accountable for further oppression. As such, it is a hard account to deliver (Potter, 1996).

The interviewee, at lines 2-3, constructs caste identities as not naturally familiar. This is done in two ways: one is to claim their awareness of caste as arriving much later in life—'10th standard'—by which time individuals are routinely 15-16 years of age. This late awareness of caste is not treated as unusual or in need of further account by the interviewer, indicating a known-in-common aspect of caste identification for the present interaction. This much is similar to accounts given in Extracts 1 and 2, where interviewees similarly indicated an unawareness of caste. Here, however, this is used to call for the removal of caste names and identities from public awareness. The second is to make a generalized claim about 'most Indians,' asserting that they are unaware of their caste, developing consensus (Potter, 1996). Together, these points suggest a possible imposition of caste and caste identities in the Indian context. At line 5, the 'government' and unspecified 'surrounding circumstances' are nominated as those that impose caste identities on individuals. In doing so, the interviewee is developing an account that treats caste identification as external to the individual instead of an identity that is willingly chosen or is 'natural' to the individual (Pal, 2023).

More specifically, the interviewee constructs the interrelations between caste identity and casteism as arising from the actions of external sources like the Government.

This much is in common with research that treats oppressed caste identities and casteism as being internalized by those in ‘lower’ caste groups (Bros, 2014; Jodhka, 2004; Jogdand, 2024). These outcomes are broadly treated as ‘oppression’ (line 8), which comprises constraints on how to behave (lines 10-11). The interviewee treats the imposition of caste identities as meaning that individuals now act in line with the expected norms of caste groups. A possible inference here is that protests such as the one that was going on in the background can be seen as merely arising from one’s caste identity instead of legitimate actions for justice. However, this is not explicitly spelled out by the interviewee.

The interviewee’s quasi-anthropological account treats the prevalence of caste names and classifications as reasons for distinct forms of actions and oppression. It is in this frame that the interviewee suggests the removal of the term/concept of ‘caste’ as a means of addressing oppression and exclusion. At lines 15-18, they offer outcomes of the absence of caste names in highly favorable terms: ‘freely be with others on equal terms,’ ‘with freedom,’ and ‘all that.’ This three-part listing (Jefferson, 1990) of ostensibly highly favorable outcomes is notable for collectively giving inferences about the absence of oppression and exclusion. The interviewee then treats identification with caste groups as implicating specific actions, behaviors, and expectations, which can lead to problems, instead of what is widely acknowledged as the reason, namely, societal oppression based on caste. Instead, these were constructed as ways of identification that are achieved, which could be used to call for abandoning caste labels.

In Extract 4, the interviewee’s description of casteism in education brings up the salience of the possibility for members in specific caste groups to make use of reservations provided by the state. Extract 4 comes from an interview with a male student interviewee. The discussion below comes after a discussion on the role of caste in daily life.

4—Reservations as Reasons for Hate

- 1

IR

education lo ee prakaram etlanti:: role play chestadi caste
in education what type of role does caste play
- 2

IE

oka chaduvllonnalla kante education system lo chaala
those without education it is within education system that there is an extreme
- 3

ghoram aina paristhiti undi ippudu present (.) adi:: explain kuda cheyalemu
horrible situation at present (.) this cannot even be explained
- 4

IR

right
- 5

IE

prati vishayam lo
in every facet
- 6

IR

ah

- 7 IE reservation osthundani prati reservation osthundi ani chepi prathi okkariki
that we have reservation every that we have reservation everyone
- 8 kullu professorslaki students ki prathi varganiki :: adi kullo kopamo
has envy professors students every section either its envy or hate
- 9 dveshamo maakaithe telvadu gaani (.) nenu neenaithe bear cheyyaleka
or disgust we don't know but (.) I I cannot bear it anymore
- 10 pothunna ikkada situation ()) ga bear cheyyaleka pothunna
situation here ((unclear)) cannot bear it anymore
- 11 IR right

The interviewer's question is on the relevance of caste in 'education,' given that protests are taking place at a university regarding caste-based discrimination in higher education. The response setup is an account of such matters. In response, the interviewee frames the goings-on 'within the education system' as much worse than outside the education system. This is developed through describing casteism in higher education as 'extreme' and 'horrible,' alongside avowing an inability to fully articulate the horribleness of casteism in education (cf. Jogdand, 2017; Mukherjee et al., 2024). The extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986)—'every facet'—treats it as routine and evident that caste pervades the education system. Researchers have argued that the expectation that education settings are expected to be 'fair' and 'equitable' compounds experiences of casteism (Pathania et al., 2024).

The reason for this is given in terms of who the targets of discrimination are: 'those who have reservation.' For the interactants and more widely, it is available that reservations are for those who identify as backward or other forms of marginalized caste groups (Bros, 2014; Chauhan, 2008; Pal, 2015, 2020). The availing of reservations is then a means to address some of the structural and historical injustices (Basu, 2021; Borooah et al., 2007; Weisskopf, 2004).

At lines 7-9, the interviewee constructs availing reservation as the reason for a range of university-relevant actors to engage in problematic actions and views towards those who make use of reservations. These actors are described in a three-part list format (Jefferson, 1990): 'professors,' 'students,' and 'every section.' The last item in the list works as a list completer, which here works to treat it as routine that those who make use of reservations are targeted. The role of these actors is relevant as it connects casteism in education settings with the specific form of identity being offered, namely that of those who can access reservations. This description makes it salient that the issue is that of merit.

Similarly, the form of targeting is given in the form of a three-part list: 'envy,' 'hate,' or 'disgust.' These together indicate an extremely problematic disposition towards those who make use of reservations. Juxtaposed to this is the avowal that the reasons for this are not known. In doing so, the interviewee constructs making use of reservations as inexplicably the target of discrimination (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019;

Mukherjee et al., 2024; Thorat, 2006). What is conveyed, however, is the extremeness of casteism that the interviewee personally experiences as given by a shift from a broader 'we' to a more personal 'I'. Possible reasons that might involve the actions, behaviors, or features related to biological aspects are avoided in place of the more societal organization of caste in Indian society (Kumar, 2016; Pathania & Tierney, 2018). In that, the interviewee treats these other possible reasons as unrelated to casteism in higher education settings over that of reservations.

Comparison of Caste Groups to Indicate Casteism

In the two extracts below, interviewees are concerned with articulating how casteism manifests in education settings. These were selected for analysis because here the interviewees make salient their own caste identities and caste group membership as central to describing casteism in higher education. In other interviews, interviewees similarly highlighted the role of preferential treatment to non-Dalits.

In the extract below, an explication of casteism is given in terms of contrasting issues for those who are Dalit and those who are not. The extract below comes from an interview with a female student interviewee. The interaction comes after discussions on the role of caste in daily life.

5–Casteism as Access

- 1 IR what what do you think of how caste is involved in higher education
- 2 IE caste is involved in many levels like
- 3 IR right
- 4 IE one example which I can give is like uhh when I uh I studi I studied my MA and
- 5 MPhil here in this university and now I do my PhD in IIT Bombay so::
- 6 IR hmmh
- 7 IE uh one thing I have always observed in both these departments is that uh when
- 8 when lower caste students joined when Dalit students join here
- 9 IR hmmh
- 10 IE th uh they take it takes time for them to get a supervisor find a supervisor
- 11 IR right right
- 12 IE so:: the system here is like you have to go to go and talk to the supervisor and if
- 13 the supervisor is interested in your topic then they will give the consent that
- 14 IR hm
- 15 IE to supervise you but sometimes what happens is like upper caste people I'm an upper
- 16 caste myself >i have to say that< so: um we get uh supervisors easily hmm

In response to the question, the interviewee gives an example of how caste is involved in education settings. Noteworthy here is that this account is given as a first-person account arising from the interviewees' access to information either from

experience or otherwise (cf. Sambaraju, 2025). This is offered after the assertion that 'caste is involved in many levels' (line 2), and so the example is designed to support this assertion. The example starts with a description of their proximity and access to information about the university where the instance of casteism is situated: 'When I uh I studi I studied my MA and MPhil here in this university' (lines 3-4). These descriptions involve claims that indicate proximity to goings-on at the university (Sambaraju & Minescu, 2019). However, it is not merely their educational status or experience that is implicated in their oncoming description of casteism (cf. Sambaraju, 2025). Instead, the interviewee develops the salience of caste group membership in describing casteism.

Based on such entitlement to access relevant happenings, the interviewee describes issues for 'Dalit' and 'lower caste' students in finding a supervisor for their academic work: 'when Dalit students join here'. While this in and of itself might not be problematic, it is the comparison with another category of students—'upper caste'—that the interviewee treats as a problem (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1999). The descriptions of the problem involve other categories like 'supervisor' and the implicated 'student' in the context of higher education. Such use makes salient normative expectations of rights and entitlements that operate across members in these categories, such as giving supervision so long as the topic of study is of interest (Sacks, 1992; Jayyusi, 1984). Specifically, at lines 12-15, the interviewee describes routine ways of accessing a supervisor. Ascribed to these categories are expected activities, such as when 'students' approach a supervisor and 'if the supervisor is interested' they accept the student. Potential difficulties in finding a supervisor can then be ascribed to a lack of fit between the proposed project and the supervisor's interests or some issues with the student, such as their calibre, or so on.

It is here that the interviewee's avowals of being an 'upper caste' person and assertions about the relative ease with which other students from similar caste groups gain access to supervisors is given. Moreover, the interviewee is careful to locate these instances in the present university: 'when Dalit students join here' (line 8). This aligns with their claims about closeness to this institution, across courses and departments, and so is sufficient in describing casteism. Despite this, the interviewee expressly categorizes herself as an 'upper caste' person in a notable manner: 'I have to say that' (line 14). This identity avowal is noteworthy because it comes in a position where she is describing the relative ease of accessing supervisors. In doing so, the interviewee introduces the alternative categorization of caste as a means of making clear that the reason for the relative ease of access is because of caste group membership and not other possibilities. The interviewee's avowal of their identity indicates casteism.

Pal (2023) has argued that a focus on social comparisons, such as 'downward comparisons' made by 'upper' caste members, might be of benefit in examining caste and casteism. Above, we see that such comparisons are made to demonstrate the forms of discrimination in higher education.

In Extract 6, two sets of comparisons are made to point to casteism and then to indicate possibilities for challenge. Extract 6 comes from an interview with a male

student interviewee. The discussion below comes after a discussion on the role of caste in daily life. This interview involved 3 male students as interviewees. The focus here is again on reservations, and caste-based reservations are uniquely targeted for discrimination.

6–Casteism and Merit

- 1 IR yes yes (.) what do you think about uh the role of caste in higher education
 2 IE as he said uh broadly I would agree with that point uh
 3 IR okay
 4 IE the moment if I I perform badly in the exam they'll say teekh hai aapne teekh se
 5 padhai nai kiya padhai karlo
okay you maybe did not study well enough
 6 IR right
 7 IE try your level best
 8 IR ya
 9 IE but suppose they know that I am from the backward caste or Dalit group or ST
 10 who has somehow got reservation
 11 IR ah
 12 IE they immediately attach me with that uh idea oh ye tho reservation se aaye hai
he is here because of reservations
 13 IR right right
 14 IE I mean I also want to ask them do you do that when you army reservation candidate
 15

In response to the interviewer's question about caste in higher education, the interviewee treats their response as broadly in agreement with an earlier response from another interviewee. This, however, is expanded at lines 4-10 through a description of a hypothetical but routine instance of casteist discrimination in education. This involves drawing a comparison between how the interviewee, as not a 'lower' caste person, is treated with how a 'Dalit' person might be treated in case of a bad performance on an 'exam'. In his case, the interviewee ascribes a position to teachers regarding a bad performance, which position exculpates the interviewee: 'maybe you did not study well enough' (lines 4-5). This position does not treat it as a dispositional feature of the interviewee that their exam performance was not up to the mark. In that, their non-Dalit status is treated as a reason for attributing to them generic abilities in achievement.

This is contrasted with a response given to a student from 'backward caste or Dalit group or ST' background, all of which are considered as 'lower' castes or groups and are accorded reservations. The use of these three caste groups is bound with the feature of having access to reservations. In this situation, the response given is that the teacher attributes their bad performance to their availing reservation, inferring that the student is perhaps not meritorious enough (Tierney & Pathania, 2018). These descriptions are

given to infer that the treatment is different based on whether the student is someone who has availed reservations and is perhaps not meritorious, and those who are (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019).

The interviewee, however, offers another instance of reservations, given for those whose parents had served in the Indian armed forces, as possibly involving similar forms of adjustments for 'merit'. This is done in ways to indicate that those who avail this type of reservation are perhaps not treated as less meritorious in contrast to those who come from caste groups. In doing so, the interviewee indicates that caste groups who avail of reservations are unique targets for discrimination in distinction to other groups that are also given reservations. This allows for inferring that discrimination based on reservation is more about caste status than merely availing reservations or supposed 'merit'. This is accomplished through bringing up their own caste identity as relative to those who are discriminated against.

In the extracts above, then, casteism is constructed as that which is structural or happening through relative dis-preference for those who are Dalits, instead of instances where Dalit and other oppressed caste group students are direct targets of casteism. In these ways, interviewees treated caste, caste group membership, and casteism as forms of societal organization in the context of higher education.

Discussion

Social psychological examination of caste identities and casteism, as Jogdand (2024) has argued, is growing but perhaps with less of a consistent trajectory. This article has taken a discursive psychological approach to examine caste identities and casteism in a specific context: interviews at a site of protest about the death of Rohit Vemula due to casteist harassment. In this context, then the issue of casteism is highly salient and interviewees' talk is likely to take place in this regard (Waghmore, 2017). The above analysis shows that for the interviewees and interviewers alike, caste as a source of identification with a caste group along a societal hierarchy is a resource in negotiating caste identification and casteism.

The findings speak to the social psychological literature on caste and broader connections between identity, group membership, and prejudice (Sharma & Jogdand, 2024; Mukherjee et al., 2024; Pathania et al., 2023). The findings show that there are unique benefits to examining talk about caste or 'caste-talk'. In distinction to research inspired by traditional social psychological theories like that done by Sharma and Jogdand (2024) or proposed by Pal (2024), the effort here has been to examine caste and caste identities in terms of individuals' descriptions and experiences (Fatima et al., 2024).

In line with the core tenets of discursive psychology (Potter, 2021), constructions of caste identities and the negotiation of membership in caste groups were examined for how these were developed and used. Caste identities were occasioned: these were constructed, claimed, softened, and negotiated in specific instances in the service of specific actions. Of specific interest here is the salience of caste identities in ways to

negotiate interviewees' positions vis-à-vis casteism. Interviewees constructed caste as a means of deriving their and others' identities while managing their relation to casteism. The first two extracts are instances where the interviewees offered accounts that treated themselves as distant from casteism and identification based on caste. This managed their accountability for casteism on their campus—they were not aware of caste hierarchies and so could not notice casteism. In Extracts 3 and 4, interviewees attributed casteism to an acceptance of caste labels (cf. Jodhka, 2004; Thapa et al., 2021) or making use of state-accorded reservations (Sukumar, 2023; Thorat, 2006). In both cases, caste identities were derived from aspects external to the individual. Notably, however, the acceptance of caste labels was identified as a problem in arguing for the eradication of caste labels and not caste hierarchies.

In Extracts 5 and 6, casteism was an explicit topic. In both cases, interviewees presented themselves as 'upper' caste persons who are not direct targets of casteism. However, their identities were again constructed and offered in ways to describe how casteism unfolds in higher education, even though they were not direct targets of casteism. Notably, these did not involve ascribing attitudes or problematic dispositions to those perpetrating casteism. Much research in social psychology on racial and anti-migrant prejudice has shown the pervasive denials of prejudice and discrimination (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Goodman, 2014; Sambaraju & McVittie, 2021). Relatedly, there are difficulties targets face in reporting prejudice (Essed, 1991; Sambaraju, 2022, 2025). Present findings then relate to these insofar as the articulation of casteism involved constructing specific forms of caste identities, which related to inferences about merit. Previous research has shown how affirmative actions for Aboriginal peoples of Australia were rejected for disturbing meritocracy (Augoustinos et al., 2005). Across these accounts of casteism (Extracts 4-6), it is reservations that are used as a means of categorizing caste groups, as meritorious or not. This last set of findings resonates with much research that identifies how reservations are routinely offered as reasons for casteism (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019; Thorat, 2006; Sukumar, 2023).

Overall, a notable aspect of the construction of caste identities is their societal valence. For interviewees, caste identities are external, unfamiliar, imposed, or bound to state policies of reservation. These versions, of course, are neither completely accurate nor fully inaccurate. Instead, these are constructed in the context of these interviews to accomplish specific interactional tasks, such as managing accountability for casteism, explaining casteism so that the fault is with making salient caste identities, or demonstrating that casteism in higher education is bound to unique aspects of education, like finding a supervisor and assessment outcomes. Caste groups and their membership are treated not merely as inner psychological constructs or feelings of belonging, but as a means to make salient and negotiate one's social relations with institutions, social structures, and other social groups (Jogdand, 2024). It is through these relations that privilege for those in the 'upper' caste and discrimination against those in the 'lower' caste groups or Dalits is affirmed, negotiated, and possibilities for challenge articulated (cf. Pal, 2024; Pathania et al., 2023).

The very social nature of caste hierarchies was then treated as a resource and constraint in locating oneself vis-à-vis caste. All of this suggests that for the interlocutors here, accounting for casteism meant addressing and making explicit that caste identities and group membership are socially accomplished outcomes. In line with the arguments of Pathania et al (2023), I have demonstrated that caste identities, especially for Dalits, are constructed along soci(et)al dimensions, such as one's class, religious, and geographical position, or state-related policies, in ways that inform their negotiations about their positions on casteism.

In the context of a protest against the caste-related death of Rohit Vemula, likely, responses and those who were willing to participate in the interview will give accounts that do not perhaps privilege their 'upper' caste identities. This carries two implications: first, despite the possible constraint of the protest and a research interview, interviewees could and did oppose reservations and rejected caste consciousness as the problem instead of casteism. Second, is that articulations of caste group membership, caste identities, and casteism are necessarily always context-bound. This again will take place in respect of the more immediate context of the research interview and the proximal context of the protest. Of course, this does not mean that caste or casteism is limited to specific settings or interactions. In contrast, specific manifestations of caste and casteism are salient for specific contexts.

These findings raise interesting implications for studying caste identities. First, this aligns with the more recent calls to examine the 'everydayness' of caste and caste identities, which might reveal the fluidity of caste identification and possibilities for anti-caste activism (Fatima et al., 2024). What it perhaps surprisingly shows is that caste identities are relational, generated in relation to other identities and the focus of interaction. Second, the findings show that caste identities can be a resource to demonstrate and explicate casteism. Third, in distinction to work on casteism in higher education (Pathania, 2016; Sukumar, 2023), the findings here show that the recognizability of casteism is informed by caste identities that individuals can claim and negotiate. Future work can further this engagement with understanding caste in its varied manifestations.

Limitations and Conclusions

The study was an interview study grounded in a specific context, namely, protests in the aftermath of the death of Rohith Vemula. As such, it focused more on broader topics around caste and not particularly on how individuals might perceive caste-based violence (Pal, 2016), experiences of caste-based discrimination (Jogdand, 2017; Sharma and Subramanyam, 2020), or opposition to reservation policies (Thorat, 2006). Further, as interviews conducted by an upper-middle-class Brahmin interviewer, these are bound to be specific to those constraints. Nevertheless, the emic focus of the analysis means that the findings are limited to the orientations of participants in the situated setting in which they find themselves. It is from within this context that the present findings are to be considered.

To conclude, the article examines how individuals themselves claim, ascribe, or negotiate caste identities. The examination shows that caste identities are claimed in ways to proffer, describe, and negotiate how caste is pervasive in our lives and the possibilities for challenging it. Instead of promoting or suppressing caste identities, the research here shows how the pervasiveness of caste is bound to its capacities to allow us to derive a sense of who we and others are.

Appendix I – Interview schedule

- 1) What are your thoughts on caste in India?
(caste meedha mee abhiprayam enti?)
- 2) What do you think of caste in everyday life?
(rooju jeevithamlo caste meedha mee abhipraayam enti?)
- 3) And, in higher education?
(mari education leka campuses lo?)
- 4) What are your thoughts on protests?
(protests meedha mee abhiprayam enti?)
- 5) Do you think protests might address these issues?
(mee prakaram protests valla ee vishayalu emaina marocha?)
- 6) What are your thoughts on political agents and their actions to address this?
(politicians inka valla panula paina mee abhiprayam enti?)
- 7) In your opinion, what is the role of the Government in addressing caste issues?
(mee prakaram, prabhutvam emi cheyochu ee vishayam lo?)
- 8) Would you say this is irrespective of any political party in power?
(mee prakaram, prabhutvam lo ee party unna vishayalu elane untaya?)
- 9) What are your thoughts on student actions and activities on caste-related issues?
(caste vishayala meeda vidyarthulu cheese panula meeda mee abhiprayam enti?)
- 10) Do you think student-led actions are useful?
(mee prakaram vidyarthulu cheese panula valla emanna avoccha?)
- 11) In your opinion, what other actors and their actions would be relevant?
(mee prakaram, vidyarthulu kaakunda inkee veere vaari actions kuuda ikkada varthisthaayi?)
- 12) Is there anything else you would like to add?
(meeru inkemaana cheppa dalchukunnara?)

Appendix II - Jeffersonian Notation

Symbol	Name	Use
[text]	Brackets	Indicates the start and end points of overlapping speech.
=	Equal Sign	Indicates the break and subsequent continuation of a single interrupted utterance.
(# of seconds)	Timed Pause	A number in parentheses indicates the time, in seconds, of a pause in speech.
(.)	Micropause	A brief pause, usually less than 0.2 seconds.
. or ↓	Period or Down Arrow	Indicates falling pitch.
? or ↑	Question Mark or Up Arrow	Indicates rising pitch.
,	Comma	Indicates a temporary rise or fall in intonation.
-	Hyphen	Indicates an abrupt halt or interruption in utterance.
>text<	Greater than / Less than symbols	Indicates that the enclosed speech was delivered more rapidly than usual for the speaker.
<text>	Less than / Greater than symbols	Indicates that the enclosed speech was delivered more slowly than usual for the speaker.
°	Degree symbol	Indicates whisper or reduced volume speech.
ALL CAPS	Capitalized text	Indicates shouted or increased volume speech.
underline	Underlined text	Indicates the speaker is emphasizing or stressing the speech.
:::	Colon(s)	Indicates prolongation of an utterance.
(hhh)		Audible exhalation
? or (.hhh)	High Dot	Audible inhalation
(text)	Parentheses	Speech which is unclear or in doubt in the transcript.
((italic text))	Double Parentheses	Annotation of non-verbal activity.

Jeffersonian Transcription Notation is described in Jefferson, G. (2004). Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction. In G.H. Lerner (Ed.). *Conversation analysis: Studies from the first generation* (pp. 13-31). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

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Sickle Cell Disease: A Review Article on Social Pathology, Social Determinants, and Poverty

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Abstract

Sickle cell disease (SCD) is a complex genetic condition intertwined with social justice issues. Despite continuous medical advancements, addressing the deep-seated disparities and historical inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalized communities is crucial for effective treatment and support. This report explores the historical understanding of SCD pathophysiology, the origins of the sickle cell gene mutation, and its global epidemiology. It delves into the significant socio-economic disparities perpetuated by the disease, particularly through the lens of social pathology and social determinants of health, including the pervasive impact of poverty and systemic racism within healthcare, with a specific focus on the challenges faced by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India due to the caste system. The report also details strategic initiatives, such as India's ambitious National Sickle Cell Elimination Mission, highlighting the global shift towards comprehensive, equitable approaches. It is argued that SCD is not merely a genetic disorder but a "social disease," where societal structures and historical injustices amplify its burden. Effective management and eventual elimination of SCD necessitate a social justice framework that tackles structural inequalities, promotes equitable healthcare access, and empowers affected communities.

Keywords

Sickle Cell Disease, Social Justice, Health Disparities, Systemic Racism, Social Determinants of Health, Caste, Equitable Healthcare, SCD Elimination Mission, Poverty

Introduction

Overview of Sickle Cell Disease (SCD) as a Genetic Condition

Sickle cell disease (SCD) is an inherited red blood cell disorder characterized by abnormal haemoglobin (HbS), which causes red blood cells to adopt a rigid, sickle

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shape. This abnormal morphology leads to premature cell death and the blockage of blood vessels, resulting in severe complications such as intractable pain, heightened susceptibility to infections, acute chest syndrome, and stroke. The condition encompasses a group of genetic disorders arising from the inheritance of the sickle cell gene, either in a homozygous state (HbSS) or as a double heterozygote with another interacting gene, such as HbSC or HbS/beta-thalassemia.

The genetic basis of SCD is remarkably simple, stemming from a single point mutation in the haemoglobin beta (HBB) gene on chromosome 11a, where valine is substituted for glutamic acid in the beta-globin protein. This genetic simplicity allowed SCD to serve as a foundational model for advances in molecular genetics, including the detection of DNA mutations by restriction fragment enzyme analysis and the proof of principle for polymerase chain reaction (PCR). However, this genetic simplicity stands in stark contrast to the disease's complex, multi-organ pathophysiology, which involves chronic inflammation, hypercoagulability, oxidative stress, and nutritional deficiencies. This fundamental disconnect between the straightforward genetic defect and the convoluted biological and social implications highlights why a purely biomedical approach, focused solely on the molecular anomaly, proves insufficient for comprehensive care and effective management of SCD. The disease's impact extends far beyond the cellular level, manifesting as a systemic challenge influenced by a myriad of external factors.

SCD as a Social Justice Issue: Disparities and Historical Inequalities

SCD is profoundly intertwined with social justice issues, with its pervasive impact increasingly recognized as a direct outcome of social disparities, historical inequalities, and systemic discrimination. Despite its discovery in Western medicine over a century ago—with the first known case described in the United States in 1910 by Herrick, and the disease name coined in 1922 by Vernon Mason—SCD has historically received significantly fewer health resources compared to other diseases of similar severity.

This historical underinvestment, particularly when juxtaposed with the substantial research funding allocated to diseases predominantly affecting white populations (e.g. cystic fibrosis, which affects three times fewer Americans but receives approximately ten times more research funding per person), underscores a critical manifestation of systemic racism within the healthcare and research funding ecosystems. The disproportionate impact of SCD on marginalized communities, particularly those experiencing poverty and predominantly individuals of African and Mediterranean descent, is deeply rooted in these historical and systemic inequalities, including discriminatory policies and implicit biases within the medical system. This pattern of neglect has effectively devalued the health and lives of predominantly Black populations affected by SCD, transforming a genetic predisposition into a profound societal disadvantage.

Global and Historical Context of SCD

SCD has existed for generations in families of African and Mediterranean descent. In local African medical literature, around the 1870s, the disease was described with the phrase “ogbanjes,” translating to “children who come and go,” reflecting the tragically high mortality rate of infants with this condition. One Ghanaian family was able to trace the inherited disease back to 1670.

The prevalence of the sickle cell trait is notably high in regions with a history of malaria, reaching as high as 40 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, eastern Saudi Arabia, and central India. This distribution is explained by the survival advantage conferred by the sickle cell trait against *Plasmodium falciparum* malaria, particularly in early childhood. Scientists realized this protective effect in the 1950s, observing that individuals with the sickle cell trait show decreased parasite counts if they contract malaria. In India, the sickle cell gene is widespread among tribal populations, with carrier frequencies reaching up to 35 per cent in certain tribes, likely due to historical selection pressure from malaria, as the sickle cell trait confers some resistance to the disease.

Regarding the origin of the SCD mutation, two models have been proposed: a multicentric model suggesting four independent genetic mutations (three in Africa, one in Saudi Arabia or central India) occurring 70,000 to 150,000 years ago, and a unicentric model. The most recent and universally adopted evidence supports the unicentric model, positing that the sickle cell mutation originated in a single individual in Western Africa, likely in the rainforest of present-day Cameroon, approximately 7,300 years ago, prior to the eastward and southward African Bantu migration. All five haplotype variations of the SCD gene are present in Cameroon and Egypt, indicating a longer presence in these regions.

The evolutionary advantage of the sickle cell trait in malaria-endemic regions, while a biological adaptation, has created a demographic reality where SCD disproportionately affects populations historically subjected to colonialism, forced migration, and ongoing systemic inequities. The very mechanism that offered a survival advantage in one environment has, through historical injustices and population movements, led to a concentrated burden of a severe genetic disease in marginalized communities across different parts of the world. This historical-biological intersection underscores the deep roots of global health disparities in SCD.

Purpose and Scope of the Article

This article aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of sickle cell disease, moving beyond its biomedical definition to analyze its profound social dimensions. It will examine the historical understanding of SCD pathophysiology, the origins and global spread of the sickle cell gene mutation, and the current epidemiology and prevalence of the disease. A central focus will be on dissecting the significant socio-economic disparities that SCD perpetuates and is, in turn, exacerbated by, with a particular

emphasis on the impact of the caste system in India. The report will detail strategic initiatives designed to address these complex issues, emphasizing that effective SCD management and ultimate elimination necessitate a social justice lens, tackling systemic inequalities and promoting equitable healthcare access for all affected populations.

Methodology

Approach to Literature Review and Data Synthesis

This report employs a systematic approach to synthesize information derived from the provided research material, encompassing medical research, public health reports, and social science literature. The methodology section outlines the process of how the information was gathered and analyzed, providing transparency and ensuring the rigor of the presented findings. Given that this report is a synthesis of pre-selected material rather than an independent literature search, the “search” and “selection criteria” aspects of a typical systematic review are adapted to reflect the scope of the provided data.

The integration of medical and social science data within this report necessitates an interdisciplinary methodological approach. This acknowledges that a purely biomedical lens is insufficient to address the complexities of SCD, which are deeply rooted in societal structures and historical contexts. The approach aims to bridge the gap between clinical understanding and the lived experiences of individuals with SCD, thereby providing a more holistic and actionable perspective on the disease. This deliberate choice of methodology underscores the importance of examining not only the biological aspects of SCD but also the profound influence of social, economic, and political factors on its prevalence, progression, and management.

Criteria for Information Inclusion and Synthesis

Information for this report was drawn directly from the provided research snippets. The primary focus was on identifying data points and narratives related to the core themes of the user query: SCD pathophysiology, its historical context, global epidemiology, the multifaceted impact of social determinants of health (including economic stability, education, healthcare access and quality, neighborhood and built environment, and social and community context), the pervasive nature of systemic racism, current diagnostic and management strategies, and emerging therapeutic advancements.

Priority was consistently given to information that highlighted the intricate intersection of SCD with social justice, poverty, and health disparities. In instances where multiple snippets contained repetitive information, the most comprehensive, authoritative, or detailed source was prioritized to ensure accuracy and depth (e.g. for methodology details for structural racism for management strategies). This selective approach ensured that the narrative was built upon the most robust evidence available within the provided material, allowing for a focused and impactful discussion of the disease’s social dimensions.

Framework for Analyzing Social Determinants and Poverty in SCD

The analysis of social determinants of health (SDoH) within this report is guided by the established understanding that these are the “conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks”. This framework recognizes that SDoH are “upstream” factors, meaning they are fundamental societal conditions that precede and profoundly influence individual health outcomes.

The five domains of SDoH, as defined by Healthy People 2030, serve as a structured framework for organizing the discussion on how poverty and broader social factors impact SCD. By explicitly adopting this recognized SDoH framework, the report moves beyond anecdotal observations to provide a structured, evidence-based analysis of how societal factors systematically influence SCD outcomes. This legitimizes the social justice argument within a public health context, demonstrating that simply promoting healthy individual choices is insufficient to eliminate health disparities in SCD. Instead, it underscores the necessity of addressing the underlying systemic conditions that create and perpetuate health inequities. This approach fundamentally reframes SCD as a public health and social policy challenge, not solely a medical one.

Socio-Pathology of Sickle Cell Disease

Systemic Racism and Discrimination in SCD Healthcare

Systemic racism, also referred to as societal or structural racism, represents a pervasive set of institutional, cultural, and historical systems that inherently grant white individuals greater access to healthcare, education, and wealth. Given that the majority of people with SCD in the United States are Black, their healthcare experiences and overall quality of life are directly and profoundly affected by these ingrained racial inequalities. Black Americans, along with other racial and ethnic minorities such as Hispanic Americans, consistently receive poorer quality care and face greater barriers to accessing routine medical services compared to White Americans. This disparity directly contributes to worse medical outcomes and higher mortality rates within these marginalized groups. For instance, Black infants experience mortality rates two to three times higher than other racial groups.

In India, the caste system functions as a deeply entrenched form of systemic discrimination, officially recognizing the Dalit community as ‘Scheduled Castes’ and Adivasis as ‘Scheduled Tribes’, while simultaneously perpetuating widespread bias despite constitutional bans on caste-based discrimination. These communities, constituting about 25 per cent of India’s population, have historically faced systemic exclusion from basic services, including healthcare, education, and land access. This persistent structural poverty and deprivation manifests in all aspects of their lives,

leading to significantly poorer health outcomes and lower healthcare utilization compared to higher caste groups.

Implicit racial bias among healthcare professionals significantly influences treatment decisions. Studies have shown that healthcare professionals are less likely to diagnose coronary heart disease with certainty among Black patients and are less inclined to prescribe narcotic medications to Black patients as their pro-White bias increases. Similarly, in India, Dalits and Adivasis face overt discrimination in healthcare settings. Studies reveal that healthcare workers, once aware of a patient's caste status, may provide less information about health services, refuse entry into private health centers, exhibit indifference, or even refuse to touch patients to understand their condition. This persistent disparity in healthcare quality for SCD patients, despite ongoing medical advancements, reveals that the healthcare system itself is a perpetuator of health inequities. Implicit bias and systemic racism/casteism act as insidious "social pathogens" that compound the biological burden of SCD. The system is not merely flawed; it is inherently structured in ways that lead to a lower standard of care for an entire patient population based on race or caste. This means that prejudice and stigma associated with SCD are, in effect, shortening the lives of those with the disease faster than the disease's biological mechanisms alone.

Patient Experiences: Bias, Mistrust, and Inadequate Pain Management

Patients living with SCD frequently report experiencing profound stigmatization within healthcare settings, often being labeled as drug-seeking or drug addicts, and consistently having their severe pain discredited. Anecdotal accounts from the SCD community vividly describe the struggle to convince medical staff of their pain's reality, encountering negligent doctors, enduring slow emergency department services, and facing a pervasive lack of knowledgeable healthcare professionals. Research substantiates these experiences, indicating that Black patients with SCD experience 25 per cent longer wait times to see a physician in emergency departments compared to the general patient population.

In India, Dalits and Adivasis face similar, if not more severe, forms of discrimination. They experience longer waiting times in private facilities, and doctors may refuse treatment based on the mistaken assumption that they cannot afford care. Reports indicate that 94 per cent of Dalit children surveyed faced discrimination in the form of touch, dispensing of medicines (91 per cent), and conduct of pathological tests (87 per cent), with 81 per cent not being given as much time as other children. These repeated experiences of discrimination foster deep medical mistrust among SCD patients, which, in turn, is directly linked to reduced engagement in preventative care, poorer disease management, and lower adherence to prescribed treatments. Consequently, many adults with SCD express a reluctance to seek healthcare services, often delaying care until it becomes a last resort, due to the anticipated racism and discrimination they expect to encounter. This pervasive discrimination and medical mistrust create a vicious cycle: patients avoid necessary proactive care, leading to an exacerbation of their condition and an increased reliance on emergency services

for acute crises. This pattern highlights a systemic failure to provide empathetic and effective care, transforming the healthcare system into a source of additional suffering and poor health outcomes for individuals with SCD.

Impact of Stigma and “Invisibility” on SCD Outcomes

Sickle cell disease is frequently described as an “enduring—and often invisible—condition”. This inherent invisibility, coupled with widespread societal stigma and misconceptions about the disease, extends its detrimental impact far beyond clinical symptoms and healthcare interactions, profoundly affecting patients’ social integration, educational attainment, and overall quality of life. Misconceptions within the general public can lead to social isolation for individuals with SCD, making it difficult for them to form and maintain friendships and romantic relationships.

Furthermore, the disease significantly hinders academic progress for adolescents. Studies show that 60 per cent of adolescents with SCD report that the disease interferes with their school performance, and 40 per cent report being retained at least one grade level, compared to a national average of 24 per cent. In India, historical caste divisions persist in the education sector, influencing unequal access, biased treatment, and limited representation for marginalized groups. Dalits and Adivasis have historically been denied access to education, leading to significant educational gaps. Students from these backgrounds often endure social stigma and discrimination within educational settings, negatively impacting their learning experiences and psychological well-being. This “invisibility” of SCD contributes to a lack of public awareness and empathy, which can translate into lower policy prioritization and resource allocation for the disease. Simultaneously, the direct stigma impacts patients’ social well-being and limits their life opportunities, collectively demonstrating a broader societal pathology that compounds the challenges of living with SCD.

Historical Neglect in Research Funding and Resource Allocation

Despite being documented over a century ago and recognized as the most common genetic disorder globally, SCD has historically suffered from a severe lack of research funding, significantly impeding the development of new and effective treatments. Until 2017, only one disease-modifying treatment was available for SCD. This stands in stark contrast to cystic fibrosis, an inherited disease that affects three times fewer Americans but has historically received approximately ten times as much research funding per person, resulting in 15 approved drugs.

This profound disparity in research funding is directly attributable to structural racism. Funding agencies and pharmaceutical companies have historically not prioritized SCD research, potentially due to perceptions of lower profitability given the disease’s prevalence primarily within marginalized communities, and also due to challenges such as low enrollment in SCD clinical trials. This historical underfunding, when juxtaposed with the disproportionate investment in diseases affecting predominantly white populations, exposes a deep-seated economic and racial bias within the scientific and pharmaceutical industries. This bias transforms a genetic

predisposition into a systemic disadvantage, as reduced investment translates directly into slower drug development, fewer therapeutic options, and ultimately, poorer health outcomes and reduced life expectancy for individuals with SCD.

Poverty and Social Determinants of Health in SCD

Defining Social Determinants of Health (SDoH) and their Relevance to SCD

Social Determinants of Health (SDoH) are fundamental conditions within the environments where individuals are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age, which collectively influence a broad spectrum of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks. These “upstream” factors are critical drivers of wide health disparities and inequities, indicating that simply promoting healthy individual choices is insufficient to eliminate these disparities. Instead, addressing SDoH necessitates systemic action to improve the fundamental conditions in people’s environments.

SCD disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly those experiencing poverty, making SDoH a critical lens through which to understand and address the disease. In India, SCD is particularly prevalent among socioeconomically disadvantaged Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) populations, who constitute about 25 per cent of the country’s population. The acknowledgment that SDoH are foundational societal factors and that individual-level interventions alone cannot resolve health disparities represents a crucial shift from individual blame to systemic responsibility. This fundamentally reframes SCD as a public health and social policy challenge, rather than solely a medical one. It implies that even with optimal medical care, if the underlying social and economic barriers are not addressed, individuals with SCD will continue to face significant obstacles to achieving optimal health.

Economic Instability and its Impact on SCD Morbidity and Mortality

Economic instability significantly exacerbates the burden of SCD. Youth diagnosed with SCD who live below the poverty line face an increased risk for morbidity, mortality, and substantial financial burden. The average total healthcare costs for individuals with SCD can reach \$1 million by age 45, with annual costs averaging around \$10,000 for children and \$30,000 for adults. This immense financial strain, coupled with pre-existing economic instability, creates a detrimental cycle of poverty and poor health outcomes.

In India, caste discrimination contributes to deep poverty, with approximately one in three Dalits living in multidimensional poverty (monetary, education, and basic infrastructure). This limits their access to even public hospitals due to widespread under-the-table corruption and out-of-pocket costs, which are unaffordable for those living on less than three dollars a day. Dalits and Adivasis have the lowest healthcare utilization and outcome percentages, and their life expectancy is significantly lower at 63.0 and 64.0 years, respectively, compared to the general population. Financial

constraints in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods often compel families with SCD to reside in substandard housing and rely on low-quality childcare settings, which further increases their social, clinical, and nutritional vulnerabilities. The protective effect of economic support is evident in studies showing that Medicaid receipt among youth with chronic illnesses, including SCD, is associated with an increased frequency of well-child visits and a decrease in emergency room (ER) and inpatient visits. This indicates that economic support can directly mitigate negative health outcomes, highlighting policy-level interventions as crucial for improving the lives of SCD patients. The disease not only causes financial hardship but also limits opportunities for economic advancement, thereby trapping families in a disadvantaged state.

Education Access and Quality: Influence on Health Literacy and Management

Education, particularly parental education, serves as a significant protective social determinant against adverse health outcomes in SCD. Research indicates that children with SCD residing in households where an adult holds at least one bachelor's degree are 33 per cent less likely to experience acute care utilization (ACU) and hospitalizations. This suggests that higher parental education levels are associated with improved health literacy, enhanced advocacy skills, and greater access to resources, all of which can profoundly mitigate the negative health impacts of SCD, even when other social determinants present challenges.

Conversely, the disease itself can impede educational attainment. Academic progress for adolescents with SCD is often hindered by frequent disease-related school absences. For example, 60 per cent of adolescents surveyed reported that SCD interfered with their school performance, and 40 per cent stated they had been retained at least one grade level. In India, the education sector is deeply affected by caste discrimination, leading to unequal access, biased treatment, and limited representation for marginalized groups. Historically, Dalits and Adivasis were denied access to education, resulting in significant educational gaps. Despite legal protections and affirmative action policies, lower caste applicants often face discrimination in admission processes and experience lower acceptance rates in colleges, even with similar academic qualifications. This illustrates that education is not merely about knowledge acquisition; it is a critical proxy for broader socioeconomic stability and the ability to navigate complex healthcare systems. Therefore, interventions that focus on educational support for families and patients could yield significant downstream health benefits, extending beyond purely medical treatment.

Neighbourhood and Built Environment: Food Deserts and Transportation Barriers

The characteristics of an individual's neighborhood and built environment directly influence health outcomes for SCD patients. Preschool-aged children with SCD who live in food deserts—areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food—and have limited access to transportation face a significantly greater risk for acute

complications and hospitalizations. Specifically, living more than one mile from a supermarket was associated with a 44 per cent increase in hospitalizations and a 37 per cent increase in acute care utilization among young children with SCD. The risk is further compounded when living more than a mile from a grocery store *and* without a vehicle, which is linked to a significantly higher likelihood of hospitalization.

In India, Dalits historically lived on the outskirts of villages, working as bonded laborers and lacking access to basic amenities like water and land. This historical marginalization contributes to the current mismatch between where health facilities are located (predominantly urban) and where Dalits and Adivasis live (nearly 90 per cent in rural settings), creating fundamental barriers to healthcare access. Their geographic isolation further exacerbates these challenges, along with internal communication barriers. Food insecurity and housing instability are highly prevalent in the under-resourced communities where children with SCD often reside, and these conditions are directly associated with poorer diet quality, characterized by higher intake of dairy and pizza and lower intake of whole grains. Adequate nutrition is known to influence the pathophysiology of SCD, and undernourished individuals are more likely to experience impaired immune function and disease exacerbation. These geographic and environmental disadvantages are not mere inconveniences; they create a direct pathway to worsened SCD outcomes, demonstrating how systemic urban planning failures and resource allocation inequities become clinical barriers, irrespective of medical advancements or individual efforts. Addressing SCD effectively thus requires interventions in urban planning, infrastructure development, and food policy, extending far beyond the traditional medical domain.

Healthcare Access and Quality Disparities for Marginalized Communities

Healthcare access and quality are critical social determinants that disproportionately affect marginalized communities with SCD. The healthcare system itself is influenced by structural racism, which contributes to a notable shortage of doctors with expertise in treating SCD; only 20 per cent of family doctors report feeling comfortable managing the disease. This lack of specialized knowledge often prevents patients from receiving routine, preventative care, consequently pushing them towards emergency rooms for crisis management.

In India, Dalits and Adivasis face direct discrimination in the private healthcare system, including disparity in care, denial of entry into private clinics, and longer waiting times. They are less likely to receive maternal healthcare and to give birth at hospitals or be assisted by a health professional during delivery, even when controlling for other factors like age and education. Only 4 per cent of Adivasi and 15 per cent of Dalits utilize private facilities, largely due to the unaffordable out-of-pocket expenditure, which is 524 per cent higher than in public facilities. Health insurance schemes like PMJAY have also failed to adequately cover these communities, with only a small fraction of private hospital admissions under the scheme coming from Dalits and Adivasis compared to their eligible population share. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these groups faced greater difficulty in securing healthcare,

with reports of villages not allowing SC families access to public health centers and a lack of connections to arrange transportation, oxygen, or beds in private hospitals. This confluence of provider discomfort, insurance-based access barriers, and a lack of specialized support creates a fragmented and inequitable healthcare landscape for SCD patients. The burden of navigating this dysfunctional system falls disproportionately on already vulnerable individuals, leading to higher utilization of acute care services (emergency department visits and hospitalizations) due to insufficient preventative and specialized outpatient care. This results in a less efficient and more costly healthcare system overall.

Addressing Social Determinants and Systemic Inequalities in SCD Care

Adopting a Social Justice Lens for SCD Interventions

Effectively addressing SCD necessitates a fundamental shift towards a social justice lens, one that explicitly recognizes the profound impact of social determinants of health and actively confronts structural inequalities. This approach moves beyond a purely biomedical focus, which, while vital, is insufficient to resolve the deep-seated issues surrounding SCD. It implies a fundamental reorientation of public health efforts, shifting the emphasis from individual patient management to systemic societal reform as a core component of disease control and eventual elimination.

This social justice framework includes advocating for equitable access to healthcare for all, actively challenging the pervasive stigma and discrimination faced by SCD patients, and promoting comprehensive policies that address the root causes of health disparities. Furthermore, effective interventions for SCD demand a community-based approach that empowers communities to actively participate in developing and implementing solutions. An intersectional approach is also crucial, acknowledging how multiple forms of social inequality—such as race, class, and gender—intersect to shape the unique experiences and outcomes of individuals living with SCD. This paradigm shift is not merely a recommendation; it is a necessary evolution in how SCD is understood and managed, recognizing that medical advancements alone cannot overcome the barriers imposed by societal inequities.

Community-Based Solutions and Empowerment Strategies

Community-based solutions and empowerment strategies are critical for building trust and ensuring culturally competent care, especially given the historical medical mistrust and systemic discrimination experienced by SCD patients. Effective interventions for SCD require a community-based approach that actively involves addressing social determinants of health and empowering affected communities to participate in the design and implementation of solutions.

Examples of this approach are evident in initiatives like India's National Sickle Cell Elimination Mission (NSCEM), where community-level work includes screening

activities conducted by Community Health Officers (CHOs) and the establishment of patient support group meetings. These efforts are vital for fostering self-advocacy and ensuring that interventions are tailored to the lived realities of the affected populations, thereby counteracting the historical disempowerment they have faced. The advocacy efforts of pioneers like Dr. Charles F. Whitten in the early 1970s, which contributed to the foundation of the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America (SCDAA), further underscore the transformative power of community organization and patient advocacy in shaping healthcare priorities and improving access to care. Such initiatives are not just about service delivery; they are about rebuilding relationships, fostering resilience, and ensuring that the voices of those most affected are central to the solutions.

Policy Recommendations and Strategic Initiatives

The global landscape for SCD care is witnessing a significant shift towards comprehensive, system-level elimination efforts, marked by the emergence of ambitious national and international strategic plans.

India's National Sickle Cell Elimination Mission (NSCEM) 2047: This mission embodies a proactive approach to addressing SCD as a public health problem. Its overarching vision is to eliminate SCD in India before 2047. The strategy is built upon three core pillars:

1. *Health Promotion:* This includes widespread awareness generation and pre-marital genetic counseling to inform potential carriers.
2. *Prevention:* Universal screening and early detection are key components, targeting a broad population from birth up to 40 years of age, with an initial focus on tribal and high-prevalence areas. The mission specifically prioritizes 17 high-prevalence states, including those with significant Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe populations, recognizing their disproportionate burden of the disease.
3. *Holistic Management & Continuum of Care:* This pillar focuses on providing comprehensive treatment at primary, secondary, and tertiary healthcare levels, establishing robust patient support systems, and promoting community adoption of prevention and management practices.

The NSCEM aims to screen approximately 7 crore (70 million) people, provide counseling for prevention, and ensure care for individuals with SCD within a three-and-a-half-year period (2023-2026) across 17 high-focus states. Key operational components include capacity-building initiatives for healthcare providers, establishing diagnostic facilities at the district level, developing mobile applications for data collection and patient follow-up, ensuring the availability of essential drugs, and creating standardized treatment protocols, alongside nutritional services. Policy elements central to NSCEM's success involve establishing national registries for surveillance, fostering research, engaging in political advocacy, implementing government insurance schemes for patients, and ensuring multi-stakeholder involvement. Anticipated outcomes include improved functionality of screening,

diagnosis, and treatment facilities, better access to medicines, increased community awareness, provision of nutritional services, improved quality of life for patients, reduced school dropouts, increased blood availability, and a decrease in SCD-related deaths. The mission aims to combine national policy with community-driven efforts to eliminate SCA as a public health issue by 2047, improving the lives of millions in its most marginalized communities.

Sickle in Africa Consortium: This collaborative initiative, comprising eight African countries, leverages a robust infrastructure to advance SCD research and care across the continent. It has established the largest global SCD database and patient registry, currently enrolling over 34,000 patients, which includes detailed demographic, clinical, and management information. SickleInAfrica has also contextually adapted clinical guidelines for managing SCD across all levels of care, used by providers at their facilities. The consortium actively engages in high-level advocacy through platforms like the 77th UN General Assembly and the US-Africa Leaders' Summit, promoting awareness, fostering partnerships, and influencing policy. Their focus spans biomedical science to enhance an understanding of SCD in African patients, implementation research to improve delivery of life-saving interventions (e.g. newborn screening, community mobilization), and partnerships for therapeutic development, including gene therapy. The consortium emphasizes the critical need for bilateral and multilateral partners across the entire chain of SCD comprehensive care, from newborn screening to curative therapies.

The emergence of these national and international strategic plans signals a growing global recognition of SCD as a public health priority, marking a significant shift from reactive clinical management to proactive, comprehensive, and system-level elimination efforts. However, the ultimate success of these plans hinges on their ability to overcome the very social determinants and systemic biases they aim to address. The challenge lies not just in the blueprint but in the effective implementation, particularly in resource-constrained settings and against deeply entrenched systemic racism/casteism. These plans serve as crucial frameworks for *how* to address SDoH and disparities, and their effectiveness will be the true measure of whether policy can successfully overcome ingrained social pathology.

Role of Advocacy and Intersectoral Collaboration

Advocacy plays a pivotal role in driving change for SCD patients. The advocacy efforts of individuals like Dr. Charles F. Whitten were instrumental in the early 1970s, contributing to the foundation of the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America (SCDAA). Today, individuals are encouraged to support or join groups that actively advocate and fight for equity in healthcare for SCD patients.

The complexity of SCD necessitates broad intersectoral collaboration. Partnerships across governmental, public health, academic, non-profit, and private organizations are essential to secure political will, pool resources, gather expertise with an understanding of local contexts, and allow for the integration of comprehensive care into all levels of existing local healthcare structures and the wider society. The

SickleInAfrica consortium, for instance, exemplifies this by fostering cross-border dialogues and emphasizing the need for robust partnerships from grassroots to global alliances to increase awareness, promote policy advocacy, and establish SCD Centers of Excellence and genomics capacity-building initiatives. In India, advancing tribal health requires a foundational shift towards evidence-based governance, prioritizing the collection and analysis of health data disaggregated by ethnicity, and strengthening institutional capacities to address specific health issues of tribal populations. Furthermore, the involvement of indigenous communities in the planning, delivery, and monitoring of health services is crucial to build trust and ensure culturally appropriate interventions. Such collaborative efforts are vital for developing and implementing sustainable solutions that address the multifaceted challenges of SCD.

Management and Diagnostic of SCD

Historical Context of Pathophysiology Discoveries

The understanding of SCD pathophysiology has evolved significantly over the past century. In 1927, Hahn and Gillespie made the groundbreaking discovery that red blood cells sickled upon the removal of oxygen in a carbon dioxide-saturated cell suspension. They further observed that this sickling characteristic could occur in the absence of the full disease, noting that patients with SCD had relatives who exhibited the sickling characteristic without having the disease themselves; this phenomenon was later identified as “sickle trait”.

Further advancements in the late 1940s and early 1950s clarified the inheritance pattern of SCD. In 1949, two independent publications described its autosomal recessive mode of inheritance: one by Col. E. A. Beet in an African medical journal, and another by Dr. James V. Neel in the American journal *Science*. These physicians detailed how individuals with “sickle trait” were heterozygous carriers of the gene variant, possessing one normal gene and one variant gene without manifesting the disease, while the disease itself appeared in individuals with two copies of the variant gene. A pivotal moment occurred in 1951 when Dr. Linus Pauling and Dr. Harvey Itano discovered the differing chemical structure of oxygen-carrying haemoglobin in the red blood cells of individuals with SCD. This landmark discovery established SCD as the first identified disease caused by dysfunctional proteins due to their abnormal molecular structure. In 1956, Dr. Vernon Ingram further detailed the exact structural alteration in the haemoglobin protein, identifying the substitution of valine for glutamic acid at the sixth amino acid position in beta globin.

Current Understanding of Pathophysiology

Beyond simple vascular blockage, SCD is now understood as a complex condition involving a cascade of physiological abnormalities. These include chronic inflammation, a hypercoagulable state, pervasive oxidative stress, and nutritional deficiencies. Oxidative stress plays a particularly significant role, characterized by an excessive production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) due to mechanisms such as

HbS autooxidation, NADPH activation, and elevated mitochondrial retention, coupled with impaired antioxidant activity. This imbalance leads to structural defects in red blood cell membranes.

Furthermore, hemolytic processes, which result in the release of cell-free haemoglobin into the plasma, contribute to ROS generation and initiate lipid peroxidation. Ischemia-reperfusion events, triggered by vaso-occlusive crises, also contribute to oxidative stress. Excessive ROS generation and ROS-dependent signaling significantly contribute to functional alterations in other crucial cell types. For instance, cell-free heme induces neutrophil activation and upregulates cell adhesion, while excessive mitochondrial ROS generation in platelets is associated with increased thrombus formation. Oxidative stress also contributes to endothelial cell dysfunction and activation, leading to the production of inflammatory molecules and adhesion molecules that recruit leukocytes and red blood cells to vessel walls, thereby driving vaso-occlusive processes. Reduced activity of antioxidant enzymes like superoxide dismutase (SOD) and catalase (CAT) is observed in SCD patients, correlating with increased oxidative markers and contributing to complications such as pulmonary hypertension and chronic lung disease.

Diagnostic Techniques

Early and accurate diagnosis of SCD is crucial for timely intervention and improved outcomes. Several diagnostic techniques are employed across different stages of life:

Prenatal Diagnosis: SCD can be diagnosed before birth, as early as 8 to 10 weeks into pregnancy, through prenatal screening. Two primary methods are utilized:

- *Amniocentesis:* Typically performed between 16 and 18 weeks of pregnancy, this outpatient procedure involves inserting a needle into the womb to obtain a small sample of amniotic fluid, which contains fetal cells. These cells are then grown in a laboratory for genetic testing to detect the sickle cell gene or other chromosomal abnormalities.
- *Chorionic Villus Sampling (CVS):* Performed earlier, around week 9 or 10 of pregnancy, CVS involves taking a small amount of material from the developing placenta. The placental cells are genetically identical to the baby's and can reveal the same types of genetic disorders as amniocentesis. While CVS carries a slightly higher risk of miscarriage than amniocentesis, it offers the advantage of earlier results. Both techniques can be used to test for the specific type of haemoglobin the baby has, with CVS often preferred for its ability to collect more cells.

Newborn Screening: All 50 states in the United States, along with many other countries, have universal newborn screening programs for SCD. This involves a heel prick to collect drops of blood on a special card, which are then tested for various treatable conditions, including SCD. Common laboratory methods used include high-performance liquid chromatography, capillary electrophoresis, and isoelectric

focusing. If initial results indicate the possibility of SCD or sickle cell trait, a special follow-up team contacts the parents for retesting to confirm the diagnosis, and genetic counseling is offered. This early identification is vital for initiating preventative care and significantly reducing early childhood mortality from infections.

Blood and Genetic Tests: For individuals who do not know their sickle cell status or for confirmation of newborn screening results, blood tests can determine the presence and quantity of haemoglobin S protein. Genetic testing can ascertain whether an individual carries one or two copies of the sickle cell gene and can also identify other abnormal haemoglobin types, such as those causing thalassemia, which may coexist with the sickle cell gene. Genetic tests are particularly useful for confirming a diagnosis when blood test results are inconclusive.

Current Management Strategies

The management of SCD focuses on preventing and treating pain episodes and other complications, aiming to improve quality of life and extend lifespan.

General Prevention Strategies: Lifestyle behaviors play a significant role in preventing complications. Patients are advised to drink plenty of water, avoid extreme temperatures, and limit exposure to high altitudes or low oxygen levels (e.g. during unpressurized flights or strenuous exercise). Infection prevention is paramount, emphasizing frequent handwashing, safe food preparation, and ensuring up-to-date vaccinations, including annual flu and pneumococcal vaccines. Young children with HbSS (the most common form of SCD) are prescribed daily penicillin until at least 5 years of age to greatly reduce infection risk.

Pain Crisis Management: Acute pain crises, often the hallmark of SCD, require prompt and effective management. Clinical management typically involves intravenous fluids and pain-reducing medications, with hospitalization necessary for severe crises. Optimal management necessitates a multidisciplinary team, including haematologists, nurses, pain specialists, and social workers, to provide empathetic, consistent, and continuous care. Pain assessment tools, such as visual analog scales, are used to quantify intensity. Mild pain can often be managed at home with oral fluids and non-narcotic analgesics like acetaminophen or NSAIDs. Moderate to severe pain requires opioid analgesics, with parenteral morphine being the treatment of choice due to its effectiveness and the neurotoxic risks associated with meperidine. Patient-controlled analgesia (PCA) is often utilized to prevent fluctuations in drug levels and empower patients in their pain management. Adjuvant agents like antihistamines and antiemetics, along with non-pharmacologic techniques such as physical therapy, heat application, and cognitive-behavioral therapies, also contribute to pain relief. Oxygen therapy is administered only if hypoxemia is present.

Complication Prevention: Regular medical screenings and interventions are crucial. Yearly eye doctor visits are recommended starting at age 10 to check for retinal damage and prevent vision loss. Transcranial Doppler (TCD) ultrasound identifies children at risk for stroke, with frequent blood transfusions recommended to prevent stroke if TCD is abnormal. Blood transfusions are also used to treat severe anemia,

particularly sudden worsening due to infection or spleen enlargement. However, frequent transfusions can lead to iron overload, necessitating iron chelation therapy to prevent life-threatening organ damage.

Disease-Modifying Medications: Several medications are approved to prevent or reduce pain crises and other SCD complications. Hydroxyurea increases fetal haemoglobin production, reducing sickling and disease severity. L-glutamine (ENDARI®) reduces oxidative injury to red blood cells and lowers pain crisis incidence. Crizanlizumab (ADAKVEO®), a monoclonal antibody, reduces cellular adhesion within vasculature, leading to significant reductions in pain episodes and hospitalizations. It is important to note that voxelotor (Oxbryta) was voluntarily withdrawn from the market in September 2024 as its benefits did not outweigh the risks for the approved SCD population.

Emerging and Curative Therapies

The landscape of SCD treatment is rapidly evolving, with significant advancements in curative and disease-modifying therapies.

Bone Marrow Transplant (BMT): Historically, bone marrow transplant has been the only potential cure for SCD. This procedure involves replacing the patient's diseased bone marrow with healthy blood-forming stem cells from a donor who does not have SCD. The new bone marrow then produces healthy red blood cells without abnormal haemoglobin S. A close match, usually a sibling, is required for this procedure, and it is most commonly performed in severe SCD cases for children with minimal organ damage. While effective, BMT is limited by the availability of suitable donors and the risks associated with the procedure.

Gene Therapies: Gene therapy has emerged as a transformative and potentially curative approach for SCD, particularly for patients who lack a matched sibling donor. In a historic move in December 2023, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved two cell-based gene therapies for the treatment of SCD in patients aged 12 years and older:

- *Casgevy™ (exagamglogene autotemcel):* Developed by CRISPR Therapeutics and Vertex Pharmaceuticals, Casgevy is the first FDA-approved therapy in the U.S. that utilizes CRISPR-Cas9 gene-editing technology. This *ex vivo* autologous therapy involves collecting a patient's own hematopoietic stem cells, which are then genetically modified outside the body using CRISPR to produce high levels of fetal hemoglobin (HbF). The modified cells are subsequently re-infused into the patient after high-dose chemotherapy to remove existing bone marrow cells. The increase in HbF replaces the mutated adult hemoglobin, alleviating disease symptoms. Clinical trials have shown promising results, with 93.5% of evaluated patients achieving freedom from severe vaso-occlusive crisis episodes for at least 12 consecutive months.
- *Lyfgenia™ (lovotibeglogene autotemcel):* Developed by Bluebird Bio, Lyfgenia utilizes a lentiviral vector for genetic modification. In this therapy,

the patient's blood stem cells are genetically modified to produce HbAT87Q, a gene-therapy-derived hemoglobin that functions similarly to normal adult hemoglobin (hemoglobin A). Red blood cells containing HbAT87Q have a lower risk of sickling and occluding blood flow. Like Casgevy, this is a one-time, single-dose infusion of the patient's own modified stem cells after chemotherapy. In clinical studies, 88 per cent of patients achieved complete resolution of vaso-occlusive events.

These gene therapies represent a significant leap forward, offering the potential for a functional cure and sustained therapeutic benefit, including transfusion independence, for many patients. However, challenges remain, including the need for refined delivery methods and addressing potential oncogenic risks. Research continues to explore *in vivo* gene therapy approaches, which would involve direct delivery of gene-editing components to the patient, and to identify multiple gene targets that could address issues beyond sickling, such as chronic inflammation and cellular adhesion.

Discussion

Sickle cell disease, at its core, is a genetic disorder, yet the evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that its burden is profoundly amplified by social pathology, particularly poverty and systemic inequalities. The historical trajectory of SCD research and care reveals a consistent pattern of neglect, directly linked to the racial demographics of the affected population. The underfunding of SCD research, starkly contrasted with investments in diseases affecting predominantly white populations, exposes a deep-seated economic and racial bias within the scientific and pharmaceutical industries. This bias has transformed a genetic predisposition into a systemic disadvantage, limiting treatment options and exacerbating suffering.

The healthcare system itself acts as a significant perpetuator of health inequities. Systemic racism and implicit biases among healthcare professionals lead to poorer care, delayed treatment, and inadequate pain management for SCD patients, particularly Black Americans. In India, the pervasive caste system further compounds these issues, with Dalits and Adivasis facing overt discrimination, refusal of care, longer waiting times, and a general indifference from healthcare providers. These experiences foster deep medical mistrust, creating a vicious cycle where patients avoid necessary preventative care, leading to worsened outcomes and an increased reliance on emergency services. This fragmentation of care, coupled with a lack of specialized expertise and support roles, underscores a dysfunctional system that disproportionately burdens vulnerable individuals.

Furthermore, the influence of social determinants of health extends beyond direct healthcare interactions. Economic instability, limited access to quality education, and adverse neighborhood conditions—such as food deserts and inadequate transportation—directly contribute to increased morbidity, mortality, and acute care utilization among SCD patients. In India, caste-based poverty limits access to even public hospitals, and historical marginalization has resulted in a mismatch between

healthcare infrastructure and the rural populations of Dalits and Adivasis. These factors highlight how systemic failures in urban planning, resource allocation, and social support become critical clinical barriers, regardless of medical advancements. The “invisibility” of SCD and societal misconceptions further compound these challenges, leading to social isolation and hindering educational attainment, thereby impacting overall quality of life.

However, the landscape is shifting. The emergence of national and international strategic plans, such as India’s National Sickle Cell Elimination Mission and the SickleInAfrica Consortium, signals a growing global recognition of SCD as a public health priority. These initiatives represent a crucial move from reactive clinical management to proactive, comprehensive, and system-level elimination efforts. They emphasize health promotion, universal screening, holistic management, and the critical role of intersectoral collaboration and patient advocacy. The recent FDA approvals of groundbreaking gene therapies like Casgevy and Lyfgenia offer unprecedented hope for curative options, representing a significant scientific triumph.

Despite these medical breakthroughs, the success of these strategic plans and the equitable deployment of new therapies hinge on overcoming the very social determinants and systemic biases they aim to address. The challenge lies not just in the scientific innovation but in ensuring equitable access, dismantling structural barriers, and fostering an environment where social justice is integral to healthcare delivery.

Conclusion

Sickle cell disease stands as a stark example of a condition where biological complexity is profoundly magnified by deeply entrenched social pathology. While significant strides have been made in understanding its pathophysiology and developing advanced treatments, including transformative gene therapies, the pervasive impact of poverty, systemic racism, and adverse social determinants of health continues to disproportionately burden affected communities. The historical neglect of SCD research and the ongoing disparities in healthcare access and quality underscore that the disease’s trajectory is not solely determined by genetics but by societal structures and historical injustices.

Effective SCD management and the ambitious goal of its elimination necessitate a holistic approach that transcends traditional biomedical interventions. It requires a fundamental reorientation of public health efforts towards a social justice framework, prioritizing equitable access to care, challenging discrimination (including caste-based discrimination in India), and addressing the root causes of health disparities. The strategic initiatives emerging globally, such as India’s National Sickle Cell Elimination Mission and the SickleInAfrica Consortium, represent a vital shift towards comprehensive, system-level solutions. However, their ultimate success will depend on a sustained, multi-sectoral commitment to dismantle the systemic barriers that perpetuate health inequities. Only by integrating medical advancements with robust

social policy and community empowerment can the full potential for health and well-being be realized for all individuals living with sickle cell disease.

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Exploring Strategies to Maintain Tribal Identity in Sundarban Island, India

Mohan Kumar Bera¹

Abstract

The Munda people are one of the first tribal settlers in the Sundarban region, but most of them are landless or hold a small agricultural land. Living in small hamlets spread in different parts of the Sundarban islands, they are influenced by the socio-cultural lives of Bengali neighbours. The tribal identity and socio-cultural and economic activities in Sundarban are a result of a long process of acculturation to live with a changing physical and socio-cultural, economic and political environment in Sundarban islands. Is it important for tribal people in the Sundarban to maintain the socio-cultural identity? Is it critical for them to adopt the process of acculturation to live with non-tribal neighbours? The main objective of the study is to explore the strategies of acculturation that strengthen tribal identity and build a consistent and socially acceptable adaptive space. An ethnographic study in a village of the Indian Sundarban island has found that Munda people are conscious of social discrimination and their identity. Socio-cultural and economic marginalisation of the Munda people encourages divisions of 'Us' and 'Them'. They experience the processes of acculturation and Hinduisation, but do not wish to convert to Hinduism. However, the changing nature of primary resource-based livelihood activities and diversification of income generation activities have created a wider space for communication and a symbiotic relationship between tribal and non-tribal communities in the village. The education, better communication and participation in decentralised democratic governance system have brought them closer to other communities. They speak the Bengali language and have adopted the socio-cultural lives of Bengali neighbours to avoid discrimination and better assimilation. The process of acculturation is not for social mobility, but a strategy for survival, along with protecting socio-cultural tribal identity in the Sundarban islands.

Keywords

Acculturation, Adaptation, Socio-cultural Identity, Munda Tribe, Sundarban Islands

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Introduction

The history of human settlement in the Sundarban region started in 1459 (Chottopadhyya, 1995), but the actual land reclamation began in 1765 by Claud Russell (Jalais, 2007). The colonial government wanted to convert the mangrove forests of the Sundarban islands into productive agricultural fields that could generate more taxes and distribute parts of the mangrove forest to local landlords on long-term leases so that the marshy land could be converted to farmland. Socio-economically marginalised people came from neighbouring districts and states to engage in the reclamation process as labourers, and many settled permanently in the Sundarban islands. The crisis of resources in the Chotonagpur in the eighteenth century forced numerous Munda people to leave the place. Availability of agricultural land and attraction of possible livelihood opportunities influenced them to settle in South Bengal. First, they settled in the Hooghly district (Basu, 1992) and gradually moved to the 24 Parganas district, mainly Kasiabad in Kakdwip, Purba Daragapur, Durbachati, Gadamuthura of Pathar Pratima, and Raidighi. The Munda population, which was 688 in 1891, increased to 9,229 (1901), 7,296 (1911), 7,860 (1921), 2,901 (1933), and 20,428 (1951) (Mukhopadhyay, 1976). Although tribal people were among the first settlers in the Sundarban islands, they had to surrender largely to the culture of the dominant Bengali communities in an alien region (Raha and Bhui, 2006), and eventually became marginalised socio-economically and politically. They adopted the socio-cultural lives of Bengali people while living for many years in the Sundarban islands. The main factor for the successful completion of the acculturation process of people is the development of productive social behaviour based on individual resources. However, the acculturation process depends on a commitment towards the culture and participation in intercultural contacts. There are two important questions being raised: Is it important for the tribal people to maintain socio-cultural identity in the Sundarban islands? And is it critical for them to establish contact with non-tribal communities? The main objective is to explore the acculturation processes that strengthen their identity and build a consistent adaptive space.

Understanding the Process of Acculturation

Adaptation is the adjustment of a social group to its socio-economic, physical, and spiritual environment. The process of adaptation ensures a favourable relationship, existence, and development (Woolston, 1917) and adjusts a community's socio-cultural and economic life to its social setting. An individual or a community adopts the dominant culture to avoid inter-community conflicts (Berry, 1997). It is a system of social activities aimed at overcoming the barriers to adjustment in any situation. According to the normative approach, adaptation is a process of continual social control over human behaviour, including social norms, values, and traditions (Romm, 2003). According to the interpretive approach, adaptation is a strategy of personal activity that allows the uninterrupted interpretation of self-identity and symbolic social context during the process of socialisation (Romm, 2003). Communities belonging to

different cultures come into direct, long-term contact, which leads to changes in the existing cultural patterns of one or both groups (Romm, 2003).

Socio-cultural adaptation of a community is determined by a continuous process of social control over human behaviour with a set of values and norms. It is a process that allows people to overcome challenges to cope with a changing environment (Romm, 2003). The socio-cultural adaptation has been discussed by Redfield et al. (1936) as a process of 'acculturation' in which groups belonging to different cultures come together and change the socio-cultural environment (Redfield et al., 1936). The communities undergo cultural changes because of a new socio-cultural environment and required behaviour adopted. Therefore, acculturation is a result of socio-cultural adaptation to accommodate socio-economic, political and cultural environment by a community at a new place of dominant culture.

Berry (1997, 2001) has incorporated the experiences of people in the process of socio-cultural adaptation at a new place. The acculturation process is a change in people's behaviour because of contact and involvement with people from other cultures. The process allows people to give the elements of their culture of origin and adopt new cultural elements (Tonder and Soontiens, 2014). Adjustment with the dominant culture and social practices is a necessity in a situation where people voluntarily or forcefully accept the dominant cultural components along with practicing their culture of origin. Therefore, acculturation is a consequence of social interaction through which people experience and adopt the dominant cultural components.

When people leave the place of origin of their culture and settle down in a different cultural setting for different purposes, the needs of acculturation emerge (Fu, 2015). It becomes paramount to explore the various acculturation strategies of people while adjusting themselves in a new socio-cultural and different environmental setting. It has been understood that the acculturation process is not a linear process. The acculturation process happens through the adjustment of people to a new setting, depending on their necessity, willingness, and pressure from the dominant community, and they gradually relinquish the culture of origin (Segall et al., 1990; Ryder et al., 2000). However, it depends on the duration of stay in the new place and the nature of the connection with people and the frequency of visits to the place of origin (Tonsing, 2010; Segall et al., 1990; Ryder et al., 2000).

Acculturation strategies are followed by an individual as well as in a group. It depends on the need for acculturation, the keenness of the people towards adoption and the socio-cultural environment. Berry et al. (1997) argued that the need for adaptation and its outcome can be positive and negative. However, the impacts of adaptation depend on individual characteristics and the capacity for adaptation at a new place. The socio-cultural adaptation is the change that people must accept while living with dominant communities in a new area (Berry, 1997). Berry (1997) has explained such adaptation as 'fit' in which people from all communities form a new environment to adjust to each other in a new area (Tonsing, 2010). Berry (1992) has conceptualised the whole process of adaptation as 'acculturation' that consists of integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation. However, the process

of acculturation depends on the ability of people to manage the cultural setting of a new place; social and communication skills and other locally based socio-cultural and economic needs. The nature of participation of people in socio-cultural life also depends on understanding local language, making friends, and attending socio-cultural activities in a new place (Ward and Rana, 1999). However, it varies with length of stay, educational qualification, social network and nature of occupation (Ward and Kennedy, 1993).

The socio-cultural identity of tribal communities is a complex product of social and physical adaptation that reflects their distinct worldviews, beliefs, social values, norms, languages, and customs in a geo-environmental setting. Tribal villages experience heavy migration as well as multiple invasions, thereby bringing distinct communities and cultures into contact with one another. The government's administrative system has imposed on tribal communities a constitutional identity that often supersedes their natural and ethnic identity (Chaudhuri, 1992; Raha, 1999). However, tribal people represent their identity through their socio-political organisation, language, rituals, festivals, technology, dress, art, and crafts. All of these are deeply connected with the land, the forest, and the river. Every tribal community has a distinct socio-cultural set-up. Socio-cultural identity is the basic element by which a tribal community can be identified. This identity may be lost if the dominant culture is accepted unreservedly (Raha, 1999). The tribal people in the Sundarban have been adapting to a physical and dominant socio-cultural environment to ensure their livelihood. The changing political environment in the Sundarban islands also provided them space to engage in the political environment in the Sundarban (Raha, 1999). The lack of connection with the place of origin and the domination of the Bengali socio-cultural environment did not give many choices other than accepting the socio-cultural environment of the new place.

The factors of socio-cultural change are political, economic, educational, religious, industrial, or agricultural (Raman, 1993); the most important is religion. Chaudhuri (1992) rightly explains that the socio-cultural change of tribal people in India started when they encountered Hindu culture—the continual process of borrowing aspects of Hindu culture and incorporating them into tribal practices brought them closer to Hindu society. The acceptance of Hindu culture among tribal people was influenced by the concept of 'great and little traditions' and may be attributed to its comparatively developed material culture, educational advancement, political dominance, and impressive Brahminical rituals (Chaudhuri, 1992).

Elwin (1964) argues that tribal people maintain socio-cultural traditions that are unique and distinct from the dominant Indian cultural traditions. Singh (2002) and Peffer and Behera (2005) support Elwin and stress the uniqueness of tribal culture. Studies show that tribal identity is strategically important for claiming land rights (Schleiter and Maaker, 2010). Gupta and Ferguson (2001) emphasise the significance of multiculturalism and hybrid identities in the modern context. Worldwide, mass movements have weakened rigid cultural identities existing in territorial boundaries, led people of different ethnicities to live together and depend on one another, and

given birth to cultural plurality within the framework of a cohesive national identity. We must therefore take a closer look at the adjustments that have been made in the socio-cultural and economic lives of tribal people in the Sundarban islands.

Research Methodology and Data Collection

The community adaptation and maintenance of the original socio-cultural identity to neighbouring dominant groups is the combination of socio-economic, cultural, institutional setup, technological know-how, and religious beliefs of a community. Understanding integrated activities of a community to deal with every physical and social phenomenon is required because the physical-socio-cultural adaptation starts from each household, which connects every member into the community (Tran and Shaw, 2007). The present study has been conducted on the Munda people who adopted the mangrove environment as livelihood activities and part of the socio-economic and political life in the Sundarban region. To explore the changing socio-cultural lives of Munda people, the research followed an ethnographic approach. Ethnography refers to fieldwork conducted by a single investigator who ‘lives with and lives like’ those who are studied, usually for a year or more. It literally means ‘a portrait of a people’. Ethnography is a written description of a particular culture—the customs, beliefs, and behaviour—based on information collected through fieldwork (Fetterman, 1998). It relies heavily on up-close, personal experience and possible participation,

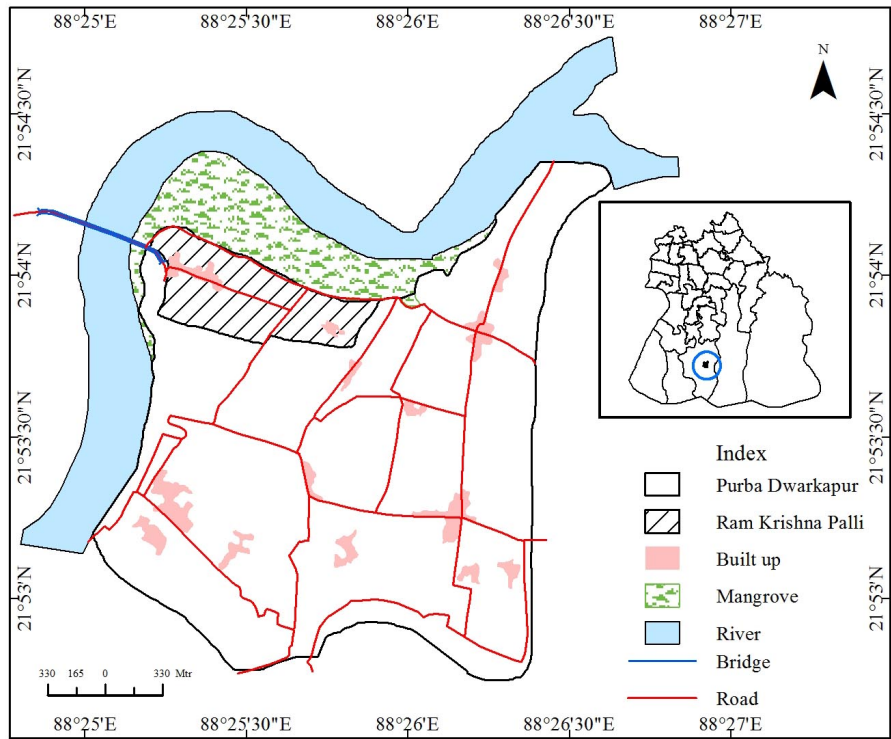


Fig. 1: Ramkrishna Palli of Purba Daragapur Village

not just observation, by the researchers (Genzuk, 2001). This study was conducted at Ramkrishna Palli of Purba Daragapur village (Figure 1), one of the oldest settlements of the Munda people in the Sundarban (Mukhopadhyay, 1976). The village is in the Pathar Pratima block of the South 24 Parganas district in West Bengal, far away from the Sundarban reserve forest region. The Munda people live with their Bengali neighbours and engage in cultivation as well as fishing, collecting honey, and catching mud crabs. The study was conducted during April–June 2017 and frequent visits to the village in last couple of years.

The fieldwork started with building rapport with the villagers, mainly elderly people. The researcher convinced a group of households to accommodate him with them and was allowed be part of different socio-cultural and political activities in the village. The long stays and frequent visits to the village in a particular interval allowed the researcher to understand their lives and challenges of the tribal people. The fieldwork has been categorised into three broad sections: changing socio-political mobilisation as an acculturation process; changing nature of economic activities as a process of acculturation; and socio-cultural activities and adaptation as a process of acculturation. The selection of the 13 respondents was based on the willingness of villagers. Very few tribal households in the village holds more than one hectare of agricultural land. Therefore, respondents have been categorized into medium landowners (landholding above one acre), small landowners (landholding of less than one acre), daily wage labourers, and landless respondents. The main motivation of the research is to understand the processes of acculturation focused on the middle aged group and elderly respondents. Elderly women and boys studding in the government high school were also included in the study because of their socio-cultural activities. Respondents focused on socio-economic and political transformation, adaptation, social integration, social inclusion and exclusion, deprivation and exclusion processes among the Munda people in the Sundarban islands. As the researcher was staying with villagers, all the participants were interacted with at multiple opportunities to understand the process of acculturation focusing on (a) influence of dominant culture on tribal culture; (b) strategies to adjust to the dominant culture; (c) influence of socio-political environment in cultural adaptation; (d) adjustment to new livelihoods; (e) influence of migration and education on socio-cultural adjustment; and (f) Impact of infrastructural development in the process of adaptation. The data has been analysed under the broad themes of integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation.

Process of Acculturation and Challenges in the Sundarban Islands

The challenges of the socio-cultural identity of the Munda people have been experienced at the individual and community levels. The history of the reclamation of the salty marshy lands of the Sundarban began with the hard work of tribal people. They were known as leaders or *Sardar* who guided others to clean the mangrove forest. They also engage with other Bengali migrants in building earthen embankments to

stop saline water intrusion in the islands. Eventually, 'Sardar' has been replaced by the 'Munda' surname by non-tribal neighbours. For example, Moti Munda becomes Moti Sardar. The change of surname has increased challenges in daily life because of a similar Bengali surname, 'Saradar' (a socially marginalised Hindu community). There is a general confusion among outsiders of Sundarban to differentiate between 'Sardar' and 'Saradar'. Sometimes, the Munda sub-caste is not mentioned in the government document such as a land registration certificate. It becomes difficult for them to prove themselves as a tribe. School going children find it even more difficult as they become ineligible to avail hostel facilities, scholarship and other government benefits for tribal students.

The Munda people in the Sundarban islands hardly speak Mundari or Sadri (the language which is an admixture of Mundari and Bengali) in public as well as at home. Since Bengali language is used in schools and government offices in the Sundarban islands, they adopted Bengali as their main language for communication. The pure Mundari language is only used during weddings and religious activities. The new generation of Munda people hardly know the Mundari language. They are also unable to sing the folk songs to continue their tradition. 'How can I prove my identity as a tribe?' (Respondent 2, 2017). "If I do not know my language, how can I preserve my culture and identity?" (Respondent 9, 2017). Tribal youths are reluctant to use the Mundari or Sadri language in public because it is seen as a marker of social inferiority.

Traditionally the Munda people worship their ancestors and nature. In addition, the adverse ecology of the Sundarban islands has influenced them to worship Hindu deities such as *Banabibi*¹ and Manasa,² *Sitala*³ and also Lord Hanuman and the Tulasi plant. They use banana leaves as holy leaves instead of the *sal* leaf, which is not available in the Sundarban. They worship all Hindu gods and goddesses together by constructing mud statues of different colours. Goddess *Kali*⁴ is rapidly becoming the most important goddess among the Munda people; the importance of the goddess *Banabibi* is waning as their dependency on forest and river-based livelihoods decreases. They follow traditional beliefs and rituals in their worship of Hindu gods and goddesses. They are attracted by the stories of Hindu mythology and by Brahminical rituals. Recently, Christian missionaries have started distributing religious books and organising religious programmes in tribal villages. Although the Munda people follow Hindu practices and allow Christian missionaries in the village, they maintain a distance from Muslims. They have experienced different religious practices in different phases of development, but do not wish to give up their traditional beliefs and practices. One villager said: "I cannot give up my rituals, traditional practices, and culture, but I will not be able to protect our tribal culture in the future" (Respondent 6, 2017).

The Munda relatives and friends living in different parts of the Sundarban islands gather during weddings. Weddings are one of the most socio-cultural activities of the Munda people that has preserved the tribal identity while living away from Chotonagpur for over a century. The Mundari language is exclusively used during the marriage rituals, inter-personal conversations and wedding receptions. However, marriage

ceremonies are getting modified by the influence of Hindu Bengali neighbours in on following ways:

- (a) **Marriage timing:** Hindu Bengali marriage ceremonies are organised at night. Traditionally, Munda wedding ceremonies and rituals are held during the daytime, but slowly shifting to night. 'There is electric light, it looks good. The marriage rituals happen during the daytime, but the receptions happen at night. The young generation also demands some of the marriage ceremonies at night' (Respondent 3, 2017). 'The Munda people are spread across the islands. The marriage ceremonies during the daytime allow the families to walk a long distance to reach the groom's house. There was a concern of safety too. Now, the development of transport communication reduces the distance among the islands' (Respondent 9, 2017).
- (b) **Expenditure:** The expenditure for wedding ceremonies also increased due to the financial stability in Munda households. The higher expenditure shows the financial strength of the households (Majumdar, 1994). Most expenses are on the marriage reception.
- (c) **Dowry:** The Munda people traditionally follow the bride price for marriage. However, a substantial number of gifts, jewellery and other materials are also given to the bridegroom and they take pride in this display of status (Majumdar, 1994). Highly qualified grooms with government jobs have started demanding dowry like the Bengali neighbours. 'Neighbouring families demand dowry and therefore grooms from our community say, Why not we?' (Respondent 5, 2017).
- (d) **Inter-community marriage:** The Munda people strictly prohibit marriage within the clan (Roy, 1970). Most of the marriages are arranged marriages, but they accept registered marriages, love marriages, inter-community marriages (mainly with Hindu Bengali families). The inter-community marriages have influenced the tribal socio-cultural lives, rituals and beliefs. The tribal households with inter-community marriages are more attracted to the dominant cultures, rituals and customs. Most of the inter-community marriages are love marriage. Usually, Bengali families do not accept such a wedding, but Munda families accept the newly married couple with a small ritual of scarifying a white fowl before entering the house. A Hindu Bengali girl married to a tribal boy embraces the tribal culture even as she follows Hindu traditions and practices in the tribal home. This acceptance of non-tribal culture has brought significant changes in the tribal system. However, the tribal community has rejected the Hindu process of cremation. If an inter-community couple does not follow the tribal funeral customs, they are not allowed to participate in community activities. Slowly, non-tribal families accept the inter-community marriage relationship. It must also be noted that inter-community marriages have helped to bridge the gap between tribal and non-tribal communities.

The ‘*Gang Dhar*’ (river side) location of the tribal hamlet becomes an integrated part of tribal lives. The location of hamlet allows the tribal people to access the river, but it also separates them from Bengali hamlets. They catch fish for consumption as well as for selling. Therefore, rice and fish become the main staple foods for Munda people. They eat pork, but do not consume beef. However, the consumption of pork has dropped due to limited availability, increasing price and avoiding social discrimination. They also stopped eating rats to avoid discrimination by the non-tribal neighbours.

Haria (a traditional alcoholic beverage made of fermented steamed rice and local herbs) is an integrated part of the socio-cultural lives of Munda people. Haria is consumed during festivals and social gatherings. They claim that Haria has medicinal values as it cools the body and often consume Haria during the farming season. “I used to work hard throughout the day. Drinking haria reduces physical pain at night. So, I could sleep at night and continue working in the morning” (Respondent 9, 2017). However, consumption of Haria has reduced due to educational development and the desire to avoid disputes after consumption. Interestingly, Hindu Bengali food and drinking habits have also changed through interactions with the Mundas. Pork and haria consumption has dropped among the Munda, but risen among their Hindu neighbours, and many rear pigs commercially at home. Pig-rearing, an activity for which the Munda people are often discriminated against, is a source of financial gain for Hindu Bengalis. They also request Munda households to prepare and sell haria. The adoption of tribal ways of life (Singh, 1985) has strengthened the relationship between the two communities.

Traditionally, the Munda households share food materials to organise any social event within a household in the village. The main purpose of sharing food materials is to reduce the financial burden of a household. The tradition of sharing food materials also allowed all the households to take part in the social event and eat together. The tradition has disappeared with the replacement of the trend of the selective invitation of neighbours to organise a social event. Neighbours are getting divided by political affiliation, like Bengali neighbours. The new trends adversely affected community bonding among tribal households. ‘The dominant Bengali culture increasingly influences the Munda tribal culture, because social regulation is weak and the Munda people lack unity. Space in the tribal hamlet is limited, and the Mundas have spread to different parts of the village; the present generation builds houses wherever land is available’ (Respondent 9, 2017). As tribal unity weakens, the desire to live symbiotically with the other community grows. The separation and distance from the tribal community increases the dependency on Bengali neighbours. Xaxa (1999) argues that tribal society has been changing from a simple to a heterogeneous society.

There is a trend of social discrimination towards tribal people in Sundarban by non-tribal people. The discrimination is centred on lower social status, location of the hamlets, food habits and physical appearance. The social behaviour of the non-tribal people has made the tribal people more conscious about discrimination and self-appearance. It is divided into ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. As a result, they prefer to wear

good clothes in public place. The newer generations of tribal people are educated and mingle more freely with their non-tribal neighbours, thereby closely experience non-tribal customs and practices, but they are always aware of the possibility of social discrimination. As one respondent says: "Although I mingle with Bengalis, I am always conscious of myself as an Adivasi and know that I may be discriminated against" (Respondent 13, 2017).

Tribal people played an important role during the reclamation process in the Sundarban islands, but non-tribal people acquired most of the available agricultural land. Local landlords distributed small sections of this land among members of the tribal community, who acted as sharecroppers. After the government abolished the landlord system, communist party activists captured the land and distributed it among party cadres. This motivated the tribal people to engage actively in politics under the communist ideology. As a result, they benefited from the land distribution process undertaken later by the communist party. Politically conscious tribal people were directly involved in the election of a tribal representative to the local government in the late 1990s. The social relationship between the tribal and non-tribal people has now transformed into a political relationship, which has strengthened the ties between the two communities. However, no political leader has emerged from the tribal community. Political ideology divides the community (Xaxa, 2005), but cultural festivals such as the Tusu bring them together. Non-tribal neighbours never participate in the Tusu festival. Recently, political parties sought to mobilise resources and popularise the Tusu festival in the Sundarban islands, but failed to divide the tribal people. Similarly, the interest in football among Munda youths binds all tribal people together. The success of the football team from the tribal village attracts other non-tribal supporters, thereby encouraging greater social interaction between the two communities.

The Munda people engage in every source of livelihood that includes fishing in the river, catching mud crabs, collecting honey and collecting wood. As there are restrictions to protect the mangrove forest, wood collection has been stopped. The collection of honey depends on the availability of a boat, an entry pass from the forest office and the distance from the forest. Honey collection is seasonal, which provides good economic support to the household, but there is a high risk of animal attack. Tribal households also used to collect fresh water tortoises during the harvest season, but there are restrictions by the forest department to catch these tortoises. There was a time when every Munda household had a boat for fishing. As they hold a small agricultural land, fishing in the estuaries of the Sundarban islands became a source of livelihood. The number of boats has decreased over the years due to the unavailability of an adequate amount of fish and crabs, fear of crocodiles and government restrictions. There is a change of natural resource-based livelihood activities to secondary and tertiary sectors based livelihood activities among the Munda people in Sundarban. They started working with Bengali neighbours while migrating in search of jobs in cities. The changing pattern of livelihood activities influences the tribal people to assimilate to the non-tribal socio-cultural and economic environment. Higher education made the

tribal youths integrate and assimilate more with non-tribal neighbours. The changing economic dependency made them economically more diversified and stable (Table 1).

Table 1: Livelihood diversification

Economic activities in the past	Economic activities at present
1. Farming (sharecropping)	1. Farming (cultivating own land or practising seasonal cropping based on a lease)
2. Migration (family and long-term)	2. Migration (individual and seasonal)
3. Catching fish, crabs, and rats	3. Catching fish and crabs
4. Rearing pigs, cows, goats, and chickens	4. Collective aquaculture
5. Ferry services	5. Rearing cows, goats, and chickens
6. Wage labour (agricultural labour)	6. Wage labour (agricultural labour and work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA))
7. Selling <i>haria</i>	7. Government jobs
	8. Jobs in private farms
	9. Small-scale trading
	10. Selling <i>haria</i> (on demand)

Educational disparities led to economic exploitation and social discrimination against the tribal community in the Sundarban islands. “Our landlord used to cheat us by changing the language of the contract papers of the land. Now my son has become a university graduate and looks after all the land documents. Now nobody can cheat us” (Respondent 6, 2017). Education has changed the socio-economic condition of the tribal community. Tribal youths spend more time with their non-tribal friends, and this allows them to learn about and engage in non-tribal cultural activities. Education has also helped to reduce alcoholism among younger members of the tribe. As one respondent says: “My daughter gets angry if I consume *haria*, wear dirty clothes and engage in unsocial activities. She is ashamed because her non-tribal friends speak frequently about how disputes among tribal people occur due to alcoholism” (Respondent 6, 2017). Many elderly tribal people are uneducated as a result of poverty. They used to stay at home and catch fish, crabs, and rats for consumption. When they started going out of the village, they realised the need to wear good clothes in public. They became aware of the notions of ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’, and learned that the latter could lead to discrimination. Educated tribal youths are also questioning the reasons behind land disputes and economic exploitation. They work for the government or migrate to cities in search of jobs. However, there is a tendency among them to adopt the dominant culture rather than revive the tribal culture.

Discussion

Tribal people have changed their physical appearance and lifestyle. The first generation of Munda people in Sundarban were very poor and too busy earning their livelihood

to clean their bodies or wash their clothes. They were discriminated against for their inferior social status, their physical appearance, and their poverty-stricken homes (where pigs were often reared). Untouchability was a common experience among the first generation of tribal people. Although access to education and a changing socio-economic and political environment have ameliorated this situation, social discrimination against the Munda people remains a challenge. Football has played an important role in encouraging interaction and bonding between the tribal and non-tribal communities. Non-tribal neighbours also drink Haria in tribal homes and work together in labour groups. While tribal people have accepted inter-caste marriages, their non-tribal neighbours do not accept them positively. Couples in inter-community marriages are persuaded to practise the rituals of the dominant community. However, educational achievements and engagement in government jobs have brought about a change in attitude towards the tribal people in the village. It is not uncommon for educated members of the tribe to engage in the social activities of the dominant Hindus.

Language plays a significant role in shaping the culture and collective identity of a community. However, the Munda people often avoid speaking in the tribal language in public to conceal their identity and prevent discrimination. In Sundarban, the language used by the tribal people is a combination of the Mundari and Bengali dialects. In such a bilingual situation, the mother language is often dominated by the second language, thereby provoking a loss or diffusion of identity, although Trudgill (1974) finds that a person or group may give up their language without losing their original identity.

Tribal culture cannot be isolated from the influence of the Bengali culture. Both Hinduism and Christianity exert a significant influence on the Munda village, but people have not changed their religion and traditional practices. The worship of Hindu gods and goddesses is not a choice, but a strategy to survive in a harsh geographical location. By adapting to the dominant culture and working with Hindus, the Mundas have expanded their means of livelihood. Cultural adjustment is also a strategy adopted by the Munda people to enhance their social status in the village. Srinivas (1966) describes this strategy as a process of Sanskritisation. In this process, the dominant ideology and culture are internalised through the acceptance and practice of its traditions and customs (Gaventa, 1980). Regarding upward mobility among tribal people, the findings differ from those of Gaventa (1980) and Fernandes (2005). The interviews of tribal people in the Sundarban islands show that they worship the dominant community's gods and goddesses to avoid social discrimination and livelihood risks, as a strategy of survival, and as a way of living with the dominant community in a foreign land—this is not merely a process of Sanskritisation, Hinduisation, or social transformation. Only a small number of tribal households follow Hindu rituals and practices; besides, worshipping Hindu gods and goddesses and practising Hindu customs do not transform tribal people into Hindus (Xaxa, 2005). There is no space for them in the Hindu caste hierarchy, as they cannot simultaneously maintain their tribal and Hindu identity, and they have never been fully accepted by the dominant Hindu community. It has traditionally followed the practice of spatial segregation in the Sundarban islands, as may be seen in its claim, and in its awareness, that tribal hamlets' geographical

location—near the riverbank, far from Bengali settlements—helps them to access river- and forest-based livelihoods.

It has been observed that the Munda people in the Sundarban are in a process of acculturation to integrate and assimilate with the larger community in the Sundarban to ensure livelihood. They accept the influence of the dominant community, but do not change their religious belief. The rejection of the Hindu cremation system by the Munda people symbolises the nature of acceptance and rejection in the process of acculturation. The process of acculturation depends on the willingness and necessity of adjustment of people (Berry, 1997). Tribal people are also in a process of Hinduisation (Xaxa, 2005), but to become Hindu. Young Munda women dressed up like Bengali women to avoid social discrimination at work and in public places. “I have to live in a society and need to follow local traditions” (A woman Respondent, 2017). The research agrees with Xaxa (2005) that educated Munda youths become highly conscious about their tribal identity. The changing nature of economic activities allowed the Munda people to integrate and assimilate with non-tribal people (XaXa, 1999).

The studies have claimed that the acculturation process and maintaining socio-cultural identities depend on the duration of stay at a new place (Tonsing, 2010; Segall et al., 1990; Ryder et al., 2000) and the connection with the people of the place of origin (Ward and Kennedy, 1993; Ryder et al., 2000; Wenjing, 2005; Jayaram, 2009). Munda people have been living in small hamlets across the Sundarban islands. They do not communicate much with the people of the Chotanagpur region. Therefore, it is not just the duration of stay, but the sense of tribal identity (Xaxa, 1999) and close bonding among the tribal people, which encourages them to integrate, assimilate, maintain and revitalise the Munda socio-cultural identity.

Table 2: Socio-economic and Cultural Adjustment with Bengali Neighbour

	Adjustments	Reason for adjustment
Language	Speaking local language and dialects	Low level of practice of the Mundari language at home No academic activities in the tribal language No use of the tribal language in government offices More engagement with non-tribal communities Tendency to hide tribal identity
Worship	Worship of Manasa, Tulasi, Banabibi, Shiva, and Hanuman	Fear of wild animals and snakes Attempt to secure livelihood Desire to live with Hindu neighbours Inter-caste marriages
Clothing	Wearing a saree, bindi, red and white conch bangles, and vermilion	Need to adjust to society Need to go to schools and offices and mingle with non-tribal neighbours Avoid discrimination Avoid the social stigma of ‘unclean’ Desire to look good

Food	Avoid pork and rat meat	Need to adjust to non-tribal neighbours Avoid quarrels among the neighbours Avoid discrimination
Drinking Haria	Reduced alcoholism Consumption during the festival	Children do not like the practice Children are ashamed within their friend circles Influence of education Economic consciousness
Livelihood activities	Reduced dependency on catching crab and fish	Government restrictions Unavailability of species Migration in search of jobs Engagement in farming Collective pisciculture
House	Building a good house	Avoid the social stigma of a poor and 'unclean' house Government housing scheme Improvement of economic condition

The socio-cultural adaptation of the Munda people also happened through a series of economic changes. Engagement in diversified economic activities has transformed their social status and ways of life. Economically stable tribal households now spend money on building concrete houses with the help of the Indira Awas Yojana (a central government housing scheme for the poor). The economic improvement of the tribal community has enabled them to live with greater respect in the village. The strategies of avoiding rearing pigs and consumption of Haria, avoid quarrels within tribal households and with non-tribal individuals; getting higher education; ambition to work in a government office; engagement in farming; maintaining economic stability; wearing good clothes (and 'be clean'); engagement in active political activities; making more friends and networking with non-tribal people and speaking the language of the dominant community symbolise the strength, strategies and challenges of acculturation of the tribal people (Table 2). These strategies allowed them to avoid social discrimination, marginalisation and stop economic exploitation and supported the process of acculturation.

Young tribal people show great interest in gaining an education and migrate for employment opportunities. Some lease land from big land-holding families for seasonal farming. This increased participation in agriculture has brought them closer to the non-tribal peasants in the village, but the diversification of economic activities has increased wealth-based social stratification, and economic development has influenced community structure and social interaction patterns. There are landless labourers, marginal farmers, and government employees; and differences in ideology, religious belief, political orientation, class, and way of life in tribal society, as in Indian society (Xaxa, 1999). Government developmental programmes have influenced the social, economic, political, and cultural life of the tribal people in the Sundarban region, changed the nature of income-generating activities, and reduced the social distance between communities, but traditional authority plays a less significant in the

tribal village today. People are psychologically united through emotional ties and the celebration of cultural ceremonies. Mallick (2011) points out that tribal people now engage more in agricultural activities even as they pursue their traditional means of livelihood. Social discrimination, economic exploitation, and educational disparities create fewer barriers in the reciprocal and symbiotic relationships between tribal and non-tribal communities.

Conclusion

One's socio-cultural identity is linked to the socio-cultural adaptation of a community. As the Munda people in the Sundarban islands are immigrants, they had to cope with adverse conditions before they could engage in primary economic activities. Their increasing involvement in agriculture has allowed them to socialise more freely with their non-tribal neighbours. By gaining financial stability and building good houses, they have succeeded in minimising social discrimination. In addition, they are now acutely conscious of the difference between the 'clean' and the 'unclean' and 'us' and 'them'. Greater access to higher education has changed their lives and daily activities. They follow non-tribal practices in public but exercise their tribal identity within private spaces. Tribal representation in social, economic, and political institutions helps them to voice tribal issues and concerns before a wider audience. The changing economic and political identity of the Munda people has influenced the attitudes of the dominant community towards them. The tribal community is now integrating into the larger social life of the Sundarban islands without losing its cultural identity. Moreover the growing politicisation of the village system is affecting tribal traditions. As the tribal people are few in number, they cannot bypass the changing socio-economic developments in the Sundarban islands. The question remains the same, how far can they adapt themselves to these changes without sacrificing their tribal socio-cultural identity?

Endnotes

1. Banabibi is the Goddess of tigers.
2. Manasa is the Goddess of snakes.
3. Sitala is the Goddess of small pox.
4. Kali is the Destroyer of evil forces.

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Jetor: An Unrecognized Interstitial Caste Community in West Bengal, India

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic research methodology, this article engages with the questions of identity, recognition, and major economic activities of the Jetor(s), a riverine, as yet unrecognized, partly-pastoral, in-marrying, ethnic group dwelling in forestine (Jangal Mahal) West Bengal, India. If the experiences of untouchability, regression, humiliation, discrimination, lack of rudimentary education, dispossession of land, entrapment in vicious cycle, etc., are the insignia for being a 'caste', the Jetors, who may be designated as a particularly vulnerable marginalized interstitial (between tribe and caste) group, more than pass for the denomination. After Independence, many communities were recategorized as DNT, PVTG, ST, SC, etc., and no less than seven censuses were conducted, but the Jetors have remained unaccounted. Abjectly deprived, minimally 'organized', and somewhat disinclined to the denomination 'Jetor/Jatord' on account of social stigma, they still live a socially in-between life. It is critical to draw the attention of the academia and the policymakers to the Jetors because 'visibility' sometimes helps in recognition and emancipation from caste atrocities.

Keywords

Caste-Tribe Interstitiality, Jetor Community, Identity, Violence, Recognition, Social Exclusion

Background

It is important to give voice to those who are subdued by the degradation imposed by those who are vocal. The unidentified community of the Jangal Mahal area named Jetor with which this article is engaged is such a small community whose 'presence'

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has been ignored in contemporary research. The Jetors have received little attention, though from time to time attempts have been made to shield the culture of some other indigenous communities in India. This is not surprising given the opinion of both Western and Indian anthropologists that Indian society is a “kind of hierarchical system in which individuals were ranked on the basis of their supposedly inherent biological characteristics” (Guha, 2023, p. 2). The warning was sounded by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (henceforth Dr. Ambedkar) long back. Referring to the existence of the criminal tribes, the aboriginal tribes, and the untouchables as an ‘abomination’ in Indian society, Dr. Ambedkar called the system “a diabolical contrivance” (1948, p. i). As an interstitial vulnerable ethnic group, Jetors are completely absent from any conversation. Just as on the Lodhas, so also on the Jetors “a negative stereotypical image” (Guha, 2016, p. 1) has been thrust upon. There is an acute lack of documentation of the Jetor community and their culture. The writer of this article has come to know via the Cultural Research Institute (CRI), Government of West Bengal, Kolkata that the CRI is apprised of the problems of the Jetors, owing to the letters of Dr. Nirmalendu De, and Professor Abhijit Guha, and the official process of identification of the Jetor community about to be started off. Preceding this research, the lone researcher to have worked in this field is Dr. Nirmalendu De (henceforth De), Headmaster (retired now) of Siromoni Birsa Munda High School. De worked for nearly eight years on the Jetors under the worthy supervision of late Professor Tushar Chattapadhyay of the University of Calcutta. In his book written in the Bengali language, De has focussed on the hybrid ethnic origin and endangered oral culture of the Jetors. The book contains a preface by Professor Probodh Kumar Bhowmick, an expert in the field of indigenous studies, and a letter by Mahasweta Devi, an eminent litterateur of Bengal. Keeping De’s contribution in mind, it may be said that explorations about the ethnic identity of the Jetors, their recognition, spatial-social exclusion, their interstitial position between tribe and caste leading to hyphenated condition of life, their condition of being caught in the interlocking structures of oppression, and most importantly their continuing deprivation with regard to the question of conferment of either caste or tribe status, etc., demand further engagement because the Jetors are even now ‘unrecognized’ and ‘undocumented’. This fact of slow violence inflicted upon them and other critical questions about their recognition as a community/group have sparked interest to carry forward the work of introducing the Jetors to the academia and the policy makers initiated by De.

Methodological Strategies

Both qualitative and ethnomethodology involving participant observation, intensive interviewing, participation in cultural events, data collection, etc., for understanding their ethnic origin, their marginalisation, semi-nomadic life, economic activities, their endogamous life, etc., have been pursued to frame the study. In the absence of any printed books on Jetor culture and literature, the present study relies mostly on field research while adhering to qualitative analysis by referring to relevant literature in the field of indigenous cultural and ethnographic studies. The researcher has faced some

procedural and ethical challenges during data collection from a community of people who are victims of centuries of indignity and humiliation. For example, some of them did not want their candid opinions about caste certificates and their deprivation to be recorded, even after being assured that there would be no breach of privacy. For some reason, the husband of a Jetor woman who is an expert in weaving *chanch* (coarse mattress made with dry reeds of thatch grass) strongly discarded the request made by the researcher for recording the *chanch*-weaving process. Another problem is that they are illiterate and cannot read questionnaires. The only recourse is to record (either audio or video) their one-to-one interviews, but sometimes they object to this also.

The Jetors: Setting and Source

Jetors comprise a distinct vulnerable ethnic group of the forestine terrain that was once part and parcel of the Jharkhandi region and culture which, according to Binoy Ghosh, has witnessed much impairment and restitution (1957, p. 334). The existence of the Jetors is ascribable to the material panorama of tension and fusion of disparate racial groups amidst the socio-political vicissitudes down the ages. The Jetors mostly live in the districts of Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur, on the border regions of Jharkhand, Bihar and Orissa located along the basin of Kangsabati and Subarnarekha. British rule in India was extended over multiple communities, each endowed with specific political, cultural and economic traits. They were a semi-nomadic ethnic community who, being driven from the south-west parts of India, settled in their current location. The Jetors are largely positioned at a vast social and psychological distance from the majority of caste Hindus owing to the influence of caste-race taboos in the stratified Indian society. In fact, they are doubly marginalized because other marginalized aboriginal peoples also 'avoid' their 'contact'.

Jetors have come into existence as a mixed group of people born out of unsanctioned sexual union among the outcasts of society (De, 2017, p. 17). In ancient times there lived in the south-western as well as middle parts of India many nomadic and semi-nomadic communities of people like Mahar, Kowra/Korowa/Kaur, Dom, Kalindi Dom, Dangi, Hari, Koibarto Jele, among others. They served the upper caste dominant classes. Following centuries of servitude, a section of these people belonging to lower caste and class came to be known as the 'untouchables' during the Rajput and Mughal rule. They were distanced, though their services were availed of, in dehumanizing and humiliating ways. Some of these people embraced Buddhism and at much later times, Christianity. Gradually, they scattered across different parts of India including the south-eastern parts comprising Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand, south-west Bengal, etc., owing to food scarcity, livelihood problems, and caste/class oppression. According to Fakir Chandra Mahar (Qtd in De, 2017, p. 17), a few of these 'untouchable' families came to a village, Jhanjia under Borosal police station in Baharagora located in the north-east parts of Orissa and in south-west Bengal. Apart from livelihood problems, the most excruciating problem they faced owing to caste taboos in the then society, is related to the question of marrying off their daughters. Pitted against such a problem,

they began to search for communities who are akin to them, and discovered the ‘Cowra’ people with whom they got mixed in course of time. Habituated to hardship and born out of immixture, the women of these communities were well-built and full of initiative. They served the upper caste people generationally for survival. Many upper caste people of rank and dominance were attracted to them. Vulnerable and at the receiving end as they were, some of these women fell victim to the sexual advances of upper caste/class men and carried the ‘seeds’ in their womb without knowing where to go and how to survive. They were uncertain about the parentage and identity of the babies to be born. According to five senior Jeter community persons, Sri Fakir Chandra Mahar of Fekoghat, Sri Harish Barik of Khalsiuli, Sri Jhareswar Mandol, Sri Amal Chandra Mandol of Nischintapur and Sri Motilal Maity of Amdoi, “a section of the Jeters are born out of illicit sexual union between the vulnerable indigenous women and the Jamindars as well as their managerial persons who did not take the responsibilities of the babies born. The prevalence of upper caste surnames in our society bears proof to a section of ours originating from the upper caste people” (De, 2017, p. 18). In addition, some upper caste men secretly ‘married’ the ‘lower-caste’ girls against the ‘laws’ and sanction of their society. Such men as ‘lived with’ the women below their caste were driven away from society along with their ‘wives’. Nowhere to go, the aforementioned pregnant women, and the socially ostracized upper caste men who stayed among their social inferiors got scattered along the banks of Subarnarekha, Kangsabati, and Dulung River. The popular saying in their localities – ‘Jar nai jatkul/ Se jay Kansai kul’ meaning ‘those who neither have caste nor lineage, go to the bank of Kansabati’ – is suggestive of their apprehensions regarding caste. Thus, many children were born out of inter-caste marriage and unsanctioned sexual union. In Indian society (as in most societies across the world), the father’s surname/family name become the surname of the children, and thus one comes across in Jeter society many people with ‘Brahmin’ surnames [such as ‘Pahari’ ‘Mishra’, ‘Rathbatul’ (‘Rath’ being the surname of the Brahmin father and Batul that of the lower caste mother)], some ‘Mahishya’ surnames (such as ‘Maity’, ‘Giri’), some ‘Sodgop’ surnames (such as ‘Ghosh’), some ‘Bhumij’ surnames (such as ‘Sing’, ‘Batul’) along with their traditional pre-modern surnames such as ‘Mahar’, ‘Ghorai’, ‘Sing’, etc. The prevalence of the surname ‘Sing’ is a clear indication that some Jeters were born out of sexual union of Adivasi (especially Munda and Bhumij) men with the surname ‘Sing’ and low-caste women. However, in the eyes of mainstream society this mixed people were ‘excluded from’ caste and hence the term ‘Jeter/Jatord’, literally meaning ‘excluded from caste’, designate a community of people who are presumably born out of unsanctioned sexual union. De (2017) refers the name of an eminent scholar Dr. Khudiram Das (henceforth Das) who has said that the word ‘Jeter’ comprises two components—the Bengali word ‘Jat’ meaning ‘caste’ and the Santali word ‘ord’ meaning ‘punished’. Taken together they mean ‘communities punished/excluded from caste’. Das has also said that the second etymological component of the word ‘tord’ is ‘water current’. Thus, on the basis of this latter etymological meaning, and also on

the basis of a popular myth of their origination from water, one meaning of the word 'Jator/Jatord' is caste people who are 'borne by water current'.

Identity Turmoil

If the experiences of untouchability, spatial exclusion, regression, humiliation, discrimination, lack of rudimentary education, dispossession of land, violation of human rights, etc., are the markers for being a 'caste community', the 'unevenly accepted' community named Jetor, who may be designated as a particularly vulnerable, hyphenated, interstitial (between tribe and caste) group, more than qualifies for the denomination. The trajectory of the 'historic achievements' of Shudras and Ati-Shudra caste movements in the colonial period, and the curve of the growth of democracy in India after Independence, that has led to the mobilization and emancipation of many marginalized groups in modern Indian society, has barely touched the Jetors. They remain as a historically disadvantaged segment despite the "historical lead" of the Dalits towards liberal democracy (Guru, 2004, p. 31). Notwithstanding the movements of E. V. Ramasamy for a section of the Dravids (Kazhagam), Narayana Guru for the Ezhava community, the Satnami movement for the Chamaras (Aiyappan, 1943, p. 390; Samuel, 1973), Mulayam Singh Yadav for the Yadavs, Kanshi Ram for the 'Bahujans' and so on, the Jetors, who are incapable of articulating their 'voice', remain 'invisible' and 'neglected'. This is reminiscent of Dr. Ambedkar's apprehensions about whether the equality and dignity promised in the Constitution would be extended "to all", and whether the "social climate would enable such a non-discriminatory situation to actually emerge" (Channa & Mencher, 2013). The condition of the Jetors is a pointer that Dr. Ambedkar's "apprehensions" were justified. Like the erstwhile Criminal Tribes (CT), the Jetors continue to be 'branded' as 'pilferers', and as people whose contact is 'polluting'. Completely devoid of land-rights (Jetors do not have even a small piece of land of their own, and they live on unclaimed, vest lands located on the side of water bodies) and legal protection against eviction, they live in the marginalized spaces which were once the ground reserved for dumping the carcass of domestic animals of the zamindars. In India rules of purity and pollution are not only socio-cultural and political, but also 'spatial'. This spatial exclusion is fatal to Indian society because during the colonial regime the "segmented territories" played a critical role in dividing Indian society into "the touchables" and "the untouchables" (Cháirez, 2014, pp. 37–50) much to the detriment of nationalism and continuance of the practice of untouchability. It is in the socio-spatial contexts that "disadvantages of caste-discrimination are internalized" in the structures of power (Patel, 2022, pp. 186–198). Though the majority of the Jetors are now spatially 'settled down' in unclaimed fallow lands away from the nerve-centre of the villages, semi-nomadic tendencies are still prevalent among them. For example, they set out for distant places in search of work, and settle down at the new place leaving the previous hut, if the work facility is better at the new place. To date, many Jetor young men settle in their in-law's house leaving their paternal home. However, after Independence, they could

not make their voices heard to obtain the status of either 'tribe' or 'caste' or PVTG or any status whatsoever. One ironic continuity between the colonial and postcolonial policy framing is that both the governments were reluctant to confer any 'status' upon a community not "organized". For example, the British government declared (in 1871, 1876, 1911 in North India, Bengal Presidency and Madras Presidency respectively) such communities as 'criminal' as were "highly organized" and "trained in crime". Moreover, that the process of inclusion of a community under CT Act was erratic is proved by the fact that the Lodhas were not included under the CT category in 1876. They were brought under its purview only in 1911, probably by the empowered local administration (Guha, 2016, p. 75). This proves that there were chances of a community being left out. In all probability, the Jetors were one such missed out in-between community. Post Independence, 153 communities were recategorized as DNT and no less than seven censuses (1951, 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001, 2011) have been conducted, but the Jetors have remained unaccounted. Needless to say, they are still deprived of the 'status' they 'deserve', and live a terrible kind of life socially away from both the upper caste Hindu people, and the tribal communities who do not establish any marital relationship with them. Usually, it is found that spatially they are adjacent to the Adivasi (aboriginal) localities, but they are farthest from the dominant castes in terms of space and cultural reciprocity. Consignment of the Jetors to a 'rung' below that of the 'ati-shudras' (also called 'avarnas') in the social ladder, is indicated by the fact that in olden times the former were considered 'too low-born' to be allowed to enter the precincts for household jobs, while the latter could serve the dominant Hindu society by doing menial jobs. What the upper caste Hindu people loathed most about the Jetors is their old habit of eating meat of 'dead' goat, ram, hen, etc. In olden times they could hardly afford to purchase meat and if they came across any 'eatable' dead domestic animals they would eat that forgetting if that was edible or not. What mattered most to them is the taste of the food, and they were little concerned about the safety of food. The Jetors live in small tottering huts (Table 1) 'outside' the nerve-centre of the caste Hindu. They are the dregs of what the scholars of Dalit studies variously call the 'ati-Shudras' who, as an "invention" in Indian society, have come into existence out of the intermingling of the Aryans and the aborigines of post-Harappa civilization (Brough, 1959, pp. 69–85; Lincon, 1981; Kosambi, 1956, pp. 94–95). The formations of the 'ati-Shudras' caste may be traced to the evolutions of clans, *Gotras* (a Sanskrit word broadly meaning 'clan', and referring to people belonging to a line of descendants), and the observance of the principles of endogamy and exogamy. According to Anastasia Piliavsky, they are not a "colonial making", and drawing on pre-colonial descriptions of robber castes (in ancient legal texts, folktales, Jain, Buddhists and Brahminic narratives, Mughal sources, Early Modern travel accounts) she has argued that the idea of castes of congenital robbers was a label that predates the colonial rule and has indigenous roots (2015, pp. 323–354). Dr. Ambedkar has said whether the caste people were Aryans, or aboriginal inhabitants of India, or tribes produced by the union of the Aryans with the other, is of little consequence. At an

early period they were placed in a class by themselves, and received the “fourth” rank and were at a considerable distance from the three superior classes/castes (2020, p. 3).

Table 1: Status of Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), a housing project of the Government of India, in select Jetor villages in the District of Paschim Medinipur

Name of the Village	Total Jetor Families	Total Jetor Population	Total Jetor Families Availing IAY	Percentage of Families Availing IAY
Bhatpara	170	750	90	52.94
Budra	44	135	7	15.91
Desonda	82	303	25	30.49
Banstala	76	240	10	13.16
Sarpal	47	191	15	31.91
Wallipur	25	60	9	36.00

Source: Author’s computations based on field survey

Referring to the prefix ‘ati’ (meaning ‘extra’) in the term ‘ati-Shudra’ used by Mahatma Jotiba Phule and Dr. Ambedkar among others, it may be said that the Jetors comprise a particularly vulnerable, interstitial, hyphenated group who share the characteristics of both the tribals and the untouchables, and who are not required (hence ‘extra’) in a seemingly complete essentialized structure in society. They are not accommodated in the framework of the pan-Indian movement for the Dalits, a caste/class-category¹ that has emerged as an essentialized group assured of no further inclusion of competing marginalized groups in the category they belong to, unless there is a major amendment of the Indian Constitution. The claim of the Dalit political discourse that it has produced a concrete alternative to the mainstream nationalist formulations seems to be ironical when one thinks of the hyphenated community like the Jetors who have ‘failed’ to prove their numerical strength. The question regarding who would be treated as ‘tribe’ or ‘caste’ or ‘PVTG’, etc., is largely determined by such ‘qualifications’ as being large in number, well organized, led by a person of relative political power, ‘presence’ in the electoral roll, etc., but the Jetors, who have ‘failed’ to fulfil all these criteria, are ‘outside’, ‘excluded’, and are ‘hyphenated’ till the present times. Sometimes a hyphen is inserted between the root word and the prefix, and the hyphen is sometimes used, and sometimes done away with because a blank space may serve the purpose of the hyphen. What the hyphen is to a compound word, the Jetors are to Indian society. Their primitive habit of collecting daily essentials from jungle and river, their geographic isolation, low literacy, declining population, their umbilical connection with river and forest, their deep understanding of the ecology of the region, etc., align them with the tribals, while their marginalization and humiliation on the basis of their ‘low birth’ and ‘low caste’ align them with the untouchables. Hence, they

¹S. Kumar et al in their article “Determinants of Social Mobility in India” (published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(29), 2983-2987) have established a direct correlation between caste and class.

may be designated a hyphenated vulnerable community belonging to the interstitial space. There is little doubt that they are more vulnerable and marginalized than either the Dalits or the tribals. This is evident from the locations they have been forced to live in, which are on the edges of either rivers or water-bodies or jungles. This reminds us of Dr. Ambedkar's use of the term *Antyaja* for the untouchables. They are the true *Antyaja* in the sense of how Dr. Ambedkar used it. They still live on the edges of the villages situated on the banks of the river Subarnarekha and Kangsabati or beside a canal or a water body. Lost in the vortex of identity politics, loathed by the upper caste people, avoided by the scheduled tribes (ST), and excluded by the Dalit activists from the purview of the movement for social justice, the Jetors, who have been living incognito, are not only critically endangered, but also 'outside' the framework of the Dalit movement, which, leaving its less fortunate and hitherto unrecognized fraternity, is quick to include the tribal people in its fold with a view to expanding its limits. For example, Stephen Christopher has argued in favour of including the Gaddi tribe of Himachal Pradesh in the 'Dalit' category (2020, p. 7). Sharankumar Limbale also has argued in favour of including the denotified tribes in the Dalit fold (Acharya and Roy, 2024, p. 1). They even remain sidelined in the recent political programs undertaken by the government. For example, the government of West Bengal has introduced a politico-social programme, 'Duare Sarkar' (government at the doorway), but unfortunately many of their problems (especially their appeal for identity status) remain unresolved in successive 'Duare Sarkar' sessions.

Problem of Surname

Pitted against abject poverty, humiliation, social stigmatization, and exclusion on the basis of caste and lowbirth, many Jetors are languishing on account of their 'General Caste surnames'. The most common surnames in their society are 'Maity', 'Mahar', 'Ghorai', 'Pahari', 'Batul', 'Mandol', 'Giri', etc., and other surnames are 'Misra', 'Sing', 'Rana', 'Rathbatul', 'Pakhira', 'Patar', 'Bhunia', 'Barik', 'Kapat', 'Paloi', etc. Among the surnames mentioned above there include 'Brahmin' surnames, 'Mahishya' surnames, 'Sodgop' surnames, 'Bhumij' surnames and more. With the Mundas and Bhumij people they share the surname 'Sing' and with the Brahmins 'Pahari' and 'Mishra'. Numerous Jetor carry the Brahmin surname 'Pahari', though they have neither similarity nor social relationship with the Brahmins. In terms of social hierarchy they are farthest from the Brahmins. The debated question as to how they obtained the Brahmin surname demands further anthropological research, but from what De and senior Jetors have hinted at are suggestive of unsanctioned sexual relation and reproduction between people of different ethnic groups. The presence of the Mahishya surname 'Maity' is also ascribable to the same ethnic immixture. It is because of their upper caste surnames that they are facing problems regarding the conferment of identity status that they most deserve and want. If they are asked as to what they want most, they will invariably say 'Jati Certificate' (caste certificate). Even the elderly have not been able to explain how such surnames as are most unbecoming

of and incompatible with their birth status and social standing came to be there. Many of the physiognomic and morphological attributes of the Jetors bear the imprints of intermixing. The exact physical identity of the Jetors still awaits research. Usually, it is held that the physical features and morphological structure of the Jetors bear physical resemblance to the common Bengali people as well as the aborigines of the adjoining areas. One will come across some Jetor people who are dark brown in skin colour while some are fair. The Jetors are wedged inbetween the 'opposites'—the 'people belonging to caste category' and the people of the 'general category'. In the eyes of the upper caste as well as the aboriginal people, the Jetors are 'excluded from caste' and are 'different'. Both sections consider the Jetors to be 'lower' in terms of caste and birth. They are thought to have been suffering on account of their 'Karma', a scriptural notion in India. Barring a few exceptions only in recent times, it is not possible to identify a single upper caste family, and a single 'Adivasi' family willingly entering into marital relationship with the Jetors. To date, it is an accepted fact that a young man belonging to the family of the 'Mahar' or 'Maity' or 'Pahari' or 'Ghorai' or 'Mandol' or 'Batul' will marry a girl hailing from another Jetor family identified by the senior members of their community. In fact, the denomination 'Jetur' which the Jetor people accept only half-heartedly (the young generation in Jetor community do not like the denomination at all because it smacks of social stigma) was invented either by the elderly members of the Jetor community or by the so called 'upper caste' people who considered them to be their social 'inferiors'. Thus, it is a matter of regret that while the nation prepares to celebrate the seventy-eighth year of independence, a community that has suffered centuries of neglect and humiliation, remains 'undocumented' and 'unidentified' by the government. Despite repeated attempts to apply for recognition, government officials ask them to provide 'chain deeds' in support of their claim. Some are also asked to explain their surnames while others say that they belong to General Caste. Thus, the Jetors are caught in a kind of hyphenated state. The General Caste people do not consider the Jetors to belong to their category and maintain a great social distance from the Jetors whom they consider to be of 'low birth'. The aboriginal peoples, who have been endowed ST status since the Indian constitution came into force, too consider the Jetors to be 'different'. Thus, the Jetor people suffer a kind of liminal condition. Pitted against the fact that neither the caste Hindus nor the people belonging to traditional faiths 'accept' them whole-heartedly, some Jetors have begun to attend Christian prayers in recent times (for example, in Bhatpara village of Paschim Medinipur). Elderly persons of their community opine that in future they may cease to exist as a distinct community, and their ethnic name may be erased altogether. Dispossession of land is a crucial problem in their society. After a discussion with the local Panchayats, it emerged that Jetors do not have any valid land deed where they have built their huts, and the condition of their huts and precincts beggar description. Most of the walls are either *Chhitabera* or polythene draped. Rooftops are perforated. A majority of them have not been able to avail themselves of Indira Awas Yojana. Thus, with their identity under threat, they are the most vulnerable of the ethnic communities of Jangal Mahal. Theirs is a pre-colonial, semi-nomadic indigenous life

based on cattle-grazing and cattle-raising, collecting food from the river and jungle (Table 4), collecting, and selling grass, etc. They have close attachment to ancestral territories—their imagined or real ‘homeland’ left behind forever. Jetors still try to cling to their ancestral practice of worship of gods and goddesses not by any Brahmin hired from outside, but by their own priest. The ancestors of the Jetors were ‘Bajondars’ (drummers and players of air instruments) and broom makers, and to date many Jetors still cling to these two professions.

Demographic Features

Table 2: Salient demographic features in the district of Paschim Medinipur

Name of the Jeter locality	If people other than the Jeters live in the locality	Urban/ Semi-urban/ Rural	Name of the water body near which they live	Total number of Jeter families	Jeter Surnames	Total Jeter population in the locality	Population per family
	(yes/no)					(tentative)	
Amda, P.S. – Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha	35	Pahari, Mandol, Mahar, Ghorai,	83	2.371429
Banstala (Gomuriapal), P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	76	Pahari, Mahar, Giri, Maity, Mandol, Ghorai, Sing, Pakhira	240	3.157895
Barbetia, (School Math) P.S. – Kharagpur	Yes	Urban	The Canal	20	Ghorai, Mahar, Maity, Pahari	80	4
Bhatpara, P.S. -Gurguripal	No	Rural	Kangsabati river	170	Ghorai, Maity, Pahari, Pakhira, Mandol, Kapat	750	4.411765
Bhasra, P.S. - Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha river	13	Maity , Mahar	43	3.307692
Bidhannagar, P.S.- Kharagpur	Yes	Urban	No such water body	3	Mahar	12	4
Budra, P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	44	Pahari, Mahar, Giri, Maity, Mandol, Ghorai	135	3.068182
Canal Pard (Panachhatra), P.S. - Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	The Canal	20	Ghorai, Mandol, Giri, Bhunia, Rana, Sing	95	4.75
Desonda, P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Semi-Urban	Kangsabati river	82	Ghorai, Batul, Mahar, Mandol, Maity	303	3.695122
DeuliMadhyo, P.S. – Belda	Yes	Semi-urban	Marshy land	14	Mahar, Sing, Ghorai	52	3.714286
Dherua, P.S.- Gurguripal	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	24	Maity, Mahar, Ghorai	101	4.208333
Dokhondiha P.S.- Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha	7	(Rath)Batul, Ghorai, Mahar	19	2.714286

Gangadharchak (Panachhatra), P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	The Canal and marshy land	4	Mandol, Maity, Sing	18	4.5
Goaldanga, P.S. – Gurguripal	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	65	Maity, Ghorai	260	4
Giripara (Gomuriapal), P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	22	Mandol, Mahar, Giri, Maity, Ghorai, Pakhira	85	3.863636
Gonsorisha P.S.- Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha	18	Pahari, Mahar	84	4.666667
Kalamatia P.S.- Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha	55	Mahar, Ghorai	240	4.363636
Kandramari P.S.- Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha	55	Mukhi, Mahar, Batul, Patar	242	4.4
Karanji Mura P.S.- Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha	29	Mahar, Batul, Ghorai	97	3.344828
Khaspara (Pannachhatra) P.S. - Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	The Canal	9	Maity, Barik, Sing, Kuilya, Mahar	50	5.555556
Mandalpara (Gomuriapal), P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	17	Mandol, Maity, Ghorai	54	3.176471
Nepura, P.S. – Gurguripal	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	2	Maity	8	4
Palasia P.S.- Keshiary	Yes	Rural	Subarnarekha	7	Batul, Mahar	35	5
Ranapatna (Sirshi), P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	The natural ditch	15	Mahar, Ghorai, Patar	60	4
Rupnarayanpur (Desonda), P.S.- Kharagpur Local	Yes	Semi-urban	Kangsabati river	58	Ghorai, Mahar	220	3.793103
Sarpal, (Gomuriapal), P.S. – Kharagpur Local	Yes	Rural	Kangsabati river	47	Pahari, Mahar, Giri, Maity, Mandol, Ghorai, Sing, Pakhira	191	4.06383
Walipur, P.S.- Kharagpur	Yes	Rural	Mora Kansai (One stagnant branch of Kangsabati river)	25	Mandol, Batul, Sing, Ghorai, Pakhira	60	2.4
Total population= 3617							
# Male female ratio = 91:100 (obtained from field survey data).							

Source: Author's computation based on field survey

All the settlements (Table 2) are located either on the riverbank or near a canal or water body. Women are very active in Jetor society, more so than the men in the observance of religious ceremonies, daily life and decision making. Numerous Jetor man are addicted to alcohol, and die early. As a result, middle-aged widowed women in their forties are found in great numbers. They are able-bodied, working women who do not remarry and remain separately in the same household as shared by their son's family. In Jetor society boys and girls marry early in life and immediately after marriage cook separately. One will come across very few families where the parents and their married children remain in a joint family. Another practice is of *ghor-jami* (in standard Bangla the word *ghor-jamai* denotes 'son-in-law staying in his wife's parental home'). After marriage the son-in-law thinks it wise to stay at the in-law's

house permanently. One remarkable demographic feature of their society is that the number of females is slightly greater than the number of male (Table 3). Sustained and full-fledged census work is required to state anything decisively regarding the male-female ratio in their society, but the initial field research and the data of a sample locality given below bears out the above statement.

Table 3: Number of male and female in the sample Jetor locality named Sarpal

Total Number of Families (in Sarpal)	Total Population in the Locality	Male	Female
47	191	91	100

Source: Author’s computation based on field survey

Jetors welcome the birth of girls as much as they welcome the birth of boys because in their society women can do all sorts of work including cultivation work in the field and managing the household. The presence of impaired or differently-abled children in their society is alarming. Poor health and hygienic conditions and poor standard of nutrition are the chief reasons behind the birth of babies with congenital problems. Parents prefer three to four children on an average, as they are unsure about how many would survive. Income levels in their society are very poor and far below the normal standard in Indian society. Women earn more than men in such families where the male members are alcoholic. Most of the time the alcoholic male remains ill or indisposed, and the woman is aware that her family will starve if she does not remain at the helm. One will find innumerable girls between the age group of 13-17 married before they have attained the official age of marriage. Teen pregnancies exist, with many girls giving birth at the age of fifteen or sixteen. In some cases it is difficult to differentiate the mother-in-law (who was offered in marriage at a very early age) from the daughter-in-law (who got married at a later age). When asked about their origin most people say that their parents migrated from the ‘West’ (‘Paschim’). The data in the following table bears proof to their origination from the south-west parts of India.

Table 4:Ancestral places of migration

Name of the Ancestral Place	District	State	Location
Baripada	Mayurbhanj	Orissa	South-Western
Nilgiri ¹⁰	Baleshwar	Orissa	South-Western
Rohini	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Dhobasol	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Fekoghat	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Chinchira	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Sankrile	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Kultikri	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Beliabera	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western

Gopiballabpur	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Jamboni	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Lalgarh	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Sardiha	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Khas Jangal	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Manikpara	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Khalsiuli	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Rautrapur	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Chubka	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Dumuria	Jhargram	West Bengal	Western
Baharagora	East Singbhum	Jharkhand (formerly Bihar)	Western
Parulia	East Singbhum	Jharkhand (formerly Bihar)	Western
Jagannathpur	West Singbhum	Jharkhand (formerly Bihar)	Western
Kumardhubi	Dhanbad	Jharkhand (formerly Bihar)	Western
Barasol	East Singbhum	Jharkhand (formerly Bihar)	Western
Bena Kuri	Pakur	Jharkhand (formerly Bihar)	Western
Domjuri	East Singbhum	Jharkhand (formerly Bihar)	Western

Source: Author's field survey

The table as well as personal interviews (at the time of field visit) with senior persons of the Jetor community reveal that their ethnic origin is south-west India, and a section of them are most probably the progenitors of the 'Mahars' who, having suffered centuries of neglect and humiliation, adopted the path of *Satyagraha* at Jawhar Lake. De also is of the same opinion in his book mentioned in this article. The widespread Jetor surname 'Mahar' is particularly indicative of migration of a section of theirs in the distant past from the state of Maharashtra where the 'Mahar'(s) are found in great numbers. Educationally, they are backward, with 9 out of 10 people in their society illiterate. It is challenging to find a graduate in a Jetor village, and if one or two are found, they languish in jobless conditions. It is for the mid-day meal that many Jetor children are sent to school nowadays. The dropout rate of the Jetor school-going children at the primary level is on the wane, but very few qualify to the Madhyamik level. The presence of customary socio-legal institutions and practices in Jetor community bear proof to their indigeneity. For example, to date they have a 'Mukhya' or 'Mukhia', an elderly person well versed in community laws and customs. There are specific laws to be implemented if a member violates the codes and customs commonly practised. Such a practice is the practice of marriage. Marriage law is very stringent. Usually the Jetors marry within their community, and an outsider has to go through the traditional process of *jatetola* (a ritual in which the newcomer has to eat a piece of cooked rice lifted from the rice dish/leaf of each of the invited members of their community, while they are eating), if he or she is to be accepted as a caste member.

Earnings and Sustenance

Making brooms from the leaves and branches (*Khejurpali*) of date palm and selling them in the local market is their ancestral profession and main source of income. Both men and women specialize in this work because they have been doing it generationally. Women are as skilled as men in this work, and travel to distant places with family and community members to collect date palm leaves. The Jetors are experts on how to collect branches without damaging the growth of the trees. The entire process takes place without the use of any material that may cause an environmental hazard. At present, some use plastic rope to tie the brooms—a practice not compatible with their work ethic. Jetors depend on the forest and river produce to a great extent and it is an ancient practice they still cling to. Women, like men, go out for *namal*, a culture-specific word meaning ‘going to distant places during cultivation season for earning wages by rendering manual labour in the fields of persons who have land’. This mass exodus from the Jetor villages will be apparent if one happens to visit their localities in the cultivation season. The villages look deserted at that time. The places they travel to under the leadership of middle-men or labour-contractors, are Egra, Pataspur, Balighai, Satmile, Bajkul, Paniparul, Ramnagar, Digha, etc. Sometimes women receive fewer amounts as wages than their male counterparts despite rendering equal amounts of work. In most instances this happens because of the interference of ‘middle men’. They also work in local farmer’s house and earn some amount of money. In olden times they would receive rice and other daily essentials instead of money from their employer as wages for rendering manual labour or for tending cattle. As a Bajondar community (drummers) they earn by playing the Dhol, Chercheri, Kurfa, Side Drum, Sanai (clarinet), various types of flute and other musical instruments at religious and social festivals. This profession gives them the scope to come in contact with the upper caste people. It is noticeable that many Jetors have formed musical bands and *Horinam Sankirtan* groups. These groups are invited by the government as well as private organizers of social functions for performances. Many Jetor men (especially in Galdanga and Dherua) cross-dress as *Sokhi*-artists and professionally perform Chou-dance. Still now several Jetor women earn their livelihood by doing midwifery jobs—another work they have done generationally. Jetor women used to do midwifery work at a time when nurses and hospital facilities were scarce. Since the Jetors live by the riverside, they rely a lot for livelihood on the Kashicotton (obtained from thatch grass) and Kashis stems (reeds of thatch grass), with which *chanch* (a kind of mat) is made. The reeds are woven into a *chanch*, which is sold either in the local market or at door steps for a meagre amount. With Kashi cotton they make pillows and thread. Jetors used to tend the cattle of those who were well-off in the village. Now they raise cows, goats, hens, etc., on their own. Only a few of the Jetors work in low-paying, small sand-mining, sponge-iron, metal industries located in the Kharagpur industrial belt. They are also engaged in activities like street vending, recycling, small-scale manufacturing, etc.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is evident that the Jetors are victims of multiple forms of human rights violation and are caught at the intersection of an oppressive network of institutions. They are hardly emancipated at the level of the psyche from the feudal oppression of upper caste Hindu society. The indignities their ancestors suffered historically have induced in them a fear psychosis and inferiority complex from which they have hardly freed themselves even today. Though caste atrocity is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden legally, it is still present in Indian society as a subterranean flow (Rao, 1966, p. 298). The issue of untouchability formed a nexus in colonial times with the question of ‘crime as profession’ and their stigmatization as ‘criminal at birth’. This factor along with other humiliating factors existing in the stratified Indian society for long pushed a section of the caste people toward a ‘limbo state’. There neither exists any document to prove that the Jetors belonged to the Criminal Tribes (CT) nor any mention of their clan name in a list of Denotified Tribes (DNT) published by the Government of India, but private interviews with the senior Jetor people as well as with aged persons of the villages adjoining the Jetor villages reveal the fact that in the past they were forced to resort to crimes, especially pilferage during hard times for survival. Another besetting problem is ‘land’. As mentioned earlier, the land department harasses them by asking them to submit ‘chain deeds of land’ if they want to procure a caste certificate. This sordid fact is not only a sheer mockery of the agrarian reforms, but also a pointer to the relation between land-dispossession and caste system. Indeed, they are critically dispossessed of land rights—a phenomenon that, according to Dr. Ambedkar, forms the “material basis” of untouchability and determines “social status” (Guha, 2023, p. 7). Jetors had settled in very small pieces of vest lands on which they did not have any claim and from which they could not earn livelihood. The landed people sometimes question their land rights, and threaten to evict them. This has resulted in their forced relocation to different places. They are also exploited in the neighbouring industrial parks which have the potency to help those who are dispossessed of land (Kumar, 2020, pp. 37-56). Because of their lack of education and technical learning, they are offered no substantive jobs in the factories of TATA Metaliks Pvt. Ltd., Rashmi and Co. and other industries. Since the Jetors are settled on the banks of Kangsabati and Subarnarekha, two major illegal sand-mining fields, they are availed of as labourers, a fact that involves them in police harassment, though they do not belong to the structures responsible for illegal sand-mining.

Thus, caught in a vicious cycle and unable to articulate themselves, the Jetors comprise a highly vulnerable community whose identity, language, culture, etc., are in jeopardy. Their complaint to the survey team is, “Nobody looks at us.” This is not a casual comment, but is suggestive of centuries of neglect and humiliation that has

left an indelible mark on their psyche, and has rendered them 'excluded' in the eyes of administration. Their other complaint is about 'folk artist's allowance' and 'old age allowance', of which many are deprived. The government of West Bengal has extended *silpibhata* (allowance for the artists) to some of them, but many folk artists [drummers like Dhaki, Dhuli, Checheri players, side-drum players, big-drum players, Sri Khol players; Sinai (clarinet) player, Kirtonias, flute players, percussion instrument players, folk singers, Sokhi-artists, performers participating in folk *Palagan* and others] still remain deprived. Jetors struggle with housing, with many having failed to avail themselves of the housing schemes of the government of India. Addiction and cheap wine consumption is eating into their vitals. The Jetor youth is getting deranged because of this habit of drinking cheap wine. Not a single Jetor family has availed of any health scheme facility offered by the government of India, though they are the most vulnerable to diseases. There are some Jetor families in which the members eat once a day on account of poverty. This happens during the dull seasons when they earn nothing and cannot beg. It is high time we 'speak' for the Jetors and take initiatives for their documentation as a community. The government may take such steps as would enable the Jetors to involve themselves in training and other reciprocal activities. Revitalization and preservation is required to resist their erasure. They deserve special attention with regard to the facilities to be extended from the government. If the caste reservation facility or PVTG status is to be extended through policy decision to any community in India, it should be the interstitial and hyphenated Jetor people, a community rendered 'faceless'.

Disclaimer

A different version of this article has been accepted in another journal of repute for publication.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

There are no such potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. Though there is involvement of many Jetor people who have kindly talked and given access to their precincts, the article reveals no personal information and does not compromise on the question of research ethics.

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The Policy Paradox: Persistent Manual Scavenging Despite Reform Efforts

Anurag Kumar¹

Abstract

Manual scavenging remains a persistent issue in India despite the state claiming zero instances of the practice in recent years. This degrading occupation, deeply entrenched in the caste system, is driven by societal segregation and caste-based discrimination, affecting marginalised communities, particularly Dalits. The article analyses legislative frameworks and the key schemes launched in the past two decades, including the Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS), Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA), and the National Action Plan for Mechanized Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE). The content analysis method is used to examine the various laws, schemes, and policies enacted to eradicate manual scavenging. The analysis reveals policy gaps, including lack of enforcement, inadequate financial support, lack of political will, and failure to dismantle caste-based discrimination. The article emphasises the need for a holistic approach to end manual scavenging, emphasising that effective reform requires policy promises and actionable, systemic change. By understanding these intersecting problems, the article aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on policy revision and social equity.

Keywords

Policy, Manual Scavenging, Dalits, Caste System, Social Equity

Introduction

In the heart of modern India, a country that takes pride in rapid technological and economic progress, lies a contradiction. Despite projecting itself as a thriving ‘Vishv Guru’ (global leader, global power), India continues to be marred by dehumanising practices, especially the persistence of manual scavenging, which starkly contradicts

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its developmental narrative. The country's rise presents a troubling paradox: the nation achieving new heights in technological fields such as artificial intelligence, space exploration, and digital infrastructure, while workers continue to lose their lives while cleaning sewers. At the time of writing this article, more than 43 manual scavengers have died from February 2024 to July 2024, and more than 339 deaths have been reported between 2018 and 2023—figures likely underreported due to deliberate state¹ suppression of data (Telegraph, 2024; Staff, 2023).

After 77 years of independence, the persistence of manual scavenging—where workers are forced to clean human excreta from dry latrines or enter toxic sewers despite the ban, and work without protective gear—stands in stark contrast to constitutional ideals of equality, dignity, and justice. This occupation remains deeply embedded in the Indian caste system, with 95 per cent of scavengers being from Dalit communities, and among them, 99 per cent are Dalit women (Permutt, 2012). Over thirty years have passed since the enactment of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act of 1993, followed by the more comprehensive Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act of 2013 (PEMSR). Yet, the practice persists, exposing workers not only to life-threatening conditions but also to a denial of their dignity. The state's apathy is further evident in its acknowledgement of the magnitude of the issue, as evidenced by the denial of any recent deaths and the exclusion of discussion on manual scavengers in Budget 2024, reflecting a lack of political commitment to addressing this ongoing crisis (Wire, 2024).

This paradox becomes even more glaring in light of the coexistence of policy interventions aimed at eradicating this practice. Despite the legal and policy intervention introduced, via the Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS), Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA), and the National Action Plan for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) the ground reality remains grim as over 1.2 million people are engaged in manual scavenging and more than 5 million Safai *karamchari* (sanitation workers) come in direct/ indirect of human excreta (Shankar & Swaroop, 2021, p. 68). With around 26 lakh dry latrines still requiring manual scavenging, despite the SBA's assertion of toilet constructions (Paul, 2025). Furthermore, Wilson claims that state agencies conceal or underreport these figures to avoid accountability (Staff, 2023).

Despite the implementation of various legal and policy frameworks aimed at eradicating manual scavenging, incidents continue to happen every day. This article will explore the policy paradox of why manual scavenging remains a reality in modern India despite these measures. It critically examines the key state interventions—Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS), Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA), and the National Action Plan for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE). While some policies have been introduced with enthusiasm,

¹Article 12 of the constitution of India defines the state, which includes the government and parliament of India, the government and the legislature of each of the states, and all local or other authorities within the territory of India or under the control of the government of India.

they have failed to achieve their objectives. Inaccuracies in data on manual scavengers remain a contentious issue, with activists and civil society organisations criticising the state for hiding accurate information. Addressing these data discrepancies is vital, as policy-making depends on accurate data. The article also highlights the issue of the state manipulating, hiding, and suppressing information. Lastly, it explores the challenges policies face in resolving this paradox.

Manual Scavenging: Meaning and Context

By definition, “manual scavenging is the removal of excreta (night soil) manually from dry toilets, i.e., the toilets without a modern flush system.” (Singh, 2009). Section 2(j) of the 1993 Act defines manual scavengers as “a person engaged in or employed for manually carrying human excreta, and the expression manual scavenging shall be construed accordingly.”² The scope of this definition was widened under the new act; Section 2(1)(g) of the PEMSR Act 2013 defines “Manual Scavenger as a person engaged or employed by an individual, local authority, or a public or private agency for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine, open drain, or pit into which the excreta from insanitary latrines is disposed of, or on a railway track or other spaces as notified by the Central or State Government, before the excreta fully decomposes in a manner prescribed, and the expression “manual scavenging” shall be understood accordingly.”³ These definitions show a progressive expansion of the understanding of manual scavenging from a narrow focus on carrying human excreta to a broader recognition of its complex nature. Nevertheless, the continued existence of loopholes and weak enforcement emphasises the need for a more thorough examination of the legal and policy effectiveness in eliminating this dehumanising practice.

The context of manual scavenging cannot be fully comprehended without an understanding of India’s caste system, which is rooted in the varna system. The caste system is a strict and hierarchical social framework that has long been a defining characteristic of Indian society. The caste system not only determines social status but also assigns specific occupational roles, consigning particular communities—primarily Dalits, once referred to as “Untouchables”—to the most degrading and perilous forms of labour. The caste system allocates and fixes occupations, thereby placing constraints on an individual’s ability to move across castes for occupational opportunities, especially for Dalits, where their status rests upon the notion of purity and pollution. Manual scavenging is an inherited occupation determined based on caste, where Dalits are forced into such menial, inhuman occupations. Ambedkar (1979) argued that laws forcing manual scavengers into perpetual subordination highlighted the brutality of the Hindu social hierarchy, where the Hindu society is like

²See Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act of 1993, Section 2(j)

³See the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act of 2013, Section 2(1)(g)

a tower which has several storeys without a ladder or an entrance; thus, caste is not just a division of labourers, but a division of labourers (Shankar & Swaroop, 2021).

Scholars like Srinivas and Singh suggested that modernisation and urbanisation would erode the traditional structures based on ascribed status, leading society to determine individuals' life chances based on achieved status (Srinivas, 1966; Yogendra Singh, 1973). This shift was expected to help people from lower castes escape traditional occupations, with industrialisation aiding in shedding the stigmatised identities linked to low caste structures. However, despite significant growth, modernisation, and urbanisation in various sectors, caste systems continue to endure in modern India. As a result, Dalits are still engaged in traditional occupations such as leatherwork, dealing with animal carcasses, and manual scavenging. Even when they attempt to move away from these caste-based occupations, they often face social and physical abuse from dominant caste groups (Singh, 2014). This discriminatory treatment of Dalits leads to violations of fundamental human rights, including the rights to education, housing, healthcare, work, and the freedom to choose one's occupation (Newman & Thorat, 2007).

Manual scavenging remains one of the most humiliating and degrading forms of sanitation, predominantly carried out by Dalit groups, despite government claims of completely eradicating the practice. Although various technologies and alternatives are available, manual scavenging persists as a tradition, often regarded as a hereditary profession that involves forced labour rather than merely a job. Legislative measures implemented in 1993 and 2013 aimed to eliminate manual scavenging; yet, in 2018 alone, over 20,000 workers were still identified as manual scavengers (Raghavendra & Kumar, 2022, p. 5). The persistence of manual scavenging in the twenty-first century highlights not only the limitations of existing legal frameworks and policy measures but also the deeply ingrained caste mentality in Indian society. It prompts a revaluation of current strategies to address these entrenched social practices.

Legislative Efforts: Manual Scavenging Policies-Bold Action or Broken Promises?

The British introduced several legislative acts, including the Municipalities Act of 1891, the Punjab Municipalities Act of 1911, and the United Provinces Municipalities Act of 1916, which outlined the statutory duties of scavengers (Mandal, 2008). As a result, the practice of manual scavenging became institutionalised during colonial rule, particularly with the establishment of public toilets in municipalities. Dalits were employed to clean human excreta. In the post-independence era, the discourse surrounding manual scavenging in India was greatly influenced by the Constitution of India.

The framers of the Indian Constitution collectively and determinedly recognised the vital need for legislation addressing the issue of untouchability. The Indian Constitution includes several specific clauses that aim to protect the rights of Dalits across the country. Some of these provisions can be found in Articles 14 (ensuring

equal protection under the law), Article 16(2) (preventing discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence, or any of them), Article 19(1)(a) (guaranteeing the right to freedom of speech and expression), Article 21 (protection of life and personal liberty), Article 23 (prohibition of trafficking in human beings and forced labour), Article 41 (assuring the right to work, education, and public assistance in certain situations such as unemployment, old age, sickness, and disability), and so on. In addition to constitutional provisions, the government initiated various policies and schemes and established multiple committees to address issues related to sanitation and manual scavenging.

The first five-year plan mentioned sanitation and public health, but no concrete interventions were undertaken until 1981 (Shekhar, 2023, p. 134). The national census of 1981 reported that rural sanitation in the country was only one per cent (Kumar, 2022, p. 85). As a result, the Central Rural Sanitation Programme (CRSP) was launched. Although sanitation facilities increased slightly, the policy failed to meet the demand. Kanoon (2021) argues that the efforts after independence were primarily concerned with the working and living conditions of manual scavengers rather than eliminating the practice. In 1999, Total Sanitation Coverage (TSC) was introduced as a reformulation of an existing policy, aiming to be more community-led and demand-driven. However, TSC also struggled to keep pace with the growing demand. Recognising the shortcomings of TSC, the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan was launched in 2013. This programme was renamed and relaunched as Swachh Bharat Mission Abhiyan (SBA) after the change in government in 2014. The government also launched the NAMASTE scheme in 2022, replacing it with SRMS.

The government has established committees such as the Barve Committee (1952), Kaka Kalelkar Commission (1955), Malkani Committee (1966), and Pandya Committee (1969) to address the issue of manual scavenging and provide recommendations for ending the practice. These committees have highlighted the plight of manual scavengers in India. They have found that it has become customary for Dalits, particularly those from the Valmiki and Bhangi communities, to inherit this work as part of their tradition. The working conditions of manual scavengers are dehumanising and lack human dignity, which goes against constitutional values and morality. However, the major flaw in the committees was that they focused on the scavengers working in the local bodies, while the private scavengers were ignored and left to function under customary rules and practices (Kanoon, 2021). The main recommendations of the committees emphasise the need for the Central Government to enact comprehensive legislation, such as the 1993 Act and the PEMSAR Act 2013, to effectively regulate the working, service, and living conditions of these workers. These efforts, along with other policy measures aimed at eliminating manual scavenging, have been ongoing for many years; however, their effectiveness remains uncertain. Are these policy actions genuine steps towards eradicating this inhumane practice, or are they unfulfilled promises that fail to address the root causes?

Legislative efforts have been ongoing since independence, starting with the enactment of the Protection of Civil Rights Act of 1955, which aimed to abolish

untouchability and social disabilities faced by the SC community. However, these acts have achieved limited success, as they have not completely eradicated the practice of untouchability. To address this issue, new legislation was introduced in the form of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, to provide greater protection and enforce their fundamental rights.

The term “manual scavenging” is not explicitly mentioned in the statute, despite the act’s objective to prevent atrocities against the Scheduled Castes (SC) and the Scheduled Tribes (ST). Another flaw of this law is that it excludes workers employed primarily in government institutions, such as municipal corporations, as well as private workers involved in manual scavenging. The limitations of the definition arise from the link between manual scavenging and the evidentiary requirement of “on the grounds of untouchability.” Even if an individual is compelled to engage in scavenging, it is not considered within the scope of the act unless the coercion is based on the enforcement of untouchability. This demonstrates a narrow perspective from the state, failing to recognise the violence inherent in manual scavenging. The practice has been viewed merely as labour rather than as a manifestation of caste-based violence perpetrated by the state (Kanoon, 2021, p. 7). Consequently, this legislation and the associated committees have been ineffective in eliminating the practice.

The first significant legislative effort primarily addressing manual scavenging was the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act of 1993, which aimed to prohibit the employment of manual scavengers and the construction of dry latrines. However, the act faces criticism from civil societies for its poor implementation and lack of effectiveness. A major flaw of this act was its narrow scope; it only targeted dry latrines and did not cover the other forms of manual scavenging, such as sewer workers and septic tank cleaners. Furthermore, this act failed to provide any comprehensive rehabilitation plan for the scavenger workers to leave this inhuman practice. The legislation failed to achieve its desired objective primarily due to poor enforcement and a lack of strict implementation at the local level. The lack of political will to enforce this law also contributed to its lack of enforcement. Consequently, this act fell short of its goal, and manual scavenging persists despite its official prohibition.

The enforcement of the law faced challenges due to inadequate implementation and the lack of strict regulations at the local level. The judiciary, including the High Courts and the Supreme Court of India, consistently raised concerns about the issue of manual scavengers on numerous occasions. The 1993 Act was enacted in 1993 and received Presidential approval in 1997. Initially, only five state governments supported the law, with other states showing little interest until 2005. Some state governments were reluctant even after the Supreme Court’s direction to enforce the law. For example, Delhi officially recognised the 1993 Act in 2010, following orders from the Supreme Court of India to all states. Even after the Supreme Court’s directives, several states remained hesitant. The privileged caste culture of the political executive may have contributed to the lack of political will to enforce the act, resulting in its failure to achieve its objectives. In 2012, the Parliamentary Standing Committee acknowledged

these shortcomings. Pressure from civil society, especially a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) from SKA in the Supreme Court, led to a judicial declaration recognising the violation of the fundamental rights of manual scavengers.

Because of the limited scope of the 1993 Act, the government introduced the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act (PEMSR Act) to address the shortcomings of previous laws. The act aimed to amend the 1993 Act by broadening the definition of manual scavenging outlined in the legislation, with a commitment to eliminate dry latrines, rehabilitate manual scavengers, and impose stricter penalties, including imprisonment and fines for violations (Wankhede, 2021, p. 5). However, despite reports of manual scavenging cases—where a sanitation worker dies every five days while entering a manhole—the state and its citizens strangely choose to ignore the issue, resulting in little accountability for those involved, who are neither fined nor imprisoned (Dhawan, 2021).

The major flaw of this act lies in its definition of “manual scavenger” as outlined under section 2(g), as the definition discussed above. The section explicitly excludes workers who clean excreta using protective gear. This provision prohibits the employment of manual scavengers without protection but fails to recognise or regulate the practice when these gears are utilised. Wankhede (2021) argues that the 2013 Act lacks the tools to achieve its central objective, which is the prohibition of employment as manual scavengers, and the rehabilitation of manual scavengers and their families, as the act prohibits hazardous cleaning and the employment of manual scavenging only when protective gear is not provided. The provision creates a paradox where, on one hand, the legislation prohibits manual scavenging, but on the other, it allows it to continue with the use of protective gear and equipment. Thus, the state’s intention is not to eradicate the practice by fully prohibiting it but to perpetuate manual scavenging by providing safety mechanisms to ensure the practice continues (Wankhede, 2021, p. 45).

The 2013 Act lists 44 types of protective gear that must be provided to manual scavenging workers; however, it does not specify what constitutes adequate gear. As a result, workers are often given the standard gear or no gear at all, while employers claim to comply with the law. Kumar (2025) found that sewage workers in Delhi are rarely provided with any protective gear; the maximum they receive are gloves that are often too large to be useful during cleaning, or ‘khpacha’ (a wooden stick used to clear sewer clogs) and a bucket. Nor are they given adequate training. Ingole (2016) also observed a similar situation in Pune, where sewage workers receive neither training nor proper protective equipment.

This provides the hint as to why hundreds of sanitation workers die every year working in sewage (Prasad & Ray, 2019). Numerous reports have documented workers’ deaths during sewer and septic tank cleaning, and the state or contractors often use this loophole to avoid responsibility in accidents. The families of the deceased or injured workers are left without assistance or compensation. The act was also criticised for insufficient funding for rehabilitation, and the lack of a mechanism to entirely ban manual scavenging in sewers or septic tanks.

Over the past twenty years, three major government policies have been introduced to eliminate manual scavenging. The government launched these initiatives as the foundation of efforts aimed at completely eradicating this inhumane practice. Therefore, it is vital to analyse these initiatives to understand the paradox of the policies that allow this practice to persist despite reform efforts.

SRMS: A Missed Opportunity?

The Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) was launched to provide alternative livelihoods for manual scavengers, with the aim of eradicating this inhumane practice and offering rehabilitation to those involved. However, the scheme has faced criticism regarding its structure, execution, and effectiveness in achieving its objectives. One of the main flaws of this policy is that it focuses solely on providing alternative employment without addressing the underlying systemic issues that lead to the need for such employment. Without addressing these fundamental aspects, the scheme fails to offer a sustainable solution for completely eradicating the practice of manual scavenging.

Year	Budget Estimates (In Crores)	Revised Estimates (In Crores)
2013-14	570	70
2014-15	448	50
2015-16	470.19	10
2016-17	10	1
2017-18	5	5
2018-19	20	NA

Source: Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Annual Report, 2020–21

Additionally, the implementation of the policy has been hindered by red tape, corruption, and a lack of coordination between the involved agencies. There have been numerous complaints about inadequate investigations into the scheme, as well as delays in the disbursement of funds. The process for identifying beneficiaries was inconsistent and flawed, resulting in many eligible individuals being excluded from the scheme. Furthermore, there was a lack of awareness among beneficiaries regarding the available support, which undermined the credibility and effectiveness of the policy.

One of the main reasons for the scheme's limitations, apart from the lack of political will, is the insufficient funds utilised by the state agencies, leading to poor expenditure and a lack of urgency towards the vital issue of rehabilitation. Wilson criticised the schemes for the state's failure to provide adequate funding and for not addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by scavengers, where he argued that essential elements such as education, healthcare, and socio-psychological support were neglected despite a significant number of workers suffering from health problems caused by prolonged exposure to harsh working conditions. (Wilson & Singh, 2016)

Moreover, there is no substantial effort to socially rehabilitate manual scavengers, leaving them marginalised even after they exit the occupation. The overall impact of the scheme was limited, as a significant number of manual scavengers are compelled to continue this degrading work due to a lack of viable alternatives. The top-down approach of the policy fails to recognise the ground realities of the diverse socio-economic contexts of scavengers. Thus, while the steps were aimed at progressing in the right direction, they represented a missed opportunity to address the multiple issues faced by manual scavengers in India.

‘Swachhta’ in Swachh Bharat Abhiyan

The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, launched in 2014, aimed to eliminate open defecation and improve sanitation facilities nationwide. While the initiative to build toilets in both rural and urban areas was commendable, it overlooked the plight of sanitation workers who are forced to manually clean human waste due to inadequate waste disposal systems and a lack of proper sewer networks. The absence of proper infrastructure for safe disposal of faecal matter means that manual scavenging remains a necessary, albeit illegal, activity in many parts of the country. The main flaw of the scheme lies in its approach and effectiveness in addressing the issue of manual scavengers. The policy appears disconnected from India’s social context and adopts an objectified and detached stance, focusing solely on “cleaning India” (Shekhar, 2023, p. 139).

The implementation strategy of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has faced criticism. According to reports, the program’s achievements are sometimes exaggerated, and many areas still lack adequate sanitation facilities. There have been claims of displaying falsified data; the websites of SBM-Urban and SBM-Gramin have shown around 30 per cent of fabricated information, such as claims of tile constructions that do not actually exist (Akhilesh & Gudavarthy, 2022). Even the beneficiaries often have no knowledge of the records under which their names and houses are recorded as recipients of SBA. Besides these fabrications, data concerning open defecation have been criticised for being exaggerated or fake, as many districts declared open defecation-free continue to engage in the practice. The programme has also been criticised for its top-down approach, which overlooks local needs and cultural contexts.

The main issue with the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) is that it primarily focuses on building toilets without sufficient infrastructure for sewage and water disposal. As a result, the newly built toilets have created many septic tanks that require manual scavengers to clean. SBA lacks the capacity to foster attitudinal change and raise awareness among rural populations, as villages still prefer open defecation and have even started using these toilets as storage rooms (Katiyar, 2022). It does not address the needs of sanitation workers, as access to water in these toilets remains a concern. Most of the constructed toilets lack proper sewage connections and water facilities, resulting in the manual cleaning of human waste. The technologies used for constructing toilets under SBM will eventually need manual cleaning of pits and sludge. Even septic tanks, primarily built in urban areas, require regular cleaning, which is performed by manual scavengers.

The emphasis on constructing toilets without providing water supply or waste disposal infrastructure has resulted in underutilisation or abandonment of facilities. The focus on figures often overshadows the need for behavioural change. The assumption that building toilets alone would resolve sanitation issues ignores the importance of education and community engagement. Roy (2017) criticised the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, stating that it is more of a superficial effort used for political propaganda rather than a genuine attempt to address sanitation problems. Roy argues that the campaign's flashy launches often conceal the harsh realities on the ground, where many newly built toilets are unusable due to factors such as a lack of water supply and poor construction quality. Additionally, she highlights that the campaign tends to blame unsanitary practices on impoverished communities without addressing deeper issues like poverty and lack of education. Similarly, Wilson notes that the notion of involving everyone in the mission to clean India is a superficial concept. It focused more on events, celebrity endorsements, and romanticising the broom rather than addressing the significant issue of how sanitation is truly handled in India's urban areas and vast rural communities (Chishti, 2024).

Gatade (2015) criticised the government's flagship programme for disconnecting caste from sanitation. He argues that Hindu ideas of purity and pollution continue to assign manual scavenging, sewer cleaning, and unclogging manholes to certain castes. Additionally, he points out that the availability of cheap Dalit labour has contributed to the neglect of modern sewage systems and sanitation technologies. Teltumbde (2014) describes Indian culture as a caste-based system, where sanitation duties are assigned to specific castes. This perpetuates the stigma that labourers engaged in sanitation are unclean and impure. Therefore, India will not become truly 'Swachh' unless the caste-based ethos is eliminated.

NAMASTE: Innovative Fix or Fundamental Flaw?

The National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) scheme, launched in 2022 by the Government of India, aims to eliminate manual scavenging by promoting mechanised cleaning of sewers and septic tanks and ensuring the rehabilitation and safety of sanitation workers. The scheme was introduced as a replacement for the existing scheme, the Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS). The scheme emphasises mechanisation, the use of protective gear, and safe working conditions to prevent health hazards associated with manual cleaning. It also includes skill development, financial inclusion, and alternative livelihood programmes for sanitation workers to help them transition to safer and more dignified employment. Despite its well-meaning objectives, the NAMASTE scheme has faced criticism for multiple reasons.

The schemes present a stark paradox: it confidently claims to be the mechanism and safety for workers on one hand, and scavengers continue to die while cleaning the sewers, revealing the grim reality which persists, underscoring the significant gap between the scheme's objectives and its impact on the ground. There is also a

lack of strong monitoring mechanisms to assess the scheme's implementation and effectiveness. As a result, the absence of accountability leads to neglect, overlooked actions, corruption, and insufficient efforts to eliminate the practice. Most sanitation workers are unaware of their entitlements under state schemes and laws designed to protect their safety and dignity. This lack of awareness weakens pressure on authorities to respect their rights to dignified work. A fundamental flaw of this scheme is that it does not address the deep-seated caste-based discrimination that underpins manual scavenging.

Another issue is that the state views these problems as infrastructural and often fails to recognise them as social issues, such as caste, which underpins this occupation. As a result, the schemes lack adjustments needed to effectively challenge the social and economic norms that sustain these discriminatory practices. Additionally, the schemes face financial constraints because the allocated funds are insufficient to meet the programme's needs. The irony is that even the small budget allocated was significantly decreased; for example, in the 2023-24 budget, NAMASTE was allotted Rs 97.41 crore, but this was further cut to Rs 30.06 crore in the Revised Estimates (Wire, 2024). The scheme's coverage is limited to urban areas, perpetuating the marginalisation of sewage workers. The lack of direct cash transfers, unlike previous programs such as SRMS, further weakens their capacity to offer significant economic relief, leaving persistent discriminatory practices unaddressed and the workers' struggles unresolved.

Data Disguised: Tactics of Manipulation, Hiding, and Information Suppression

The data on manual scavengers in the country is discrepant, with independent organisations like SKA and many activists accusing the government of manipulating, hiding, and suppressing information related to manual scavenging. Even the government data provided by different agencies is contradictory in nature, as some agencies report different data on manual scavengers. Both central and state governmental bodies have frequently been accused of engaging in practices that obscure the true scale of manual scavenging, effectively disregarding the experiences of the marginalised communities involved.

The government agencies are accused of manipulating, concealing, and suppressing data to hide the actual number of manual scavengers in India. Various organisations and activists have accused the state of reflecting the cultural ideology of the dominant ruling class and of lacking the political will to address the issue seriously. Wilson claims that government agencies intentionally underreport the actual number of labourers involved in this inhumane practice. He criticises the state agencies for using a narrow interpretation of the act to define manual scavengers and other criteria that exclude many people who should be included in the category of manual scavenging.

In addition to data manipulation, state agencies are also accused of concealing information and suppressing data related to manual scavenging records. There has been an incident where the death of manual scavengers is suppressed, and the records

of the number of manual scavengers are also concealed. Furthermore, there is a lack of transparency in the policies of manual scavenging and deliberate concealment of information about the effectiveness of schemes. There is often little to no public disclosure on the progress and effectiveness of these schemes, making it difficult to assess whether those who have left manual scavenging have truly been rehabilitated into safer, more dignified employment. This manipulation of data serves to downplay the magnitude of the problem, thus reducing the pressure on the government to implement effective interventions.

In July 2024, the government stated that there was no proof of manual scavenging in the last five years in the country. This statement has faced criticism from various civil societies and is contradictory to the findings of the state's own agencies such as NITI Ayog. Interestingly, in a response to a parliamentary inquiry dated December 2021, it was reported that 58,098 manual scavengers had been identified according to the criteria outlined in the 2013 act. Out of these, 43,797 manual scavengers had available caste-related data, with 97.25 per cent belonging to the Scheduled Castes. The explicit denial by the state regarding the existence of manual scavengers reflects their lack of political will to address the issue (M, 2022).

The government recently announced in Parliament that there are no current reports of individuals engaged in manual scavenging in the country. However, the most recent annual report (2019-20) from the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) emphasised that this practice still persists in both rural and urban areas. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) declared in January 2021 that the claims made by several states of having zero manual scavengers and zero insanitary latrines are not accurate (NHRC, 2021).

According to the SECC-2011, rural areas had 182,505 manual scavengers, and the Census 2011 indicated more than 26 lakh insanitary latrines in the country. The government claims that most of these have been converted into sanitary facilities under the Swachh Bharat Mission. However, the Safai Karmachari Andolan believes that the official reports underestimate the actual number of manual scavengers in the country. They state that around 7.7 lakh individuals work as sewer cleaners, and there have been 1760 reported deaths of sewer cleaners since 2000. Additionally, there are 36,176 railway sewer cleaners. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) stopped publishing data on cases under the 2013 act from the year 2017. This means that it is not possible to ascertain how many cases are being filed under the 2013 act based on the NCRB reports.

Confronting the Barriers: Policy Challenges in Ending Manual Scavenging

The persistence of manual scavenging in India highlights the complex interplay between policy uncertainties and deeply rooted social attitudes that perpetuate this inhumane practice. The trajectory of these legislative and policy frameworks provides ample proof to illustrate the indifference, insensitivity and denial by the state to

eradicate this practice altogether. The 2013 Act, considered the major legislative reform aimed at eradicating this degrading act, has certain ambiguities that contradict its intention to prohibit the act. Khanna (2019) argues that the act has watered down “the unambiguous illegality of the practice of manual scavenging with exemptions, exceptions and provisions” (Koonan, 2021, p. 9).

Beyond the legislative flaws, the policy implementation remains fragmented and mostly on paper, creating significant gaps between policy outcomes and ground realities. Local governing bodies often lack the capacity and accountability to ensure compliance with the legal and policy framework, leaving scavenging communities trapped in exploitative labour practices. The contractualization of labour within neoliberal policies has further worsened the conditions for scavengers in various ways, especially in urban areas where municipalities and other state agencies outsource work to private contractors to evade direct responsibility for workers. Contractors often exploit these workers through low wages, working in hazardous conditions and denying social benefits. This system has led to further exploitation, with workers categorised as informal or temporary, and in case of any tragedy, denied compensation or rehabilitation, as these policies aim to prevent. The insensitivity and indifference of state agencies form the foundation of an exploitative culture that shields the state from accountability.

The technological lag in sewage infrastructure highlights the ongoing failure to invest in mechanisation solutions, such as sewage cleaning machines, which still heavily depend on human labour. Even policies like NAMASTE, designed to encourage mechanisation, have fallen short in bridging this technological gap due to weak enforcement and limited funding. Although technologies like the Super Sucker truck have been introduced for sewage cleaning, they are still operated by Dalits, reinforcing caste-based occupational stigma. These oversights sharply contrast with the state’s priorities, where it could develop advanced technologies such as a rover capable of landing on Mars, yet still lacks the measures needed to fully automate sewage cleaning and resolve this inhumane issue. This may reflect the pervasive caste bias within the entire system (Kanoon, 2021). The cultural normalisation of manual scavenging as acceptable when Dalits, primarily Valmiki, perform these tasks underscores the longstanding association of caste with occupation. This societal attitude fosters indifference among policymakers and implementing agencies, who are often guided by privileged caste values that tend to ignore the problematic division of labour based on caste. Narula (2008) asserts that “the rule of law lives in the shadow of the rule of caste” (p. 267). This likely explains the persistent technological gap, where, despite the potential to develop sophisticated technologies, social realities remain unchanged.

Chaplin (1999) argues that the lack of political and administrative will, combined with weak governance capacity and the absence of a significant “threat from below” since informal workers remain excluded from trade unions, can hinder their ability to voice concerns. Adding to these challenges, society has become accustomed to relying on workers’ services, believing it is expected of them. This cultural normalisation

of manual scavenging further deepens feelings of insecurity and ignorance about the plight of these workers. Policy initiatives, such as SBA and NAMSTE, which are presented as pioneers of sanitation reform, fail to grasp the fundamental nature of scavenging, which is akin to a caste system; their primary focus remains on urban cleanliness rather than eradicating manual scavenging. Critics argued that these policies are superficial in their approach, as they concentrate on upgrading infrastructure without addressing the root issues of caste or actively enforcing these policies locally. Similarly, Ramasamy (2005) argues that such initiatives are more driven by global concerns, such as the SDGs, rather than a genuine commitment to improving the lives of manual scavengers, highlighting their limited potential for meaningful change.

The state's denial of the existence of manual scavenging, along with the suppression and concealment of accurate data, complicates efforts to eradicate this issue. The claim that there have been no deaths of manual scavengers in the past five years reveals the state's true intention: to avoid acknowledging the problem and neglecting to address it. Furthermore, the removal of rehabilitation schemes in the 2024 Budget, along with their merger into policies aimed at promoting mechanisation, demonstrates a deliberate disregard for the issue and undermines policy efforts. This perpetuates the marginalisation of scavengers. The lack of reliable data and acknowledgement hampers informed policymaking and effective interventions. Chandrasekharan (1986) proposed a framework of "Dalit jurisprudence" to directly confront caste-rooted injustices, recognising that existing legal structures fail to address the underlying social reality. Without such structural changes, it is essential to understand that manual scavenging is not merely a policy issue, but a societal one tied to caste discrimination and dehumanisation.

The prevailing misconception underlying these policies is that merely shifting to mechanisation will eliminate manual scavenging. However, such a one-dimensional approach fails to recognise the deeper structural issues that sustain this practise entrenched caste hierarchies and social exclusion. Achieving genuine change requires comprehensive measures coupled with decisive government action to improve the social, educational, health, and rehabilitative conditions of the scavenging community. The policy framework must be responsive and adaptable to ground realities, prioritising workers' needs rather than relying solely on technological solutions. Eradication calls for a multidimensional and integrated strategy that is sustained over time, addressing all aspects and recognising caste as a core issue. Collaboration with all stakeholders, including civil societies, is essential, as it will help enhance state accountability and ensure that the voices of marginalised groups are heard in policy-making. Therefore, to resolve the current policy paradox and foster lasting change, a holistic approach that goes beyond mere prohibition and mechanisation is crucial. This strategy should focus on improving socio-economic conditions, promoting social justice, and safeguarding human rights. Policies should be based on the direct experiences of manual scavengers and include ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment.

Conclusion

The persistence of manual scavenging despite numerous legal frameworks and public policies underscores the deep-rooted paradox in the state's approach to real inclusion, human dignity, and social justice. The Indian state presents a contradictory situation where, on the one hand, it has enacted progressive laws and policies. On the other hand, ground realities continue to reveal systemic failure and structural barriers that allow manual scavenging to persist despite official claims of eradicating the practice entirely. This paradox exposes the critical gap between policymakers' intentions and actual policy outcomes, rendering many policies largely symbolic. The failure to eliminate manual scavenging is mainly due to the state's neglect of the problem. Existing policies are hindered by flawed implementation, lack of accountability, and poor enforcement of these measures. Despite the severity of this inhumane practice, strangely, no official has been penalised for rule violations. Consequently, weak monitoring and a lack of accountability result in legislation existing more in theory than in practice. This situation renders manual scavenger's invisible citizens who exist in reality, yet remain unacknowledged by the state.

There is an urgent need to confront and dismantle the visible and invisible chains associated with the caste system and the occupation based on it. While the path to fairness may be daunting, it can be paved with resilience, determination, and unity, ultimately leading towards a future where manual scavenging becomes history, and the chains of caste are finally broken. The dignity of every individual must be upheld. In conclusion, addressing the persistent issue of manual scavenging requires more than just making policy promises; it demands building a fair, inclusive, and just society. Eliminating manual scavenging is not only a matter of legislation but a moral obligation that calls for a complete re-evaluation of social frameworks, economic strategies, and governance systems. Only through united efforts, dedication, and a transformative approach can India aspire to resolve this enduring contradiction, ensure respect for all its inhabitants, and truly advance on the path of global power.

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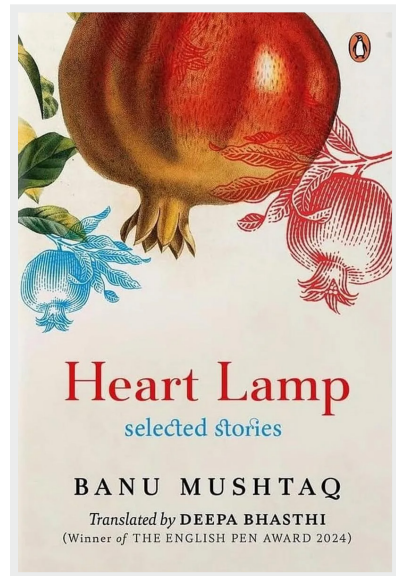
Heart Lamp

Author: *Banu Mushtaq*

Publisher: *Penguin*

Year: 2025

Reviewer: *Gaurav J. Pathania*¹



The International Booker prize 2025 winner is *Heart Lamp* by Banu Mushtaq translated from Kannada to English by Deepa Bhasthi. *Heart Lamp*, a literal translation of the Kannada term *hridaya deepa*, is a radiant collection of twelve stories that illuminate the inner lives of women in Muslim communities of southern India, capturing the quiet yet pervasive pressures of patriarchy, religious tradition, class, and belonging through prose that is both spare and resonant. What distinguishes the collection is its steady refusal to treat Muslim identity as monolithic: Mushtaq's characters inhabit social hierarchies, moral contradictions, and multiple registers of belonging, and it is precisely in these tensions that the possibility of critique emerges. Mushtaq constructs her narratives through an intersectional lens, engaging not only with gender but also with the dynamics of class, caste, and religion.

Across its twelve stories, one of *Heart Lamp*'s greatest strengths is Mushtaq's ability to transform ordinary domestic scenes into moments that unsettle moral certainties. The title story, "*Heart Lamp*," portrays a married woman with children whose dreams of continuing her studies are stifled as she struggles against her family's patriarchal and traditional expectations. "As evening started to lose its light, lamps were lit around the house. But the lamp in Mehurn's heart had been extinguished a long time ago. Who should she live for?" (p. 108). In "*Black Cobras*," a woman abandoned

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by her husband confronts a mosque authority (*mutawalli*) to demand sustenance for her children, only to be dismissed until she stages a public protest. “*A Decision of the Heart*” explores the severe tensions of married life, reducing a woman’s fate to two bleak options: “The first option was to give talaq to Akhila... the second option was to marry another woman to punish Akhila” (p. 71). In another story, “*Fire Rain*,” Mushtaq exposes how a clergyman twists religious doctrine to deny women their rights, weaving rumor, gossip, and communal pressure into a sharp allegory of unchecked spiritual authority. Through subtle narrative compression and moments of tonal irony, Mushtaq reveals how forces of shame, obligation, and hierarchy shape women’s lives long before violence becomes visible.

While Mushtaq foregrounds religion, she does not entirely evade the question of caste among Muslims. In some stories the hierarchies seem implicit: women belonging to “lesser” Muslim households or those doing menial labor must address elders or mosque authorities in deferential tones, while more educated women navigate normative pieties more confidently. The translator’s note suggests that caste is part of this landscape of social distance even within Muslim communities, though the stories seldom stage caste as a central conflict. There is fertile ground here: for example, how “purity”, a concept typically associated with Hindu caste discourse, may migrate into Muslim households in terms of “respectable” lineage, endogamy, or social ranking tied to occupational histories (e.g. housekeeping, pious lineage). Mushtaq hints at these gradations but rarely lets them dominate the narrative; perhaps this is a deliberate reticence, a recognition that within her communities, such caste distinctions are lived and understood rather than loudly contested.

Deepa Bhashti’s translation merits special recognition. By leaving Arabic, Urdu, and Kannada terms untranslated—and refraining from footnotes or italics—she preserves the cadence of regional speech while refusing to flatten cultural specificity for Anglophone readers. Her refusal to mark these terms as “foreign” subtly resists colonial translation practices that otherize linguistic differences. Yet this choice carries trade-offs: readers unfamiliar with the cultural context may feel unsettled by the untranslated vocabulary or unspoken references. At certain moments, too, a firmer editorial hand might have helped; abrupt tonal shifts—for example, when a story of simmering tension veers suddenly into satire—can feel jarring rather than propulsive.

Another limitation lies in uneven attention to wider structural forces. Many stories focus intimately on individuals and their immediate relational worlds, husbands, mosque elders, neighbors—but less on political economy, electoral power, or legal institutions. For instance, when a woman seeks mosque support or claim under Sharia, the stories often bypass the broader institutional logics that enable or frustrate her claim. This is not necessarily a flaw—Mushtaq’s strength is in subtle detail—but it means that readers seeking more systemic critique may find the collection wanting.

Moreover, because the narrative lens is so often interior and personal, *Heart Lamp* occasionally risks reiteration: the oppressive husband, the silent shame, the thwarted voice appears across multiple stories, and some vignettes echo one another in their texture if not in plot. The power is cumulative, but for readers attuned to structure, a

few stories feel more necessary than others. A slightly tighter editorial shaping could heighten the collection's overall arc.

As one engages with this work, an inevitable set of questions arises: in what ways can literary texts more clearly reveal the workings of caste within Muslim social life, particularly in relation to Hindu-majority hierarchies? How do structures such as Islamic schooling, land ownership, or mosque governance sustain, or challenge, forms of caste-like stratification? Mushtaq's understated, empathetic narratives gesture toward these dilemmas without offering resolution, which seems to be her very intent: to provoke reflection rather than deliver admonition.

In sum, *Heart Lamp* is a richly layered, morally perceptive, and stylistically restrained collection whose power lies in its intimate perspective. The acknowledgment of more than 900 individuals speaks to the writer's deep social capital, while the translator's careful labor shines through each story. The book gives voice to women obscured by pious façades, brings into focus the gulf between devotion and authority, and points toward entrenched inequalities, including caste, within Muslim communities. Its achievement lies not in offering resolution, but in compelling us to dwell in the tension, to breathe with it, and to feel the lamp's fragile yet persistent glow in the dark.

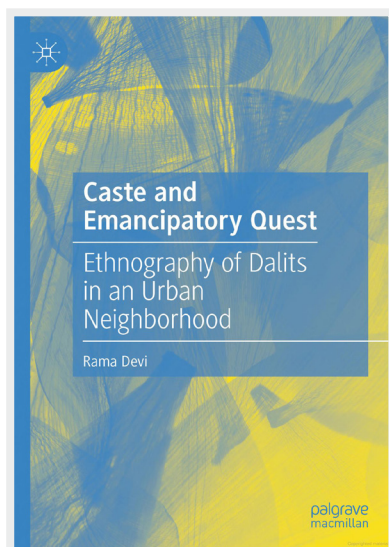
Caste and Emancipatory Quest: Ethnography of Dalits in an Urban Neighborhood

Author: *Rama Devi*

Publisher: *Palgrave Macmillan*

Year: 2025

Reviewers: *Ratan Sarkar*¹, *Santhosh J.*²



Rama Devi's *Caste and Emancipatory Quest: Ethnography of Dalits in an Urban Neighborhood* (Springer, 2025) is a deeply engaged ethnographic exploration of how caste, despite predictions of its decline under urban modernity, continues to structure everyday life, aspirations, and politics in India's metropolitan contexts. Based in Ashanagar, a pseudonymous neighborhood in Delhi, the book presents an ambitious attempt to examine the interplay between caste, neoliberal urban transformations, and Dalit struggles for emancipation. It achieves this through a combination of fine-grained ethnographic detail, critical theoretical engagement, and a reflective commitment to Ambedkarite thought.

The book opens with a careful reconsideration of B.R. Ambedkar's prescient observations about urban as a site of potential liberation but also enduring caste oppression. Ambedkar envisaged the city as a space where caste hierarchies would weaken, yet he remained skeptical about their full disappearance. Rama Devi captures this paradox well, noting Ambedkar's remark that untouchability would not vanish "within an imaginable distance of time" (p. 2). This sets the stage for her central argument: that while neoliberal urbanism reconfigures opportunities, aspirations, and exclusions, caste continues to persist in both subtle and overt ways. The book thereby

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challenges modernization theory's assumption that caste is a "traditional" institution bound to vanish in urban contexts (pp. 5–7).

A major strength of the book lies in its dismantling of the spatial binary between "caste-ridden rural" and "casteless urban." The author draws on contemporary critiques of Western-centric urban theory, particularly Jennifer Robinson's call for "ordinary cities," to argue that Indian cities must be understood in terms of their own complex trajectories rather than as derivatives of Euro-American modernity (p. 6). In Ashanagar, caste is not erased but adapted—present through patterns of civility, housing segregation, and neighborhood relations. Chapter Two vividly demonstrates how Dalits negotiate what the author calls the "paradox of absent presence," where caste is simultaneously denied and enacted in everyday interactions (pp. 54–57). Civility allows different caste groups to coexist, but underlying notions of purity and pollution shape boundaries of intimacy and trust.

Marriage emerges as another site where caste reproduces itself with remarkable tenacity. Chapter Three shows how the principle of endogamy continues to dictate social legitimacy. Love marriages, especially inter-caste unions, are resisted or reluctantly tolerated under conditions of necessity, revealing how honor and shame remain gendered and caste-inflected (pp. 87–95). Here the ethnography resonates with earlier scholarship on caste and marriage, but the book's contribution lies in demonstrating how even urban, educated Dalit youth often remain ensnared in negotiations between modern aspirations and caste-based constraints.

Chapters Four and Five are particularly significant for situating caste within the neoliberal educational and occupational order. The author captures the "mahaul" (atmosphere) of constrained educational aspirations, where Dalit students, despite ambitions for upward mobility, are often steered toward "easy subjects," distance learning, or vocational diplomas due to structural barriers (pp. 120–129). Dreams of professional careers are frequently abandoned because of financial compulsions or systemic exclusion. Similarly, in the labor market, Dalit youth encounter precarious employment, short-term contracts, and the stigmatization of their caste identity (pp. 173–185).

While neoliberal discourse emphasizes meritocracy and individual responsibility, Rama Devi shows how caste invisibly shapes life chances—an insight supported by the economic analyses of Thorat and Attwell (2007) and Thorat and Newman (2010), and Deshpande (2011) on caste-based discrimination in urban labour markets, and by Jodhka and Newman's (2007) and Jodhka's (2015) sociological studies on the continuing salience of caste identities in urban India.

The later chapters expand into the terrain of politics and representation. Chapter Six offers a valuable account of Dalit political engagement in Delhi, tracing reserved constituencies, electoral alliances, and the fragmentation of Dalit politics (pp. 212–218). Rather than romanticizing Dalit unity, the author highlights the contradictions of co-option and factionalism. Chapter Seven explores youth politics, showing how young Dalits navigate between aspirations for "casteless" citizenship and the pull of caste-based organizations (pp. 230–240). Ambedkar's iconisation appears here

as a double-edged phenomenon: while his figure inspires mobilization, it is also appropriated in diluted, non-transformative ways (pp. 251–254).

The book's conclusion (pp. 263–269) reflects on the “mirage of castelessness,” arguing that despite urban modernity and globalization, caste hierarchies are not dissolved but rearticulated in new forms. The author proposes the notion of “Dalit cosmopolitanism” as a framework to think about how Dalits creatively negotiate exclusion, assert dignity, and reimagine urban belonging. This is one of the book's most original contributions: it refuses both the pessimism of caste's eternal reproduction and the naïveté of casteless modernity, instead emphasizing the incomplete, contested, and aspirational character of Dalit struggles.

Methodologically, the book exemplifies the strengths of ethnography: thick descriptions of neighborhood life, dialogues with participants, and sensitive reflections on positionality. The long-term field engagement (since 2015) allows the author to capture both continuity and change in Dalit experiences. The reflexivity in acknowledging pseudonyms, ethical concerns, and the influence of earlier collaborative projects (Author's Note, p. ix) adds credibility to the research. While the ethnography's focus on Dalit lives powerfully illuminates the micro-worlds of caste and precarity, future research could build upon this foundation by introducing a more systematic comparative lens. Examining interactions or contrasts with other caste groups in Ashanagar or similar localities could help sharpen our understanding of relational hierarchies and intersectional dynamics within urban spaces. Such extensions would not address a shortcoming of the present work, but rather expand its scope—complementing the *emic* depth of this ethnography with *etic* perspectives that further situate Dalit experiences within wider urban and social frameworks.

Similarly, while the ethnographic design justifiably privileges qualitative immersion over quantitative breadth, future studies could consider integrating larger datasets or macro-level policy analyses to trace the structural underpinnings of the experiences so vividly portrayed here. Incorporating labour market or educational statistics would strengthen the dialogue between micro-level narratives and macro-level inequalities, offering a more layered understanding of urban marginality. Moreover, as the book incisively critiques neoliberalism (pp. 18–19), subsequent research might extend these insights through engagement with global debates on precarity, informal economies, and the politics of urban exclusion in the Global South. Framed thus, these suggestions emerge not as critiques of the book's method, but as productive pathways for future comparative and interdisciplinary work that could further consolidate its analytical and theoretical contributions.

Despite these limitations, the book makes a substantial contribution to multiple debates. It extends the scholarship of Dalit studies into urban ethnography, complementing works like Deshpande's *Contemporary India: A Sociological View* (2003) and Jodhka and Naudet's *Oxford Handbook of Caste* (2023). It also engages with broader discussions on urban inequality, resonating with Loïc Wacquant's work on advanced marginality, while highlighting the specificity of caste in shaping exclusions. Most importantly, it embodies, as Gopal Guru (2002) powerfully argues, that there is

a pressing need to foreground the “Dalit voice” in knowledge production—treating Dalit perspectives as epistemic interventions rather than mere data points (see also Guru and Sarukkai, 2012).

For pedagogy, the book is well-suited for courses on caste, urban sociology, and South Asian politics, as it bridges theoretical debates with lived realities. For policy, it underscores the urgent need to recognize caste not as a rural residue but as an active determinant of urban inequality. Urban planning, labor policies, and educational reforms must address caste-based exclusion if the promise of inclusive urbanization is to be realized. For future research, the idea of Dalit cosmopolitanism opens fertile ground for comparative studies with other marginalized groups globally, inviting reflections on how identities adapt, resist, and reconstitute in neoliberal urban spaces.

In conclusion, *Caste and Emancipatory Quest* is a timely, reflective, and scientifically rigorous ethnography that dismantles the myth of urban castelessness. It shows how Dalits in Delhi navigate between exclusion and aspiration, stigma and dignity, precarity and hope. Its strength lies in illuminating the everyday negotiations of emancipation, reminding us that the quest for equality is not a completed project but an ongoing struggle. While the book has limitations in scope and comparative reach, it stands as a significant contribution to caste studies, urban sociology, and the wider quest for social justice in India and beyond.

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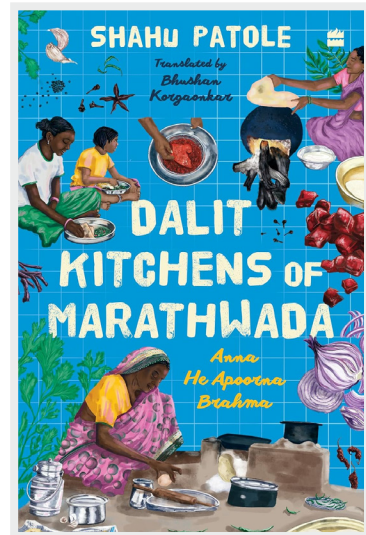
Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada

Author: *Shahu Patole*

Publisher: *HarperCollins*

Year: 2025

Reviewer: *Angel Sophan*¹



When I first picked up the book *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* written by Shahu Patole, a few lines from the blurb caught my eye, ‘This book presents the poor man’s patchwork plate, one devoid of oil, ghee, and milk.’ I could not help but ask myself: What else could be used? I could only think of water as a common linkage between mainstream and marginalized kitchens. However, the caste-based politics of water knew no bounds (Freed, 1970; Wahi, 2022). In the preface, the author has done an excellent job of placing critical questions as food for thought, garnished with humor, yet punch in the gut style of writing. The author raises a simple yet profound question: Why are vegetarians obsessed with us? He strings a brilliant argument by juxtaposing the sattvic diet, expectations set out on sattvic diet eaters, and reality. Sattvic people are meant to be *Satshil* (good-natured). It refers to natural and good food for the soul. It also means tasty, rich, and substantial food loved by the man of goodness (Dolphijn, 2006). Nevertheless, are not the sattvic diet eaters the torchbearers of the caste and class system? So why is their diet not reflected in their persona? The preface is ended with a quote by a verse by Sant Eknath,

Vivad Vadhe he to adham lakshan

Bhaktiche karan na sadhe yene.

It is translated as, “To challenge something (in this spiritual discourse) or get into a debate is a sin and a sign of stupidity. If you indulge in such behavior, all your

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devotion and spiritual progress is futile. Reflecting on these lines, Patole concludes the preface, “I am glad that I am stupid and my devotion and spiritual progress is wasted” (p.xvi), and sets the tone of rebellion and criticality for the entire book.

This book, *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada*, an English translation by Bhushan Korgaonkar of the original Marathi title ‘*Anna He Apoorva Brahma*,’ details the dietary practices of the Mahar and Mang communities of Marathwada. They are two prominent Dalit communities, among others from Maharashtra. The book primarily focuses on how Mahar and Mang communities’ culinary practices evolved over centuries, significantly shaped by discrimination and resilience. Patole passionately writes about caste, religion, food, and politics. The book has 12 chapters, ranging from an introduction to the Mahar and Mang communities, festivals, and different recipes for non-vegetarian and vegetarian food for the said communities. It ends with the 1972 famine and its impact on the rural food culture of Marathwada.

In the first and second chapters titled, ‘What about us?’, ‘Inclusion and Validation’, the author contextualizes the Mahar and Mang communities, their historical background, varied sub-castes within the communities, corresponding traditional occupations, and how their recipes never found a place in the mainstream culinary space. I could not help but think, if ‘recipe’ itself is an elite word? Shanahan and colleagues (2012) write that recipe books may seem quite natural today in kitchens, but they were once a new and fashionable genre intimately connected to social and cultural change. The earliest medieval culinary manuscripts were anonymous, although later, it was found that all were authored by men who were professional chefs working in royal and noble kitchens. Later, women from upper-class aristocratic backgrounds started leading in writing recipes (see, Shanahan et al., 2012).

Patole narrates how the identity of Marathwada and Maharashtra is equated to dishes belonging to the upper caste/class. For instance, *Puran poli* (sweet dish), *kande pohe* (sweet dish), etc., are associated with the Maharashtrian identity. He also details the marriage rituals of these two Dalit communities, duties undertaken by the bride and groom’s side, and how *shidori* (sweet dish) is a highly significant element in the wedding, which can break or make future relationships. The author says the preparation of sweet dishes undertaken by the so-called lower castes does not add sugar, jaggery or tamarind, making us ponder other alternatives.

In chapter four, ‘What does ‘non-vegetarian’ mean for us?’, it becomes evident that there are no alternatives; it just does not exist. Food is prepared in the absence of these ingredients. Most of the meat involves *rakti* (blood), *jeebh* (tongue), *bheja* (brain), *gana* (windpipe), etc. An eerie pattern was noticed in the list of ingredients, and it ends within 3 or 4 requirements at the maximum. Everything is mainly cooked with salt, turmeric, and chilli. Ginger-garlic paste and coriander are optional. Here, optional does not refer to the cook’s discretion, but rather, it indicates accessibility and affordability of that ingredient. Dried fat is also used as a substitute for oil for frying. Food and eating have always been markers of social class distinction. Eating also refers to a symbolic system that reflects social, religious, political, economic, and aesthetic aspects. Bourdieu’s study (de Morais Sato et al., 2016), conducted in France

from 1963 to 1968, resulted in two conclusions: the taste of luxury/freedom and the taste of necessity. The taste of luxury was established among dominant social classes whose privileged access to certain types of food and cultural capital was necessary to appreciate these specific types of food. The taste of necessity was more characteristic of the working class. It was also found that the higher the class, the healthier the food practices.

In chapter six, '*Kaaran* (sacrifice of a male buffalo)', the author details the duties of *Potaraj* (a troupe of male artists who perform religious songs, storytelling and puja). In concluding the chapter, he explores a few myths of the pre-Vedic and post-Vedic periods surrounding the sacrifice of a male buffalo; highlighting their casteist and sexist implications. These myths demarcated the distinction between how brahmins are symbolized versus the Dalits. To the extent that if a brahmin woman finds out her husband is Dalit, she immolates herself or jumps into a well. A Dalit husband is considered the male buffalo, and hence, the sacrifice of the male buffalo is carried out to reduce the Goddess's wrath. I can only hope and pray that the current and future generations realize the inherent casteist nature and view these Vedic myths with criticality.

As the book progresses, the writing shifts from critical to casual/ non-scholarly; it feels like an onlooker's observation. For instance, in chapter seven, 'Other Meats', usage of the terms like "addiction" (p.149) can cause serious repercussions when used lightly to represent a community and locality. Addiction refers to a compulsive, chronic, physiological or psychological need for a habit-forming substance, behavior, or activity having harmful physical, psychological or social effects typically causing well-defined symptoms upon withdrawal or abstinence (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In the book, the paragraphs written under the title 'Addiction' had only the process of making the liquor and how men drank during certain occasions only and how it can potentially lead to domestic abuse at home.

There was a strong undercurrent of patriarchy flowing through the pages and how women are tied to the kitchen inseparably. For instance, in chapter ten, titled 'Chapati, Puran Poli and more' the author writes, "Making these bread were invariably women's work" (p.245); Similarly in chapter twelve, 'The 1972 famine and its impact on the rural food culture of Marathwada' he writes that "The invention of motor facilitated the advent of grinding machines. Women were the happiest when these machines reached villages, as this innovation reduced their toil considerably" (p. 327). In chapter three, 'Starvation and Survival', the author asserts, "After men finished their meal, the women, especially the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law would eat together from the same plate" (p. 52). Correspondingly, in chapter four, "Women still do not get to eat in the first serving. They are usually the last ones to eat and have to make do with whatever leftovers came their way." (p. 93)

Foregrounding the above passage, the author could have also addressed the triple intersectionality faced by Dalit women—caste, class, and gender; and the toll it takes on their health, especially given that they often eat last if anything remains. It has been shown that women bear the primary responsibility for family eating practices.

Providing food for the family socially constructs the identities of women and mothers (Beagan et al., 2008). I also wonder why the book's original Marathi and English titles are entirely different; the Marathi title (*Anna He Apoorna Brahma*, "the original verse *Anna He Poorna Brahma* means food is the complete truth. Prayer asserts that consuming food is not just about filling the stomach but it is a sacred act and the title of this book proclaimed food is an incomplete reality" (p. xxi) captures a subtle act of rebellion, while the English title has a more descriptive language. The act of rebellion could have also been retained in the English title.

With the mention of Marathwada in the title, I expected the book to explore Dr. Ambedkar's influence on the region's food culture. In 1978, Marathwada witnessed widespread violence following the renaming of Marathwada University to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University, leading to the killing, rape, and displacement of thousands of Dalits (Soni, 2017). Dr. Ambedkar was instrumental in establishing several educational institutions in both Bombay and the underdeveloped Marathwada region (Sukumar, 2011). Given the history of Marathwada, it has been a region of activism particularly related to caste and social justice. The activism inevitably seeps into the food culture of the region. According to Guru (2019), in the cultural history of Dalits in Maharashtra, dead cattle were traditionally given as dowry within Dalit households. However, the Mahars willingly abandoned this practice, led by Ambedkar, who encouraged them to embrace dignity and self-respect. Their dietary habits also shifted dramatically—from *Murdada* (meat from dead cattle) to *Hatfatka* (meat acquired through hunting) and eventually to *Toliv* (meat from a slaughtered animal). The book, however, fell short of capturing these significant nuances and acts of resistance within the community, neglecting the inherent political nature of food.

Even though a section is dedicated to references, a significant limitation of the book is not having notes to explain corresponding references. The references were Hindi/Marathi texts; if available, the translated version could have provided an English translation. So, it was hard to follow up or read further on the historical facts mentioned. Usually, books and cookery shows leave an element of excitement and salivation for the viewer, but this book was a stark reminder to look within oneself. Reading the pages felt like traversing through a different civilization in itself. A civilization born out of discrimination that grew from the margins, and trauma filled in each bite. Upper caste leftovers became the centrifugal force in planning diets in Dalit communities.

The India Community Cookbook Project (Pujary et al., n.d.) aims to preserve India's culinary heritage by digitizing it—Maharashtrian cuisine from *Soopshastra* (1875), considered the first book on Marathi cuisine, to more recent works, including cookbooks from the Thanjavur Maharashtrian and Saraswat Brahmin communities. Although I haven't reviewed all the books in the list, *Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada* stands out as more than just another addition; it challenges a space typically dominated by upper-caste dishes and cooking methods. A deeper analysis of this would be valuable, highlighting how food is political and which 'cuisines' gain mainstream recognition.

Reading this book led me to reflect on the term ‘non-vegetarian’. We have all encountered it in restaurants, menu cards, conversations around diet and cuisines, but what does it imply? The term ‘non-vegetarian’ automatically implies a vegetarian centric worldview, framing vegetarianism as the societal norm and other diets as deviations. Let us try to understand it statistically with the metaphor of a normal probability curve, it positions vegetarianism at the mean, signifying societal acceptance, while ‘non-vegetarian’ diets are seen as deviations, with foods like chicken closer to the mean and others like beef and pork pushed to the periphery as stigmatized or ‘deviant.’ This hierarchy also reflects biases, reinforcing social inequality and marginalization of communities based on dietary practices, underscoring how language particularly terms like ‘non-vegetarian’ can perpetuate cultural power dynamics. Going forward, I hope we remain cognizant of the political nature of food and language surrounding it.

Patole’s book holds up a mirror with a scathing reflection of caste, class, and other privileges perpetuating injustices. It highlights society’s silence and complicity towards marginalized communities’ pain. As a reader I could not help but wonder how these communities coped with adversity, oppression, and cruel demarcation that penetrates their very being. As the question lingered, the book provided the answer: ‘*Ati zaala ani hasu aala*’ (if it becomes too much, just laugh it off). It certainly is a testament to the community’s struggles. More than just a documentation of their resilience, the book is also a call for action, urging everyone to confront biases and break these seemingly unbreakable societal shackles.

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