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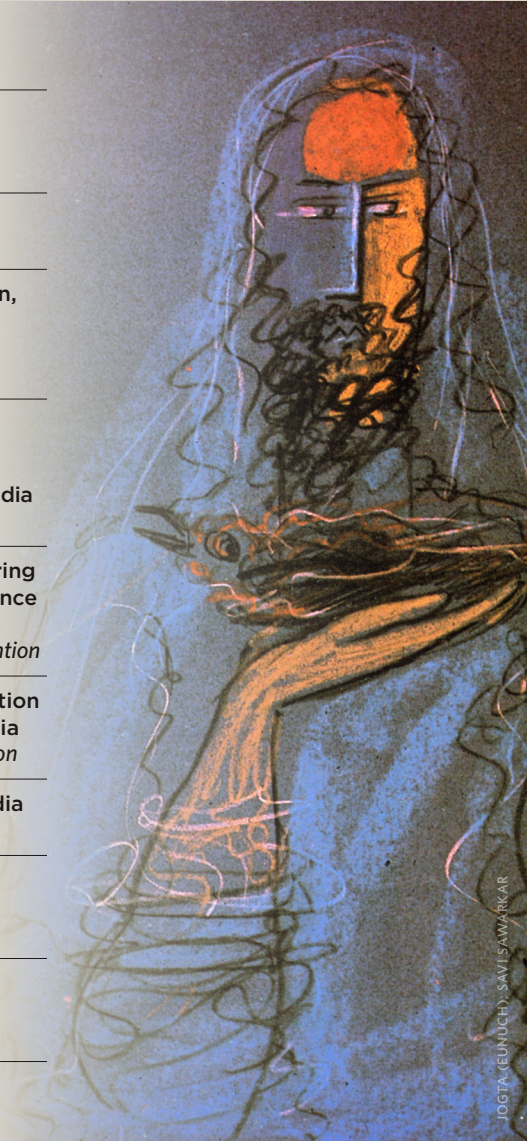
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# The Three S's of Being: Swayambhu, Skandhas, and Śūnyatā in Ambedkar's Deconstruction of Caste-Self

Santosh I. Raut<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article examines how B.R. Ambedkar deployed three interconnected Buddhist philosophical categories—*swayambhu* (self-becoming), *skandha* (aggregates), and *anattā* (selflessness)—to construct a systematic critique of caste as simultaneously a metaphysical, social, and *epistemological* formation. While Ambedkar's political and constitutional contributions are well studied, his philosophical engagement with Buddhist doctrine as a tool for dismantling caste ontology has received comparatively less rigorous analysis, and the epistemological dimension of his critique has been largely overlooked. This article addresses that gap by reading Ambedkar's writings, particularly *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957), *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), and *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*, alongside the Pali canonical doctrine of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), Aśvaghōṣa's *Vajrasūcī*, and the classical analysis of the five aggregates. The central argument is that Ambedkar identified a structural homology between the Brahmanical doctrine of an eternal, self-existent self (*ātman/swayambhu*) and the ideological foundation of caste: both posit fixed, inherent essences where Buddhist analysis reveals only conditioned processes. Crucially, this article introduces three interrelated concepts—*epistemic enclosure*, *epistemic caste*, and *epistemicide*—to name the mechanisms by which the caste system functions not only as a social hierarchy but as a knowledge hierarchy, one that denies Śūdras, untouchables, and women the very status of knowers. By systematically applying the Buddhist teaching that phenomena lack inherent self-nature (*svabhāva*), Ambedkar reframed caste not as a natural or divinely ordained category but as a contingent mental construction sustained by wrong view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*). Ambedkar's reading of the Bhagavad Gita as a “philosophic defence of counter-revolution” is shown to be integral to his deconstruction: the Gita's attempt to ground *caturvarṇa* in the theory of innate

<sup>1</sup>Postdoctoral fellow, Harvard University, and Assistant Professor, Department of Aesthetics and Philosophy, the EFL University, Hyderabad, India  
Email: santoshrautefl@gmail.com

qualities (*guṇas*) represents, in Buddhist terms, a paradigmatic instance of wrong view (*pāpa-diṭṭhikam*)—the reification of contingent social categories into fixed ontological essences. The article traces how this philosophical deconstruction informed Ambedkar’s practical programme of conversion, culminating in the Navayāna movement and the twenty-two vows of 1956, and argues that the Navayāna denomination constitutes an act of epistemic liberation: the reclamation by formerly excluded communities of the right to know, to interpret, and to construct meaning.

### Keywords

Swayambhu, Epistemic Caste, Atman, **Diṭṭi**, Ambedkar, Liberation

## Introduction

### *The Problem of Caste as Ontology and Epistemology*

The caste system has been analysed through sociological, economic, historical, and political lenses. What has received insufficient attention is caste as an *ontological* claim—that is, a claim about what kinds of beings exist and what properties they possess essentially rather than contingently. When the *Manusmṛiti* assigns occupations, rights, and spiritual capacities by birth, it does not merely prescribe a social arrangement; it asserts that persons belonging to different *varṇas* possess fundamentally different natures. The Brahmin is not simply someone who performs priestly functions but someone whose essential being is priestly. The Śūdra is not merely assigned menial labour but is held to be constituted for servitude and slavery. Caste, in this framework, is not a social convention but a metaphysical fact.

What has been even less adequately addressed is the *epistemological* dimension of this ontological claim. Caste does not merely rank persons by social function or ritual purity; it ranks them by their presumed capacity for knowledge. The Brahmanical system assigns to each *varṇa* not only different occupations but different cognitive endowments, with the Brahmin possessing full authority to know, interpret, and transmit sacred knowledge, and the Śūdra and the untouchable being defined as fundamentally incapable of receiving it. This article introduces the concept of *epistemic caste* to name this phenomenon: the hierarchical ordering of persons according to their presumed capacity for knowledge, where that ordering is grounded not in demonstrated ability but in birth.<sup>1</sup> Epistemic caste is the epistemological face of ontological caste: if persons

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<sup>1</sup>The term “epistemic caste” designates the hierarchical ordering of persons according to their presumed capacity for knowledge, where that ordering is grounded not in demonstrated ability but in birth. It names the phenomenon whereby the social hierarchy of caste is simultaneously an epistemological hierarchy: each *varṇa* is assigned not merely different labor but different cognitive capacities, with the Brahmin possessing full epistemic authority and the Śūdra and untouchable being defined as epistemically null. The concept extends Miranda Fricker’s “testimonial injustice” and “hermeneutical injustice” (*Epistemic Injustice: Power and the*

possess fixed, inherent essences (the metaphysical claim), then those essences include fixed, inherent cognitive capacities (the epistemological claim). The Brahmin knows because it is the Brahmin's nature to know. The Śūdra does not know because it is the Śūdra's nature not to know. Knowledge, in this framework, is not an achievement but a birthright - or the permanent absence of one.

B.R. Ambedkar recognized that dismantling caste required engaging it at both the ontological and the epistemological level. His political and legal interventions—drafting constitutional protections, advocating reservation policies—addressed caste's institutional manifestations. But his turn to Buddhism, which occupied the last two decades of his life with increasing intensity, addressed what he understood to be caste's philosophical foundation: the doctrine of a fixed, eternal self. Ambedkar's central philosophical insight, developed across multiple works, was that the Brahmanical concept of *ātman*, the self-existent, unchanging self that the Upanishads identify with *Brahman*, provides the metaphysical architecture upon which both the social hierarchy and the knowledge hierarchy of caste are built. If persons possess eternal, immutable essences, then the hierarchical ordering of those essences, including their differential capacities for knowing, appears natural and unalterable. The Buddhist denial of *ātman*, in Ambedkar's reading, therefore constitutes not merely a soteriological teaching about liberation from suffering but a direct philosophical assault on the conceptual preconditions of caste in all its dimensions: social, ritual, and epistemic.

This article traces how Ambedkar constructed this argument through three interconnected Buddhist categories. The first, *swayambhu* (“self-becoming” or “self-existent”), is the Brahmanical concept Ambedkar identified as the ideological linchpin of caste. The second, the *skandhas* (five aggregates), provides the Buddhist analytical framework through which the illusion of a fixed self is deconstructed. The third, *anattā* (self-lessness or no-self), represents the positive philosophical position that Ambedkar drew from Buddhism to ground an emancipatory social and epistemological vision. These three categories correspond to what Ambedkar opposed, the method by which he opposed it, and the alternative he proposed. Running through the entire analysis are the three epistemological concepts—*epistemic enclosure*, *epistemic caste*, and *epistemocide*—that name the mechanisms by which caste functions as a regime of knowledge suppression, and that Ambedkar's Buddhist turn was designed to dismantle.

The argument proceeds in seven sections. Section I examines the concept of *ditṭhi* (view) in Buddhist philosophy and establishes how Ambedkar understood wrong view as the epistemological root of caste. Section II develops the concepts of

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*Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford, 2007) into the domain of caste, where the injustice is not merely that certain testimony is discounted but that certain persons are categorically denied the status of knowers.

epistemic enclosure, epistemic caste, and epistemicide as an analytical framework for understanding the knowledge dimensions of caste oppression. Section III analyses the Brahmanical doctrine of *Swayambhu* and its relationship to caste ontology, drawing on both Upanishadic sources and Aśvaghōṣa's *Vajrasūcī*. Section IV reconstructs Ambedkar's use of the five *skandhas* to dismantle essentialist conceptions of personhood. Section V traces Ambedkar's application of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) to the specific question of caste. Section VI engages the Bhagavad Gita as the most sophisticated philosophical defence of the caste ontology that Ambedkar sought to dismantle. Section VII examines how this philosophical framework was translated into the practical programme of conversion, culminating in the Navayāna Buddhist movement as an act of epistemic liberation.

## I

### Wrong View as the Root of Caste: *Diṭṭhi* and Ambedkar's Epistemological Critique

The concept of *diṭṭhi* (Skt. *dr̥ṣṭi*), conventionally translated as “view,” occupies a foundational position in Buddhist soteriology. It appears as the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path: *sammā-diṭṭhi*, Right View, defined in the canonical texts as understanding suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to cessation. The placement of Right View at the head of the path is doctrinally significant: in the Buddhist analysis, cognitive error precedes and generates all other forms of suffering. One does not merely *behave* wrongly; one *sees* wrongly, and wrong behaviour follows from wrong seeing.<sup>2</sup>

The Brahmajāla Sutta, the first discourse of the entire Pali Canon, enumerates sixty-two varieties of wrong view, demonstrating the Buddha's systematic concern with mapping the terrain of cognitive distortion. These views are not arbitrary errors but structured misapprehensions that arise, according to the sutta, from craving (*taṇhā*) and feeling (*vedanā*): speculative positions adopted because they serve the emotional needs of the self-concept rather than because they correspond to reality. The sutta's central teaching is that the Buddha has seen through all sixty-two views and is “liberated without remainder,” not by adopting a superior speculative position but by relinquishing the very compulsion to construct fixed views about the nature of reality.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The Pali formula is: *imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti, imass' uppādā idaṃ uppajjati; imasmiṃ asati idaṃ na hoti, imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati*. See Samyutta Nikāya 12.61, in Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 575–577.

<sup>3</sup>Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 73–74. The Brahmajāla Sutta enumerates sixty-two kinds of wrong view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*).

Ambedkar's engagement with this framework was not merely academic. His entire critique of Brahmanism can be understood as an application of the Buddhist analysis of wrong view to the specific domain of social organization. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar argued that the caste system is sustained not primarily by economic exploitation or political coercion, though both are present, but by a set of beliefs about the nature of persons and their proper ordering. Caste, Ambedkar insisted, is "a notion; it is a state of the mind."<sup>4</sup> This formulation is precise in its Buddhist resonance: caste is a *ditṭhi*, a view that has been mistaken for reality. It is not a feature of the natural or metaphysical order but a cognitive construction that has been reified through centuries of social practice and religious sanction.

The moral consequences of wrong view constitute, for Ambedkar, the decisive test of a philosophical or religious system. In the Buddhist framework, wrong views are not merely intellectually mistaken; they generate suffering because they distort one's relationship with reality. Ambedkar extended this principle to social analysis: a philosophical system that produces and validates a cruel, hierarchical social order thereby reveals itself as grounded in wrong view, regardless of its internal sophistication. The *Manusmriti*'s elaborate prescriptions for caste behaviour, including severe punishments for Śūdras who transgress caste boundaries, exemplify what Ambedkar understood as the social manifestation of metaphysical error. His public burning of the *Manusmriti* on 25 December 1927 was, in Buddhist terms, a symbolic act of rejecting wrong view, disposing of a text whose prescriptions revealed its foundational cognitive distortion.<sup>5</sup>

This epistemological critique distinguishes Ambedkar's approach from both liberal reformism and Marxist materialism. The liberal reformer seeks to modify caste behaviour without addressing its conceptual foundations; the Marxist reduces caste to economic relations. Ambedkar, reading through Buddhist philosophy, located the problem at the level of view itself: the fundamental assumptions about reality, particularly about the nature of the self, that make caste appear natural, inevitable, and divinely ordained. To dismantle caste, one must first dismantle the view of self upon which it rests. But Ambedkar perceived something further still: that wrong view about the self generates not only social hierarchy but a hierarchy of *knowing* – a system in which the capacity for knowledge is itself distributed according to caste. It is this insight that the following section elaborates.

<sup>4</sup>B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* [hereafter BAWs], vol. 1, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), 47.

<sup>5</sup>On Ambedkar's burning of the *Manusmriti* on 25 December 1927, see Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability*, 34–36; Anand Teltumbde, *Mahad: The Making of the First Dalit Revolt* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2016).

## II

## Epistemic Enclosure, Epistemic Caste, and Epistemocide: The Knowledge Dimension of Caste Oppression

The caste system has been analysed extensively as a system of social stratification, economic exploitation, and ritual pollution. What has not been adequately theorized is the degree to which caste operates as a *knowledge regime*—a system that produces, controls, restricts, and destroys knowledge along caste lines. This section introduces three interrelated concepts that together name the epistemological architecture of caste: *epistemic enclosure*, *epistemic caste*, and *epistemocide*. These concepts are not merely supplementary to the ontological analysis of caste developed elsewhere in this article; they identify a dimension of caste oppression that is, in certain respects, more fundamental than the social and economic dimensions, because it concerns the very conditions under which social and economic reality can be understood, interpreted, and challenged.

### Epistemic Enclosure

By *epistemic enclosure*, I mean a structural arrangement in which access to knowledge is restricted by the same authority that produces and interprets that knowledge, creating a self-sealing system impervious to external challenge.<sup>6</sup> The term is deliberately drawn from the history of land enclosure in early modern Europe, where common lands were fenced off and placed under private control, dispossessing those who had previously enjoyed rights of access. Epistemic enclosure operates analogously: knowledge that might in principle be available to all is fenced off by institutional and ideological barriers, and placed under the exclusive control of a designated group. The concept shares certain features with Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony and Foucault's analysis of the power/knowledge nexus, but it names something more specific than either: a system in which the restriction of knowledge is grounded not in class position or institutional gatekeeping alone but in the metaphysical claim that certain categories of persons are *inherently incapable* of receiving knowledge. This is the distinctive Brahmanical contribution to the technology of epistemic control.

The Brahmanical system constitutes perhaps the most thoroughgoing epistemic enclosure in the history of human civilization. The *Muṇḍaka Upanishad's* restriction,

<sup>6</sup>I use the term "epistemic enclosure" to describe a structural arrangement in which access to knowledge is restricted by the same authority that produces and interprets that knowledge, creating a self-sealing system impervious to external challenge. The concept draws on but is distinct from Gramsci's notion of hegemony and Foucault's power/knowledge nexus, as it foregrounds the specifically *caste-based* mechanism of restriction: knowledge is enclosed not by class position or institutional gatekeeping alone but by the metaphysical claim that certain bodies are inherently incapable of receiving it.

“This knowledge may be taught only to those who perform rites, only to those who are learned in the scripture,”<sup>7</sup> establishes the formal boundary of the enclosure. But the *Manusmṛiti* specifies its enforcement with chilling precision: a Śūdra who recites the Vedas is to have molten lead poured into his mouth; a Śūdra who merely *hears* the Vedas is to have his ears filled with lac.<sup>8</sup> The punishment targets the sensory organs of knowledge acquisition—the mouth that speaks, the ears that hear—making explicit what the system implies: the subordinated body is to be physically sealed against the entry of sacred knowledge. The body of the Śūdra and the untouchable is, in the logic of epistemic enclosure, a body that must be kept epistemically closed.

What makes epistemic enclosure so effective as a mechanism of domination is its self-sealing character. Those who possess exclusive access to knowledge also possess exclusive authority to interpret and validate claims about that knowledge. The Brahmin is both the producer and the gatekeeper of sacred knowledge, both the source and the arbiter of truth. Any challenge to the enclosure must be articulated in terms that the enclosure itself controls: to argue that the Vedas should be accessible to all, one would need to demonstrate familiarity with the Vedas, which is precisely what the enclosure prohibits. The result is a closed hermeneutical circle: the authority of the knowledge justifies the authority of its guardians, and the authority of the guardians justifies the restriction of the knowledge. Ambedkar saw this circularity with penetrating clarity. His solution was not to argue for admission into the enclosure—to demand that Śūdras be granted access to the Vedas—but to reject the authority of the enclosed knowledge altogether, turning instead to the Buddhist tradition, which, as Bronkhorst observes, “did not start out with any identifiable implicit or explicit convictions about language” and spread its message “in local languages, being adjusted or translated where necessary.”<sup>9</sup>

## Epistemic Caste

*Epistemic caste* names the next layer of the system: the hierarchical ordering of persons according to their presumed capacity for knowledge, where that ordering is grounded not in demonstrated ability but in birth. The concept extends Miranda Fricker’s influential analysis of “testimonial injustice” and “hermeneutical injustice”

<sup>7</sup>A. Shearer and P. Russel (trans.), *Mundaka Upanishad, The Upanishads*, Harper Colophon Books, New York, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup>On the prohibition against Śūdras hearing the Vedas, see *Manusmṛiti* IV.99, VIII.270–272. Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Manu’s Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 130, 193. The punishment for a Śūdra who recites the Vedas is specified as having molten lead poured into the ears; for hearing the Vedas, having the ears filled with lac.

<sup>9</sup>Johannes Bronkhorst, *A Śabda Reader: Language in Classical Indian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 4–5.

into the domain of caste.<sup>10</sup> For Fricker, testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker receives a deflated level of credibility due to prejudice; hermeneutical injustice occurs when a structural gap in collective interpretive resources disadvantages certain groups in making sense of their own experience. Epistemic caste involves both forms of injustice but exceeds them in a crucial respect. In Fricker's analysis, the epistemic subject remains a subject, a knower whose knowledge is discounted or whose interpretive resources are impoverished. In the Brahmanical system, the Śūdra and the untouchable are not merely discounted as knowers; they are categorically *denied the status of knowers*. Their exclusion from knowledge is not a contingent social fact that might be remedied by reducing prejudice or enriching interpretive resources; it is an ontological determination, grounded in the metaphysical claim that their essential nature precludes the capacity for sacred knowledge.

This is why the concept of epistemic caste is needed alongside, not merely as a subset of Fricker's framework. Testimonial injustice presupposes that the subject has testimony to offer, which is then unfairly discounted. Hermeneutical injustice presupposes that the subject has experiences to interpret, but lacks the conceptual resources to do so. Epistemic caste operates at a more fundamental level: it denies that the subject is the *kind of being* that can know. The Śūdra's exclusion from knowledge is not an accident of social circumstance but an expression of the Śūdra's *svabhāva*—inherent nature. This is why caste-based epistemic exclusion cannot be addressed by the liberal solution of "equal access to education" alone (though Ambedkar fought strenuously for that access). The deeper problem is the view that different persons possess different capacities for knowledge *by nature*—a view that persists, often unconsciously, long after formal restrictions have been removed.

Ambedkar experienced epistemic caste personally and theorized it philosophically. As a Mahar, he was among the first untouchables to gain access to higher education in British India, yet his own account of his school years testifies to the persistence of epistemic caste even within nominally open institutions: he was forbidden from touching the water pitcher, made to sit apart from other students, and treated as cognitively deficient by default. As Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai have argued, the relationship between caste and the capacity for theoretical reflection is not incidental but structural: the caste system produces a distribution of "who can think" that

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<sup>10</sup>Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–7, 147–175. Fricker's framework distinguishes testimonial injustice (a deflated level of credibility given to a speaker due to prejudice) from hermeneutical injustice (a structural gap in collective interpretive resources that disadvantages certain groups). Caste epistemicide involves both but exceeds them: it does not merely discount testimony or deprive groups of interpretive resources but categorically denies the capacity for knowledge on ontological grounds.

mirrors its distribution of social rank.<sup>11</sup> Ambedkar's own intellectual achievements, his doctorates from Columbia and the London School of Economics, his drafting of India's constitution, were thus not merely personal accomplishments but existential refutations of epistemic caste: living proof that the Brahmanical mapping of cognitive capacity onto birth was false.

The gendered dimension of epistemic caste must be emphasized. The *Manusmriti* excludes women from Vedic study alongside Śūdras, and the logic is identical: women, like Śūdras, are held to lack the essential nature required for sacred knowledge. This means that epistemic caste operates along *two* axes simultaneously—caste and gender—producing a compounded exclusion for women of subordinated castes who are denied epistemic standing on both grounds. Ambedkar was attentive to this intersection. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he devoted specific attention to the Buddha's conversion of women, and he specified that Śūdras and women were the “two classes most oppressed by Brahmanism.”<sup>12</sup> The Buddhist dissolution of fixed selfhood dismantles the metaphysical ground of both forms of exclusion simultaneously: if there is no *svabhāva*, there is no essential nature that could make any person inherently incapable of knowledge.

## Epistemicide

The most severe operation of the caste-knowledge regime is what may be called *epistemicide*: the systematic destruction of knowledge systems and the suppression of the capacity for knowledge among subordinated groups.<sup>13</sup> The term was developed by the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos to describe how European colonialism destroyed indigenous knowledge traditions across the colonized world,

<sup>11</sup>Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially chapters 1–3 on the relationship between caste and the capacity for theoretical reflection. See also Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006), on the intersection of caste and gender in epistemic exclusion.

<sup>12</sup>Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, BAWs, vol. 11, Book I, Part III (“Brahmanas”), §§32–46.

<sup>13</sup>I adopt “epistemicide” from Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who defines it as the systematic destruction of knowledge systems by dominant powers (*Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*, Boulder: Paradigm, 2014). Santos develops the concept primarily in relation to European colonialism's erasure of indigenous knowledge traditions. I extend the term here to the Brahmanical suppression of non-Brahmanical knowledge, which involves not only the destruction of rival knowledge systems (such as Buddhist philosophical traditions) but the more fundamental denial that subordinated castes possess the capacity for knowledge at all. Where colonial epistemicide destroys existing knowledge, Brahmanical epistemicide operates through a prior move: it denies that the subordinated subject could have been a knower in the first place.

not merely displacing local knowledge with Western knowledge but actively annihilating the epistemological frameworks through which colonized peoples understood their worlds.<sup>14</sup> Santos's concept is illuminating for the study of caste, but it requires significant modification. Colonial epistemicide, as Santos describes it, operates primarily by destroying existing knowledge: burning libraries, suppressing languages, delegitimizing traditional practices. Brahmanical epistemicide operates through a more fundamental move: it denies that the subordinated subject could have been a knower in the first place. Where colonial epistemicide destroys knowledge that was once possessed, Brahmanical epistemicide forecloses the very possibility of knowledge by ontological fiat.

This distinction between colonial and Brahmanical epistemicide is not merely analytical but has practical consequences. Colonial epistemicide leaves traces: the colonized can remember what was lost, can point to the ruins of destroyed institutions, can reconstruct suppressed traditions. Brahmanical epistemicide, in its most thoroughgoing form, leaves no traces at all, because it denies that there was ever anything to destroy. If the Śūdra is inherently incapable of knowledge, then the Śūdra has never possessed knowledge, and there is nothing to mourn or recover. The violence of this erasure is so total that it becomes invisible: it does not appear as suppression because it presents itself as nature.

Yet Brahmanical epistemicide also operated in the material sense that Santos describes. Ambedkar's account of the decline of Buddhism in India documents the physical destruction of Buddhist institutions of learning, the monasteries and universities such as Nālandā, Takshashila, and Vikramaśīla that constituted the material infrastructure of non-Brahmanical knowledge production.<sup>15</sup> When Ambedkar argued that the Buddhist priesthood "perished by the sword of Islam and could not be resuscitated," while "it was not possible for Islam to annihilate the Brahmanic priesthood," he was identifying an asymmetry rooted in epistemicide: Brahmanism survived because its knowledge was distributed across a hereditary social group embedded in every village, while Buddhism's knowledge was concentrated in monastic centres that could be physically destroyed.<sup>16</sup> The destruction of the monasteries was an act of epistemicide in the most literal sense, the annihilation of institutions where

<sup>14</sup>Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 92–100.

<sup>15</sup>Ambedkar, *The Decline and Fall of Buddhism*, BAWs, vol. 3, 229–232. For the argument that the destruction of Nālandā and Vikramaśīla constituted epistemicide in the material sense—the physical annihilation of institutions of non-Brahmanical learning—see Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, *God as Political Philosopher: Buddha's Challenge to Brahminism* (New Delhi: Sage, 2018), 156–172.

<sup>16</sup>Ambedkar, *The Decline and Fall of Buddhism*, BAWs, vol. 3, 229–232.

subordinated communities had access to philosophical training and knowledge production outside the Brahmanical enclosure.

Together, these three concepts—epistemic enclosure, epistemic caste, and epistemocide—constitute the epistemological architecture of the caste system: enclosure restricts knowledge, epistemic caste naturalizes that restriction by grounding it in ontology, and epistemocide destroys the conditions under which alternative knowledge could be produced. Ambedkar's turn to Buddhism was a response to all three. By rejecting the authority of the Vedas, he broke the enclosure. By denying *ātman* and *svabhāva*, he dismantled the ontological foundation of epistemic caste. And by reviving the Buddhist tradition in India through the Navayāna Buddhist movement, he undertook what may be called *epistemic reconstruction*, namely, the rebuilding of a knowledge tradition that had been subjected to centuries of epistemocide.

### III

## Swayambhu and the Metaphysics of Caste: Fixed Self as Ideological Foundation

The Upanishadic tradition posits *ātman* as the essential, unchanging core of personhood. The *Īśā Upanishad* declares that “all that exists is nothing but the self” and characterizes this self as *swayambhu*—self-existent, self-sufficient, uncaused by anything external to itself. The *Muṇḍaka Upanishad* reinforces that the self is “unchanging.”<sup>17</sup> This raises two serious limitations: first, the self is posited as eternal, unchanging, and fixed, thus unquestionable; and second, this contradicts the notion of Brahman as all-inclusive and universal when only one caste—Brahmins—has exclusive access to knowledge (*Brahma-jnana*).<sup>18</sup> This metaphysical claim carries immediate implications for both social and epistemological ontology. If the self possesses a fixed, essential nature, then that nature can be classified, ranked, and assigned differential worth and differential cognitive capacity, which is precisely what the *varṇa* system does. The fourfold division of society in the *Purusha Sūkta* (Ṛg Veda 10.90), where different castes emerge from different parts of the cosmic being's body (*Brahma*), makes the connection between metaphysics and social hierarchy explicit:

<sup>17</sup>A. Shearer and P. Russel (trans.), *Mundaka Upanishad, The Upanishads*, Harper Colophon Books, New York, p. 41.

<sup>18</sup>A. Shearer and P. Russel (trans.), *The Upanishads*, Harper Colophon Books, New York. *Aham Brahmasmi* (I am Brahman: knowledge that the essence of self is none other than the infinite reality of Brahman), 1.4.10, *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*. Also, in, *Brahmavid apnoti param, Brahmiva san brahmapayeti* (the knower of Brahman attains the supreme - only being Brahman, he attains Brahman); *atama-brahma* - this self is Brahman: 3.2.9., *Mundaka Upanishad*.

ontological difference grounds both social difference and epistemic difference. The mouth (Brahmin) speaks and knows; the feet (Śūdra) bear weight in silence.

Ambedkar identified this connection with characteristic precision. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he traced how the Brahmanical doctrine of *caturvarṇa* fixes the social order on the basis of birth, assigning occupations, rights, and spiritual capacities as immutable properties of persons. What Ambedkar termed “graded inequality,” a hierarchy in which each caste oppresses the one below it, is simultaneously a graded *epistemology*: each caste possesses a diminishing share of the right to know. At the bottommost of this graded system, the untouchable possesses no epistemic rights at all, a condition that is not merely an effect of social exclusion but its ontological justification. Ambedkar specified that Śūdras and women were the classes most oppressed by this system, denied both the right to knowledge and the right to bear arms. The denial of knowledge and the denial of physical self-defence together constitute a comprehensive disempowerment: the subordinated subject can neither understand the system that oppresses them nor resist it by force.<sup>19</sup>

The rhetorical structure of Ambedkar’s narrative in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is significant: Buddha’s voice and Ambedkar’s voice blend as the text asks whether caste can be amended and concludes that, as a “divinely ordained social order,... it could not be. It could only be ended.”<sup>20</sup> The deliberate fusion of voices performs the argument: Ambedkar’s rejection of caste is presented as continuous with the Buddha’s original rejection of Brahmanism. The word “ended” is important. Ambedkar does not propose reform of the enclosure, wider access to the enclosed knowledge, but abolition of the system that makes enclosure possible: the metaphysical doctrine of fixed selfhood.

It is important to acknowledge that the Upanishadic corpus is not monolithic. Different Upanishads develop the concept of *ātman* in different ways, and later Advaita Vedānta offers a reading of *ātman* as universal and non-differentiated that, at least in principle, might seem to undercut caste distinctions. Ambedkar was aware of such readings but regarded them as practically irrelevant, because the social system that actually developed under Brahmanical authority was one of rigid hierarchy, and rigid epistemic enclosure, regardless of any theoretical universalism. The crucial point is not whether a philosophically charitable reading of the Upanishads *could* produce an egalitarian metaphysics, but whether the metaphysical framework *as historically deployed* served to justify caste. On this point, the historical record is unambiguous.

<sup>19</sup>Ambedkar, BAWS, vol. 11, Book I, Part III (“Brahmanas”), §§32–46. Ambedkar’s concept of “graded inequality” is elaborated in *Annihilation of Caste*, BAWS, vol. 1, 47–57.

<sup>20</sup>Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, BAWS, vol. 11, Book I, Part V (“The Brahmanas”), §3. p. 92

Aśvaghōṣa's *Vajrasūcī* ("The Diamond Needle"), composed in the first or second century CE, provides the classical Buddhist counterargument to caste essentialism that Ambedkar drew upon extensively. The text subjects the concept of caste to systematic logical deconstruction, asking what constitutes a Brahmin: is it the *jīva* (life force), the body, birth, knowledge, or conduct? Aśvaghōṣa demonstrates that none of these criteria can sustain the claim that Brahmin-hood is an inherent property of certain persons. If caste resides in the *jīva*, then all *jīvas* are of the same nature and no distinction holds. If it resides in the body, then all bodies are composed of the same elements. If in birth, then the mythological origins of great sages contradict the claim of pure lineage. Aśvaghōṣa's conclusion is that caste is a "mere mental construction, empty of any objective reality"<sup>21</sup>—a position that, as Vincent Eltschinger has shown, represents a sustained Buddhist philosophical tradition of critiquing the "realist interpretation of social denominations."<sup>22</sup> Crucially, the *Vajrasūcī*'s deconstruction targets epistemic caste directly: if there is no ontological basis for distinguishing a Brahmin from a Śūdra, then there is no ontological basis for distinguishing their capacities for knowledge. The epistemic hierarchy dissolves alongside the social one.

## IV

### The Skandhas and the Deconstruction of Essentialist Personhood

The Buddha's teaching on the five aggregates (*pañca khandha*) provides the analytical method by which the illusion of a fixed self is dismantled. The five aggregates: form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*sankhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*), are presented in the Pali Canon not as components that constitute a self but as the exhaustive analysis of what is conventionally mistaken for one. The *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* (SN 22.59) records the Buddha's systematic examination of each aggregate through three interconnected arguments: each aggregate is impermanent (*anicca*), therefore unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and therefore not-self (*anattā*).<sup>23</sup>

The logic is precise. If form were truly self, if it possessed *svabhāva* (inherent, independent existence), it would not be subject to change. But the body of infancy is not the body of youth, which is not the body of old age. Cells regenerate, organs fail, skin changes. Because form is impermanent, it is unsatisfactory: we cannot maintain the body in the state we desire. And because we lack sovereignty over form, we cannot

<sup>21</sup>Aśvaghōṣa, *Vajrasūcī*, in *Life of the Buddha*, trans. Olivelle, 393–415. For analysis, see Vincent Eltschinger, *Caste and Buddhist Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2012), 31–68.

<sup>22</sup>Vincent Eltschinger, *Caste and Buddhist Philosophy: Continuity of Some Buddhist Arguments against the Realist Interpretation of Social Denominations* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2012).

<sup>23</sup>Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 889. See *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, SN 22.59.

command, “Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus,” it cannot be identified as self, for selfhood in the Brahmanical sense implies precisely such sovereign control.<sup>24</sup> The same analysis applies to each of the remaining aggregates. Sensations arise and pass away unbidden. Perceptions shift. Mental formations are conditioned responses, not autonomous acts of will. Even consciousness, the most tempting candidate for selfhood, is revealed as arising dependently upon the other aggregates and upon contact between sense organs and sense objects.

Herbert Guenther characterizes the aggregates as “a unitary process of becoming in which no part can be isolated and called a self.”<sup>25</sup> This process-oriented understanding is central to Ambedkar’s appropriation of the teaching. Where the Brahmanical tradition posits an essential self that has various properties, including, crucially, a caste identity and a corresponding epistemic capacity, the Buddhist analysis reveals only a dynamic flux of processes that are conventionally designated as a “person.” The distinction matters enormously for social and epistemological philosophy alike. If persons are constituted by aggregates in constant transformation rather than by fixed essences, then the assignment of permanent social categories based on “essential nature” is not merely unjust but incoherent. It mistakes a conventional designation for an ultimate reality. And the assignment of permanent *epistemic* categories—the claim that certain persons are by nature knowers and others by nature unknowers—is equally incoherent, for the same reason: there is no fixed essence that could ground a fixed cognitive capacity.

This is the philosophical mechanism by which the *skandha* analysis dismantles epistemic caste. If the “self” is a conventional designation for five aggregates in constant flux, then the “Brahmin self” and the “Śūdra self” are equally conventional designations, equally devoid of inherent nature. The Brahmin’s supposed natural capacity for knowledge is no more an intrinsic property of the aggregates that compose a Brahmin than the Śūdra’s supposed natural incapacity is an intrinsic property of the aggregates that compose a Śūdra. Both designations are imposed upon a process that, in its actual nature, supports neither. The *skandha* analysis does not merely argue that caste is socially constructed (a claim that could be made from many philosophical traditions); it argues that the very *self* to which caste and epistemic capacity is attributed, is itself a construction. There is no essential subject who *is* a Brahmin or a Śūdra, because there is no essential subject at all.

Ambedkar makes this connection explicit in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* when he presents the Buddha’s engagement with the Vedic tradition. The text records the

<sup>24</sup>Ibid. The Pali formula is: *netam mama, neso ’ham asmi, na meso attā* (“this is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self”).

<sup>25</sup>Herbert V. Guenther, *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma* (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1976), 231–232.

Buddha's assessment that the Vedic Rishis were "groping for the truth but did not reach it," and details the Buddha's selective acceptance of Sāṅkhya philosophy: he accepted that reality must rest on proof, that there was no logical basis for presuming God's existence, and that *dukkha* pervades the world—while bypassing the remainder of Kapila's system as irrelevant to his purpose.<sup>26</sup> What Ambedkar highlights in this selective appropriation is the Buddha's methodological commitment to empirical analysis over speculative metaphysics; a commitment that, when applied to the question of personhood, yields the *skandha* analysis rather than the *ātman* doctrine, and that, when applied to the question of knowledge, yields a universally accessible practice of investigation rather than a restricted body of revealed truth.

The body contemplation practices preserved in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10) extend this analysis experientially. The practitioner is instructed to contemplate the body's constituent parts: "head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones," revealing that "body" is a conceptual designation for a collection of parts, each of which can be further subdivided.<sup>27</sup> Śāntideva, in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, extends this analysis through the lens of emptiness: when we search for the body in its parts, we find only components; when we search for those components in *their* parts, the process continues without terminus. The body, like the chariot in Nāgasena's famous analogy in the *Milindapañha*, cannot be located as a substantial entity.<sup>28</sup> For Ambedkar's purposes, the critical implication is that if the "person" is a conventional designation applied to a collection of conditioned processes, then "caste identity" is a conventional designation applied to a conventional designation; a second-order abstraction with no ground in ultimate reality.

## V

### Dependent Origination and the Emptiness of Caste

The doctrine of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) provides the systematic framework within which the *skandha* analysis and the teaching of *anattā* are situated. The classical Pali formulation is terse and comprehensive: "This being, that becomes; from the arising of this, that arises. This not being, that does not become; from the ceasing of this, that ceases."<sup>29</sup> The doctrine describes a principle of conditioned co-

<sup>26</sup>Ambedkar, BAWs, vol. 11, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Book I, Part III ("Buddha and His Predecessors"), §§20–36.

<sup>27</sup>Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 145 (Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, MN 10).

<sup>28</sup>Śāntideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, trans. Vesna A. Wallace and B. Alan Wallace (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1997), ch. IX, vv. 56–60.

<sup>29</sup>See note 2 above

production: phenomena arise not from a single cause in linear sequence but through specific combinations of conditions, and they cease when those conditions cease.

A common misinterpretation of Dependent Origination reduces it to linear causation: A causes B, which causes C. The canonical teaching is more radical: it describes the *interdependent* arising of phenomena, where each element in the chain both conditions and is conditioned by the others. The twelve links (*nidānas*)—from ignorance (*avijjā*) through formations (*sankhāra*), consciousness, name-and-form, six sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, and aging-and-death—constitute not a temporal sequence but a structural description of how the experience of a “self” in a “world” is generated and sustained moment by moment.

Ambedkar’s interpretation of this doctrine is articulated most fully in his treatment of Buddha’s concept of *sūnyatā* (emptiness). In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar glosses *sūnyatā* not as nihilism or metaphysical void but as “the potential changes occurring at every moment in the phenomenal world.”<sup>30</sup> This interpretation is philosophically significant: emptiness, for Ambedkar, is not a negative property (the absence of something that should be there) but a positive condition (the openness of phenomena to transformation). Things are empty of fixed essence precisely because they are full of conditioned processes in constant flux. This reading aligns with the Mādhyamaka tradition’s insistence that emptiness and dependent origination are not two separate doctrines but two descriptions of the same reality: phenomena are empty because they arise dependently, and they arise dependently *because* they are empty of inherent nature.

Applied to caste, the implications are devastating to essentialist ideology. If all phenomena arise through interconnected causes and conditions, then no social category can possess the fixed, inherent nature that caste ideology attributes to it. The Brahmin’s “purity” is not an essential property but a socially sustained designation; the Śūdra’s “impurity” is equally devoid of ontological ground. In Ambedkar’s formulation, “being is becoming,” what we take to be stable entities are in fact processes in constant transformation. Caste, when subjected to the analysis of Dependent Origination, reveals itself as a contingent formation sustained by specific historical, social, and cognitive conditions: economic exploitation, political power, epistemic enclosure, and, most fundamentally, the wrong view that persons possess fixed essences. Applied to the epistemic dimension, dependent origination reveals that the capacity for knowledge, as *guṇas* the Gita attributes to persons, are themselves dependently arisen, products of conditioning, not expressions of inherent nature. The capacity for knowledge is a function of conditions (education, access, opportunity) rather than of birth. The Brahmin’s knowledge is conditioned, not innate; the Śūdra’s

<sup>30</sup>Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, BAWs, vol. 11, introduction, 6.

ignorance is produced by epistemic enclosure and epistemocide, not by ontological deficiency or *tamas*-dominated *svabhāva*.

Ambedkar traced the historical dimension of this analysis in “Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India.” His central claim that “the history of India is nothing but a history of a mortal conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism,”<sup>31</sup> is often read as political polemic, but it carries a precise philosophical meaning within the framework established here. The “conflict” is between two incompatible views of reality: one that posits fixed essences and derives social and epistemic hierarchy from them, and one that reveals the dependent origination and essential emptiness of all phenomena, including social categories and claims to knowledge. Ambedkar’s account of the decline of Buddhism in India, through the combination of Brahmanical reassertion, the absorption of Buddhist elements into “Hinduism” (including the appropriation of the Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu), and the destruction of monastic institutions by Muslim invasions,<sup>32</sup> is thus not merely a historical narrative but an account of how wrong view reasserted itself after the Buddhist “revolution” in right view, and, simultaneously, an account of epistemocide: the destruction of the institutions through which non-Brahmanical knowledge had been produced and transmitted.

Ambedkar was careful to distinguish between the “decline” and the “fall” of Buddhism, attributing the former to the internal dilution of Buddhist distinctiveness as Brahmanism absorbed its elements, and the latter to the external destruction of monastic centres. Peter Harvey’s analysis supports Ambedkar’s general framework while adding nuance: the surface similarities between Hindu and Mahāyāna devotional cults may have led the laity to perceive the two traditions as interchangeable, while Brahmanism’s integration into caste-based life rituals ensured its survival in a way that monastery-centered Buddhism could not match.<sup>33</sup> Gail Omvedt, drawing on A.L. Basham, emphasizes that even Buddhist families had their life rituals handled by Brahmins, enabling the gradual reabsorption of Buddhism into a reformed Brahmanism.<sup>34</sup> The philosophical point remains: the reassertion of caste was simultaneously the reassertion of *ātman* doctrine and the restoration of epistemic enclosure - the re-establishment of a knowledge hierarchy grounded in the fiction of fixed, essential selfhood.

<sup>31</sup>Ambedkar, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*, BAWS, vol. 3, part III, 267.

<sup>32</sup>Ambedkar, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*, BAWS, vol. 3, 229–232

<sup>33</sup>Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, Practices*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 195–197.

<sup>34</sup>Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* (New Delhi: Sage, 2003), 160–161, citing A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (1954; repr. New York: Grove Press, 1959), 265–266.

## VI

## The Bhagavat Gita as Philosophic Defence of Caste-Self: Wrong View Codified

If the Upanishadic doctrine of *ātman/swayambhu* provides the metaphysical foundation of caste, and the *Manusmriti* provides its juridical enforcement, then the Bhagavad Gita provides what Ambedkar identified as its most sophisticated *philosophical defence*. In his essay “Krishna and His Gita,” Ambedkar argued that the Gita came into being specifically to counter the Buddhist challenge to Brahmanism. The text does not merely assert the divine origin of *catuvarṇa*; it offers a philosophical justification for caste by linking it to the theory of innate, inborn qualities (*guṇas*) derived from Sāṅkhya philosophy. As Ambedkar writes, “The fixing of the Varna of man is not an arbitrary act, says the Bhagavat Gita. But it is fixed according to his innate, inborn qualities.”<sup>35</sup> This move is philosophically significant: the Gita shifts the ground of caste’s legitimacy from pure divine fiat to a quasi-naturalistic claim about the inherent constitution of persons. In doing so, it provides the caste system with exactly the kind of philosophical respectability that Ambedkar’s Buddhist critique was designed to dismantle.

Ambedkar’s reading of the Gita as a response to Buddhism is central to his broader thesis that “the history of India is nothing but a history of a mortal conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism.” The Gita, in this reading, is not a timeless spiritual text but a historical intervention—a counter-revolutionary document produced to shore up the Brahmanical order against the Buddhist assault. Ambedkar identifies the specific doctrines under threat: the Buddha had preached non-violence, condemning the animal sacrifices of the *karma kaṇḍa*; he had attacked *catuvarṇa* with “some of the most offensive similes”; Śūdras and women had become *sannyasis*, a status that the counter-revolution sought to deny them. The Brahmanical response, according to Ambedkar, was twofold: first, to assert that “these things were ordained by the Vedas, the Vedas were infallible, therefore the dogmas were not to be questioned”; and second, to provide a more philosophically respectable defence through the Gita’s *guṇa* theory.<sup>36</sup>

Ambedkar exposed a fundamental logical flaw in this defence. The Sāṅkhya system recognizes three *guṇas*: *sattva* (goodness, light), *rajas* (passion, activity), and *tamas* (darkness, inertia). But *catuvarṇa* requires *four* categories: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Śūdra. As Ambedkar observes, “How can a system of four varnas be defended on the basis of a philosophy which does not recognise more

<sup>35</sup>Ambedkar, *Essays on the Bhagvat Gita: Philosophic Defence of Counter-Revolution*, BAWS, vol. 3, 362.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 363.

than three varnas?"<sup>37</sup> The logical incoherence reveals the apologetic nature of the Gita's philosophical apparatus: the Sāṅkhya framework is pressed into service not because it fits the social reality but because any philosophical framework is better than naked assertion. The mismatch between three *guṇas* and four *varṇas* exposes the Gita's defence of caste as post hoc rationalization rather than genuine philosophical derivation.

More revealing still are the Gita's two injunctions that Ambedkar identifies as the practical enforcement of its philosophical defence. The first, in Chapter III, verse 26, instructs that "a wise man should not by counter propaganda create a doubt in the mind of an ignorant person who is follower of Karma kand", in other words, one must not agitate people to rebel against *caturvarṇa*. The second, in Chapter XVIII, verses 41–48, ties salvation itself to the performance of *varṇa*-specific duty, warning that "a Shudra however great he may be as a devotee will not get salvation if he has transgressed the duty of the Shudra, namely to live and die in the service of the higher classes."<sup>38</sup> *Bhagavad-Gītā* teaches, it is better to engage in one's occupation...one should not give up the work born of his nature.<sup>39</sup> Read together, these injunctions constitute what in the epistemological framework of this article must be recognized as a double enclosure: the first injunction encloses the questioning of caste (epistemic enclosure of critical thought itself), while the second encloses salvation within caste duty (soteriological enclosure). The Śūdra is denied not only the right to knowledge but the right to challenge the system, and not only the right to challenge but even the possibility of spiritual liberation outside the prescribed caste function.

From the Buddhist philosophical perspective that Ambedkar adopted, the Gita's defence of caste constitutes a paradigmatic instance of wrong view—what the Pali texts term *pāpa-ditṭhikaṃ*, the holding of evil or wrong views.<sup>40</sup> The term is significant: in the Pali Canon, *pāpa-ditṭhikaṃ* does not merely designate intellectual error but marks a morally consequential distortion of reality that generates suffering for oneself and

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 363. Ambedkar's argument is that the Sāṅkhya system recognizes only three *guṇas* (*sattva*, *rajas*, *taṃas*) while *caturvarṇa* requires four categories, exposing a logical incoherence in the Gita's philosophical defense of caste.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 365. The injunction in Chapter III, verse 26, forbids counter-propaganda against *karma kaṇḍa*; Chapter XVIII, verses 41–48, ties salvation to the performance of *varṇa*-specific duty.

<sup>39</sup>Bhaktivedanta Swami A.C., *Bhagavad-Gītā*, (II ed)The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Los Angeles, 2021, 798-800

<sup>40</sup>The Pali term *pāpa-ditṭhikaṃ* (holder of wrong view, or one given to evil views) appears in the Majjhima Nikāya and the Anguttara Nikāya. See Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), and *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012). The designation marks not merely intellectual error but a morally consequential distortion of reality that generates suffering for oneself and others.

others. The Gita's claim that persons possess innate, inborn qualities that determine their *varṇa* is, in Buddhist analysis, a specific instance of the more general error of attributing *svabhāva* (inherent self-nature) to what are in fact dependently arisen and constantly changing phenomena. The *guṇas* are presented as fixed properties of persons; the Buddha's teaching reveals that all properties of persons are impermanent, conditioned, and devoid of inherent existence. The Gita's philosophical defence of caste is thus not merely politically objectionable but *ontologically false* from the standpoint of Dependent Origination: it mistakes contingent formations for inherent essences, conventional designations for ultimate realities.

Ambedkar recognized that the Gita occupies a peculiar intermediate position in the Brahmanical tradition. As he observes in Volume 3 of his *Writings and Speeches*, "The Gita does not, like Buddhism, absolutely reject the Vedas, but it shelves them. The Gita does not totally root out caste. It places caste on a less untenable basis."<sup>41</sup> This observation is philosophically acute. The Gita's strategy is not to defend caste on the old grounds of Vedic infallibility—grounds that the Buddhist critique had made untenable—but to provide new, quasi-rational grounds through the *guṇa* theory. It concedes part of the Buddhist criticism (the arbitrary authority of the Vedas) in order to save the essential Brahmanical institution (caste hierarchy). Ambedkar saw through this strategy: the new philosophical basis is no less a wrong view than the old scriptural basis, because both attribute fixed, inherent properties to what Buddhism reveals as a flux of conditioned processes. Whether one claims that a person is a Śūdra because the Vedas say so or because innate *guṇas* make it so, the fundamental error is the same—the attribution of *svabhāva* to the caste-self. The Buddha's teaching of *anattā* dissolves both foundations simultaneously.

The Gita's defence of caste also reveals the *epistemocidal* dimension of the counter-revolution with particular clarity. The injunction against "counter propaganda", against creating doubt in the minds of those who follow *karma kaṇḍa*, is an explicit instruction to suppress critical inquiry. It sanctifies ignorance: not the innocent ignorance of those who have not yet encountered the truth, but the *enforced* ignorance of those who are forbidden from questioning the foundations of their subordination. This is epistemic enclosure operating not merely through restriction of access to texts but through the prohibition of thought itself. When the Gita instructs the "wise man" not to create doubt, it deputizes the intellectual class as enforcers of epistemic enclosure – turning the Brahmanical guardians of knowledge into active agents of epistemicide against critical consciousness. Ambedkar's Buddhist reading exposes this for what it is: the most insidious form of wrong view, one that not only distorts reality but actively prevents others from seeing clearly.

<sup>41</sup>Ambedkar, BAWs, vol. 3, 386. The passage discusses how the Gita "shelves" the Vedas and places caste "on a less untenable basis" without rooting it out, in contrast to Buddhism's absolute rejection.

## VII

### From Deconstruction to Epistemic Liberation: Conversion and the Navayāna Buddhist Movement

Ambedkar's philosophical deconstruction of caste was inseparable from his practical programme of conversion. If caste rests on wrong view, and if wrong view generates epistemic enclosure, epistemic caste, and epistemocide, then the remedy is not social reform alone but a fundamental shift in the conceptual framework through which persons understand themselves, their world, and their capacity to know. Ambedkar's announcement at the Depressed Classes Conference at Yeola on 13 October 1935, "I will not die a Hindu," inaugurated a twenty-one-year process in which the philosophical critique and the practical programme developed in tandem.<sup>42</sup>

The delay between announcement and conversion was not indecision but deliberation. As Zelliott documents, Ambedkar considered and rejected multiple alternatives: Sikhism had the advantage of being an Indic religion but did not provide the philosophical resources he sought; Islam and Christianity carried associations with colonial power that complicated the question of national identity. More significantly, Ambedkar judged that "none of the available choices were intellectually and politically suitable to him," and that constitutional work offered a more immediate method of change.<sup>43</sup> It was only after 1950, with the constitution drafted and Ambedkar's disillusionment with the pace of social transformation growing, that Buddhism emerged as the clear choice, not as a default but as the tradition whose philosophical foundations most thoroughly dismantled the ontological and epistemological architecture of caste.

*The Buddha and His Dhamma*, completed shortly before Ambedkar's death in 1956, represents the culmination of this dual project of philosophical deconstruction and epistemic reconstruction. The text is structured as a biographical narrative of the Buddha, but its introduction establishes a hermeneutic framework that transforms it into something more: an argument about how to read Buddhism for emancipatory purposes. Ambedkar frames four "problems": the historical circumstances of the Buddha's renunciation; whether the Four Noble Truths belong to the original teaching; the apparent contradiction between the denial of *ātman* and the doctrines of karma and rebirth; and the purpose of the monastic community.<sup>44</sup> The very act of framing

<sup>42</sup>For a detailed account, see Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste* (London: Hurst, 2005), 119–122; Zelliott, *Ambedkar's World*, 155–162.

<sup>43</sup>Zelliott, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement*, Navayana Publications, New Delhi, 161–170.

<sup>44</sup>Ambedkar, BAWs, vol. 11, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, introduction, 6. Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma, eds., *B.R. Ambedkar: The Buddha and His Dhamma—A Critical Edition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

these problems, of a Dalit intellectual subjecting the Buddhist canonical tradition to critical hermeneutic scrutiny, is itself a reversal of epistemic caste. Ambedkar does not approach the tradition as a supplicant seeking admission to an enclosed body of knowledge; he approaches it as a critical thinker exercising the epistemic agency that the Brahmanical system denied to persons of his birth. The introduction closes by inviting readers to participate in the making of the text by contributing their own solutions, an invitation that extends epistemic agency to the community of readers, dissolving the model of knowledge as a restricted possession transmitted from authority to recipient.<sup>45</sup>

The text's treatment of the "Campaign of Conversion" draws on the biographical tradition of Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita* while reframing it for Ambedkar's purposes. The Buddha's conversion of followers across social categories, the high and the low, men and women, the fallen and the criminal, is presented as evidence of a religion that refuses the essentialist distinctions upon which caste depends.<sup>46</sup> Ambedkar positions his own conversion as continuous with this original campaign: a revival of the Buddhist movement against caste essentialism, interrupted by the historical "counter-revolution" of Brahmanism and its accompanying epistemocide.

The conversion ceremony of 14 October 1956 at Nagpur, attended by approximately half a million people, embodied the philosophical argument in ritual form. Ambedkar received conversion from an eighty-three-year-old *bhikkhu* from Burma, then administered the three refuges (*tisaraṇa*) and the five precepts (*pañca sīla*) in Pali, maintaining continuity with the classical Theravāda tradition.<sup>47</sup> The twenty-two vows that followed, however, were Ambedkar's own composition, delivered in Marathi, the language of his community, the language that epistemic enclosure had designated as unfit for sacred knowledge. The choice of language is itself an act of epistemic liberation: sacred truth is now spoken in the vernacular of the formerly excluded.

The twenty-two vows perform the philosophical argument analyzed in this article. The first five vows negate Hindu theological claims, with the fifth: "I do not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this propaganda is mischievous and false," directly addressing the Brahmanical strategy of absorbing Buddhism that Ambedkar identified as central to its historical decline. Vow nineteen: discarding the Hindu religion, enacts the rejection of wrong view. The remaining vows affirm

<sup>45</sup>Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, BAWs, vol. 11, introduction, 8.

<sup>46</sup>Patrick Olivelle, introduction to Aśvaghōṣa, *Life of the Buddha*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (New York: New York University Press, 2008), xx.

<sup>47</sup>For Ambedkar's engagement with Pali, see Vasant Moon, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2002), 206; Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2004), 250.

Buddhist principles.<sup>48</sup> The vows thus combine *de-brahmanization* (the dismantling of wrong view and the breaking of epistemic enclosure) with *re-orientation* (the adoption of right view and the reconstruction of epistemic agency), corresponding exactly to the dual movement of Ambedkar's philosophical project: the deconstruction of caste-self through the *skandha* analysis and the reconstruction of selfless, epistemically liberated personhood through *anattā*. The conversion is, at its deepest level, an act of collective epistemic self-determination: a community that had been defined for millennia as incapable of knowledge now claims the right to know, to interpret, and to construct meaning on its own terms.

## VII

### Conclusion: Being as Becoming, Knowing as Liberation

Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhist philosophy constitutes a distinctive contribution to both Caste studies and Buddhist Studies – predominantly in the field of socially engaged Buddhism. By identifying the structural homology between *ātman* doctrine and caste ideology, Ambedkar reframed the social question of caste as a philosophical question about the nature of selfhood, and, as this article has argued, as an epistemological question about the nature of knowledge and the right to know. The three categories examined in this article: *swayambhu*, *skandha*, and *śūnyata*, represent not separate arguments but three moments of a single philosophical movement: the identification of caste's metaphysical and epistemological foundation in the doctrine of self-existent selfhood; the analytical dismantling of that foundation through the Buddhist teaching that what we call "self" is a conventional designation for five aggregates in constant flux; and the positive articulation of an alternative understanding of personhood grounded in selflessness, dependent origination, and universal epistemic capacity.

The three epistemological concepts introduced in this article—epistemic enclosure, epistemic caste, and epistemicide—provide an analytical vocabulary for naming what Ambedkar's Buddhist critique was designed to dismantle. Epistemic enclosure names the institutional mechanism by which knowledge is restricted to a hereditary elite. Epistemic caste names the ontological claim that naturalizes that restriction by grounding it in the supposed essential natures of persons. Epistemicide names the systematic destruction of alternative knowledge traditions and the denial of epistemic capacity to subordinated groups. Together, these three concepts reveal caste as not merely a social hierarchy but a *knowledge regime*, a comprehensive system for controlling who can know, what can be known, and on whose authority knowledge

<sup>48</sup>Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement*, Navayana Publications, New Delhi, 169–170. The twenty-two vows are reproduced in full in Zelliot's text.

claims are validated. Ambedkar's Buddhist intervention addressed all three levels: breaking the enclosure by rejecting Vedic authority, dissolving epistemic caste by denying *svabhāva*, and reversing epistemocide by reviving the Buddhist tradition as a framework for non-Brahmanical knowledge production.

The doctrine of Dependent Origination provides the overarching framework for this movement. Because all phenomena arise through interconnected causes and conditions, no phenomenon - including what we call "caste" or "epistemic capacity," can possess the fixed, inherent nature that essentialist ideology attributes to it. Ambedkar's reading of *śūnyatā* as "the potential changes occurring at every moment" reframes emptiness not as absence but as possibility, the condition that makes transformation, including social and epistemic transformation, possible. If things possessed fixed essences, change would be metaphysically impossible; precisely because they do not, emancipation is achievable.

If I put in Dōgen's formulation: "To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self,"<sup>49</sup> captures something of the paradox at the heart of Ambedkar's project. Ambedkar studied the self—the caste-self, the *ātman*-self, the *swayambhu*-self—with extraordinary rigor and historical depth. And through that study, he arrived at the annihilation of self: the recognition that the self which caste claims to classify, rank, and assign differential worth and differential knowledge does not, in the final analysis, exist as an independent, fixed entity. What remains after this deconstruction is not nihilism but what Ambedkar called the Eightfold Path and the ten *pāramitās*—a practical programme for living without the conceptual, social, and epistemic prison of caste-self. The Navayāna school cannot be classified as solely rational or solely mystical because its ultimate aim—emancipation through the dissolution of the fiction of inherent selfhood - operates simultaneously at the philosophical, social, epistemological, and spiritual levels.

The Navayāna movement that Ambedkar initiated thus represents not merely a religious conversion but an act of *epistemic liberation*: the reclamation by formerly excluded communities of the right to know, to interpret, to construct meaning, and to define the terms on which reality is understood. In a system built on epistemic enclosure, epistemic caste, and epistemocide, the most radical act is not to demand admission to the enclosed knowledge but to demonstrate, as the Buddha demonstrated, and as Ambedkar demonstrated after him, that the knowledge was never the exclusive possession of anyone, because the self to which it was attributed never existed in the first place. Nothing is fixed, nothing is eternal, and therefore everything, including the most entrenched structures of social and epistemic oppression, is subject to change and thus subject to transformation.

<sup>49</sup>On Dōgen's *genjōkōan*, see Hee-Jin Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 55–78.

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# Maadhuri Hireker: Education, Emancipation, and an Ambedkarite-Buddhist Woman's Journey from India to the UK

Gaurav J. Pathania<sup>1</sup>, Sat Pal Muman<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This article presents a transnational oral history of Maadhuri Hireker (b. 1940), a first-generation educated Ambedkarite woman whose life traverses rural Maharashtra, the historic moment of Buddhist conversion in 1956, and the institutionalization of Ambedkarism in postwar Britain. Grounded in extended first-person narrative, it advances an Ambedkarite feminist methodology that treats lived experience as a site of theory production rather than illustrative data. It argues that Ambedkarism circulates not as abstract ideology but as an ethical and socio-political practice, enacted through education, refusal of humiliation, gendered agency, and institution-building across borders.

Situating Maadhuri's life within Ambedkar's core commitments—the annihilation of caste, education as emancipation, ethical self-respect, and resistance to graded inequality—the article foregrounds the gendered labour through which Ambedkarite ethics are sustained and transmitted in the diaspora. Placing her experiences alongside Ambedkar's writings and subsequent scholarship, it shows how her life challenges patriarchy, caste, and untouchability while extending Ambedkarite thought in practice. Rooted in rural Maharashtra, Maadhuri drew on a distinct cultural and political inheritance, including witnessing Dr. Ambedkar firsthand, which shaped her trajectory toward emancipation. By centering her voice, the article addresses a significant gap in scholarship on Dalit women's leadership within the global Ambedkarite movement while also contributing to broader discussions on caste, feminism, oral history, and migration. The article is embedded in a longitudinal project documenting the oral histories of first-generation Ambedkarites who migrated to the UK between the 1950s and 1970s and laid the foundations of contemporary Ambedkarism.

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor of Sociology & Peacebuilding, Eastern Mennonite University, Virginia

<sup>2</sup>Secretary of Ambedkar International Mission in London; Co-founder and Chairman of Caste Watch UK  
E-mail: <sup>1</sup>gaurav.pathania@emu.edu, <sup>2</sup>sat.muman01@gmail.com

## Keywords

Ambedkarism, Buddhism, Caste, Dalit diaspora, Dalit studies, Dalit feminism, Education, Maharashtra, UK

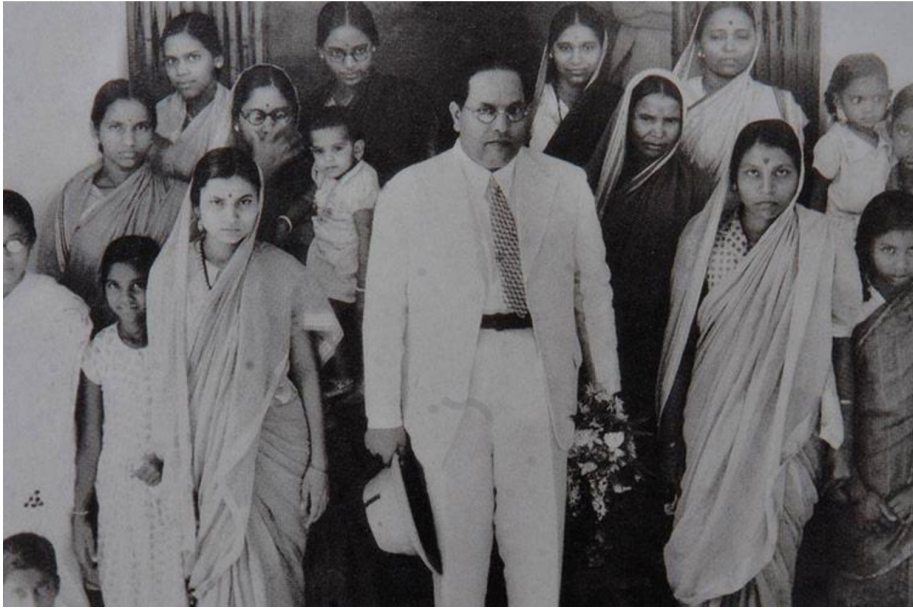
## Introduction to Ambedkarism

Ambedkarism is a transformative socio-political and intellectual tradition grounded in the life and thought of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), a distinguished Indian jurist, economist, political philosopher, social reformer, chief architect of the Indian Constitution, and a key figure in the revival of Buddhism in modern India. At its core, Ambedkarism advances the abolition of caste, the pursuit of social justice and civic rights, and the emancipation of Dalits and other marginalized communities through constitutional morality, education, and sustained political action. In India and across the diaspora, it upholds rationalism, human rights, and gender equality, and endorses conversion to Buddhism as an ethical pledge and simultaneous political rejection of caste oppression. Moving beyond identity-based politics, Ambedkarism constitutes a comprehensive framework for social transformation, committed to building an egalitarian society grounded in liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice.

Ambedkar repeatedly insisted that caste is not merely “a division of labour but a division of labourers” (Ambedkar 1944, p. 47), sustained through everyday practices, affective discipline, and gendered regulation. Women, he argued, were made the gatekeepers of caste, bearing the burden of ritual purity, endogamy, and social reproduction. Yet Ambedkar also insisted that women, once educated and politically awakened, would be among the most radical agents of social transformation. Dr. Ambedkar advocated for the equal education of girls and boys from a young age, a commitment reflected in his personal efforts to educate his sisters and in a letter written at age twenty-five stressing that social progress would be accelerated if male and female education advanced together (Saha 2017). Ambedkar regarded women’s empowerment as foundational to dismantling structural inequalities.

Ambedkar’s engagement with women’s rights was inseparable from his project of the *Annihilation of Caste*. He conceptualized untouchability as a deeply gendered condition, arguing that caste oppression was reproduced through women’s bodies and reproductive roles. As Gopal (2023, p. 288) notes, Ambedkar questioned the moral contradiction that rendered birth from Dalit women a “sin” while birth from dominant-caste women was considered a ‘merit’, exposing how caste hierarchies were sustained through the stigmatization of Dalit motherhood. This emphasis on education and empowerment as tools of liberation resonates with bell hooks’ later articulation that “education as the practice of freedom enables the oppressed to reclaim their agency

and envision a life beyond domination (hooks 1994: 13),” linking Ambedkar’s work with broader struggles for emancipation across time and context.



Dr. Ambedkar with women delegates of the Scheduled Caste Federation during their annual Conference on July 8, 1942 at Nagpur (Source: *Forward Press*, April 14, 2016)

In addition to advocating education, Ambedkar emphasized women’s economic independence and legal rights, most notably through his support for maternity benefits and gender-equal provisions in the Hindu Code Bill. His firm belief in women-led movements was evident during the Mahad Satyagraha on 20 March 1927, where over 300 women participated. His commitment is reflected in his well-known words: “I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved” (BAWS, 14 (2), p. 172). Ambedkar asserted that women, when fully trusted and mobilized, possessed the transformative capacity to challenge entrenched social inequalities and improve the conditions of marginalized communities. Sarkar (2022) pointed out that reducing him to just a ‘Dalit reformer’, is “curbing the potential to realise how his ideas can contribute to the contemporary landscape of feminism. Ambedkar’s ideologies are imperative to intersectional feminism, according to her.”

### **Invisibility and Scholarly Neglect of Dalit Women in the Diaspora**

Scholarship on Dalit diasporic communities has developed since the late 1980s, with early studies by Jurgensmeyer (1982) on Dalit Sikhs (Ravidasias) establishing gurudwaras in the UK, Desai (1963) on Indian immigrants in Britain, and V. Kumar (2004, 2013, pp. 256–257) and S. Kumar (2023) providing comparative accounts of Dalit migration to the US, Canada, and the UK. While these works examine

migration patterns, education, and occupational stratification, they predominantly foreground male experiences. Vivek Kumar's pioneer work in *Dalit Diaspora* (2013) in Malaysia,<sup>1</sup> UK, Canada, and the United States, highlights the roles of Dalit Sikhs, Dalit Christians, and Dalit women in the U.S. as engineers, sales workers, and homemakers, while offering limited focus on their engagement in political activism or leadership. Adur & Narayan (2017) and Soundararajan (2022) highlights how caste oppression persists in the diaspora, where Dalit women continue to face hidden but real forms of discrimination shaped by both caste identity and patriarchal norms even outside South Asia. In their recent research on campus life, Zare & Pathania (2025) and Zare et al. (2025) document experiences of immigrant students studying in the US universities. Similarly, UK-focused scholarship, including Dhanda (2009, 2013, 2014, 2017), Ghuman (2011), Jaspal and Takhar (2016), Kalsi (1992), Singh and Tatla (2006), Sato (2012), Sanam (2023) and Pasha (2025) has largely centered on caste hierarchies, youth identity, and community formation, often leaving women's agency in organizing or theorizing Ambedkarite politics unexamined. Outside the UK, US and Canada, Tejaswini Niranjana (2006) in her study of Indo-Trinidadian communities, offers a nuanced engagement with questions of gender, diaspora, and cultural identity, particularly through the figure of the indentured woman. While her research provides valuable insights into these intersecting domains, it does not specifically focus on Dalit women. Similarly, Pande (2020) provides valuable perspectives on the experiences of indentured and post-indentured Indian women in the Caribbean, enhancing our understanding of migration and gender. Adur & Narayan (2017, p. 247) pointed out that little attention has been paid to the gendered nature of diasporic experiences. The "Dalits' lives are rarely at the center of discussions of South Asian diaspora, and the dearth of scholarship on Dalit lives and activism in the US is a testament to that marginalization" (2017, p. 244). They argue that Dalit women's experiences of exclusion and discrimination in the UK and US diaspora are shaped by Dalit immigrants' efforts to assimilate, yet these efforts are hindered by both racism in wider society and casteism within their own communities, effectively positioning Dalit women as a "diaspora within a diaspora". This gap reflects a broader absence in diaspora studies where Dalit women's leadership, resistance, and political praxis remain underexplored (Das Gupta 2006; Prashad 2000; Gould, Dass & Jaffrelot 2022; Jaoul 2021; Mehta 2021; Mishra 2016; Muman 2025; Nagpal 2025; Waughray 2018, 2022; Yengde 2025). Recent important works on caste discrimination and

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<sup>1</sup>In his research on Dalit International Organization (DIO) Malaysia points out that Dalits especially from the then Madras presidency were brought here as indentured laborers some hundred years back by the colonial rulers. According to their information, Dalits here constitute sixty five percent of the ten percent of the total Indian population settled in Malaysia.

legal frameworks in Britain (Waughray & Dhanda 2016; Waughray 2022) analyse transnational identities but women's narrative remains overlooked in these studies.

This article addresses these gaps (the specific trajectories of Dalit women's activism within anti-caste movements and across the diaspora) through the broader project *The Emergence of Ambedkarism in the UK*, which draws on interviews with first-generation migrants who arrived during the 1950s and 1970s. During this diasporic movement, women were often secondary or delayed migrants, with mobility largely structured by marital and familial arrangements. In many cases, women migrated only after marriage, joining their husbands once they had become economically and socially established in the host country. This has been a general trend among Dalits diaspora.

In contrast, this article focuses on the story of a woman from Maharashtra who came from a relatively well-off family. We examine how, despite the constraints of her time and social context, her contrarian spirit reshaped her life trajectory, leading her to become a lifelong Ambedkarite activist and community organizer. By focusing on Maadhuri Hireker, one of the earliest educated Dalit women from Maharashtra to migrate, it illuminates how Dalit women actively shaped Ambedkarite politics abroad, foregrounding gendered diasporic subjectivity and transnational activism largely invisible in existing literature.

## Methodology

Both authors conducted two in-person interviews with Maadhuri Hireker at her residence in London between May 2023 and December 2025 to document her life narrative. Following the initial data collection and archival review, a final interview was completed in December 2025. All interviews were guided by a structured protocol and video recorded with the participant's informed consent. Additionally, two in-depth follow-up meetings were held by Sat Pal Muman, and further clarifications were obtained through telephone communication. The information collected was systematically cross-verified at multiple stages to ensure accuracy and reliability. During the analysis and writing phase, Maadhuri suggested consulting a recently published family memoir on her cousin, N.G. Uke (written by Uke's daughter Nagpal 2025), an influential figure in her life. This memoir helped us verify and refine specific historical dates and details.

Sociologist C. Wright Mills reminds us that "no social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey (Mills 1967, p. 6). The article employs a life-history interviewing method. Life history traces key events and transitions over time while incorporating subjective dimensions such as memory, relationships, and aspirations that shape individual trajectories, thereby offering deeper insight into how and why

individuals come to occupy their present positions. Moving between Maadhuri's remembered past and the analytical present, the study illustrates how Ambedkarism travelled with her, from a remote village where Dalit girls were not allowed to study, to London where she, as an activist, celebrates her first Ambedkar Jayanti (Ambedkar's birthday- April 14) along with migrant students and workers in 1961. Her life allows us to trace how Ambedkar's ideas were not only received and celebrated but enacted, translated, and institutionalised across borders. Methodologically, the article treats Maadhuri's narrative as an archive. Her quotations are retained to preserve cadence, idiom, and affect, resisting the tendency of academic writing to over-summarise subaltern speech. As she herself states, memory is not passive recollection but an active ethical stance: remembering is a way of refusing erasure. Situated within this methodological framework, the study engages with the role of narrative construction in diasporic settings. In such contexts, imagination and memory, often interwoven with elements of both myth and history, serve as critical resources through which marginalized communities sustain identity, dignity, and a sense of social presence. Accordingly, this article examines how caste-based identities are not merely preserved but are actively reconstituted and articulated as anti-caste ideologies within new diasporic contexts.

### **Maadhuri Hireker: Village, Caste, and the Making of Defiance**

Maadhuri Hireker was a first-generation educated Dalit woman, hailing from the same linguistic region, Maharashtra, where Dr. Ambedkar comes from. She saw Dr. Ambedkar at the age of 13 when he visited a nearby village. What sets her apart is her distinctive spirit of resistance, which manifested in ways quite unlike others. In this article, we explore her life journey, her vision, and her contributions to Ambedkarite activism in the UK. Her narrative interlaces memories of village life in Maharashtra with family histories, the dislocations of migration to Britain, experiences of work and exclusion, sustained community engagement, and struggles over historical recognition. Through her leadership in founding and presiding over the Indian Buddhist Society (IBS) in London, she helped establish the material and moral foundations of the Ambedkarite movement in the UK, an early example of Dalit self-representation abroad.

Maadhuri Hireker was born in 1940 in Kurud village in the Chandrapur region of Maharashtra, a social world structured by caste hierarchy, agrarian labour, and rigid gender norms. This contradiction entered Maadhuri's consciousness early, often through her own questions. She recounts her experience as a young girl watching her mother ritually clean a seat before offering it to a high-caste woman who came to visit her house: *"I said to my mother, Why are you cleaning it. You are dirtying your sari.*

*They can sit there with us... We are cleaner than them.*" This moment is significant not merely as childhood insolence but as an ethical refusal of internalised hierarchy. Ambedkar described caste as a system sustained through consent and habituation (Ambedkar 1936, p. 47); Maadhuri's question interrupts that habituation at a very young age. Her awareness of caste differences did not come through abstract teaching but through lived encounters and warnings issued by her own sisters: "*You shouldn't do that... you are from low caste (Mahar),<sup>2</sup> they will do something.*" Maadhuri repeatedly narrates how such warnings failed to produce compliance. Instead, they sharpened her sense of injustice.

One formative incident occurred when she was six or seven years old, when cattle belonging to a higher-caste family destroyed her family's paddy crop. Her sister retaliated physically against the boy tending the cows. The village responded by convening a meeting, a familiar mechanism of caste authority. Maadhuri recalls standing up and speaking in Marathi before the elders: "*It's not my sister's fault... their (upper caste's) cows were eating our rice field. Whose fault was that?*" The significance of this scene lies not only in her courage but in the temporary suspension of caste power when confronted with factual injustice. "*They did not say anything,*" she recalls. "*Because that was their fault.*"

Water, a central symbol in Ambedkarite politics, also figures prominently in her narrative. She describes segregated wells, built and maintained by Dalits for their own use, while being forbidden from approaching upper-caste wells. She recalls her mother saying, "*When high caste people come they could climb up to the well and could see but we could not climb up to their wells to see.*" The asymmetry is stark: visibility without access, surveillance without reciprocity. Her mother's response '*Just fight*' reveals a survival ethic grounded in dignity rather than submission. Denial of access to water in public spaces has been a recurring theme in Maadhuri's narrative, as well as in the experiences of Dr. Ambedkar and the first generation of migrants to the UK.

Education enters Maadhuri's life not as a smooth progression, but as a hard-won achievement. The establishment of a school in her village was itself an act of defiance,

<sup>2</sup>The Mahars constitute one of the historically marginalized communities within the caste hierarchy. Ambedkar classifies communities such as the Mahars among the "Avarna," those placed outside the varna system and subjected to systematic untouchability and spatial segregation (Ambedkar, *BAWS*, Vol. 7, pp. 29, 65). Mahar figure is Chokhamela, a fourteenth-century poet-saint associated with the bhakti movement, which fostered devotional participation across caste boundaries despite prevailing exclusions. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar also belonged to the Mahar community. According to Gokhale-Turner (1980: 69) "It seems to be generally agreed that the formation of the Mahar community as an Untouchable *jati* goes back to the period of 'Aryanisation' and reflects the confrontation between the original tribally-organised inhabitants and the Aryan settlers who invaded their land. "Their integration into the Brahmanical Order occurred with their being assigned a position as Untouchables" (ibid, 75).

made possible by her cousin N.G. Uke,<sup>3</sup> who, inspired by Ambedkar's emphasis on learning, wrote from England in 1946 and helped open a primary school for the community girls in the village. Maadhuri's father started the school at his own house, insisting, "*The school is not only for Mahar community. It is for the entire village community.*" This insistence on universality echoes Ambedkar's own refusal to frame Dalit education as charity rather than right.

Maadhuri's upbringing was marked by an absence of the gendered restraint typically imposed on girls. She recalls driving bullock carts, accompanying her mother to local markets, and being described by villagers as "*not a girl; she is a boy*"—the comment revealed an impoverished imagination of gender rather than any confusion.<sup>4</sup> Maadhuri narrates the episode with laughter, signalling that such remarks failed to discipline her behaviour. Rather than resisting or internalising this characterisation as stigma, she recounted it with humour, indicating how early acts of gender transgression became a source of confidence rather than shame. When she travelled alone to collect a prize for securing the highest marks in her primary examination, an inspector from her caste awarded her five rupees at a community Bullock Races event in which her family was participating. She recalls the incident vividly: "*I snatched them and shouted, I won 5 rupees!*" The exhilaration of achievement and acknowledgment and a sense of self-assurance was further reinforced through moments of public recognition. These early experiences questioning ritual, speaking in assemblies, defending land, pursuing education form the ethical groundwork upon which Ambedkar's ideas would later resonate. By the time she encountered Ambedkar in person, she was already, in her own words, "*not timid.*" Her village life, rather than serving as a pre-political backdrop, constituted the formative site in which her Ambedkarite self was shaped.

### **Encountering Ambedkar and His Political Pedagogy (1952–1956)**

Education, the first pillar of Ambedkar's slogan (Educate, Agitate, Organize)<sup>5</sup> and a way of emancipation, appears in Maadhuri's narrative not as credentialism but

<sup>3</sup>"N.G. Uke was the first student from the District of Chanda, to have been selected and the icing on the cake was that he had won this scholarship on his own merit and was selected as a general candidate by the Government of British India" (Nagpal 2025, p. 69). He left from Wadsa station on September 28 and reached Bombay and boarded the ship "orion" on October 6 and had 14 days travel and finally reached Southampton, UK on October 21, 1945 (see detailed diary description in Nagpal 2025, Ch. 13, pp. 75-85).

<sup>4</sup>Within a patriarchal framework, masculinity functioned as the only available reference point for strength, mobility, or independence; thus, any deviation from normative femininity was understood by equating it with being a boy or a man.

<sup>5</sup>Ambedkar invoked this slogan in the All India Depressed Classes Conference held at Nagpur from 18th to 20<sup>th</sup> July 1942 and underscored the necessity of a mass movement to dismantle caste oppression. (BAWS, 17 (3): 274).

as ethical preparation. Her childhood was a harsh reminder of prohibitions. As she recalls, *“At that particular time, girls were not allowed to go to school. Not only were they not allowed to go to school, there was no school for boys or girls in the village.”* Her family's relative economic stability as farmers complicates a common assumption that caste oppression maps neatly onto poverty. *“My father, Ramnath Uke, was a farmer. We lived in a large haveli and owned cows, buffaloes, and bullocks. He had a big farm. Because we were farmers, we had plenty of food. I never felt that I needed food.”* Chandrapur was part of Vidarbha region where few Mahars used to own land in villages.<sup>6</sup> Yet this material sufficiency did not dissolve caste stigma. Instead, it exposed the contradiction at the heart of caste society: even when Dalits possess land, food, and self-sufficiency, they remain symbolically degraded.

Maadhuri Hireker's first encounter with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar did not occur in isolation from her educational trajectory; rather, it emerged directly from it. By the early 1950s, she had already crossed multiple social thresholds, travelling beyond her village for schooling, living away from home as a young girl, and entering institutional spaces historically closed to Dalit women. These movements were themselves political acts, made legible through Ambedkar's insistence that education was not a supplement to emancipation but its necessary foundation.

By 1951, she had moved to Brahmपुरi (Chanda district, now known as Chandrapur district of Maharashtra) to continue her studies after excelling in primary school. This transition involved not only academic advancement but a radical reconfiguration of gendered mobility. *“How could a village girl travel?”* she asks rhetorically, before answering through action: she stayed with relatives, walked long distances, and navigated public transport alone. Such a movement, especially for a Dalit girl in early postcolonial India, constituted embodied dissent.

It was during the 1952 election campaign that Ambedkar's political presence became tangible in her life, no longer an abstract figure but an immediate reality. News spread that Ambedkar would be arriving in the nearby village of Wadsa for an election meeting, and a relative encouraged her to attend. She describes the moment simply: *“I became aware... There is a big meeting. Somebody's coming.”* Without informing her parents as communication infrastructure was limited, and even though permission was not culturally assumed, she travelled alone by train in the late afternoon. *“I was so happy. I was going by train alone.”* Dr. Ambedkar had argued that freedom must be exercised to be learned; Maadhuri's decision to go, unescorted and unapologetic, embodies this principle. When she arrived, the scale of the gathering overwhelmed her:

<sup>6</sup>According to Gokhale-Turner, between the 16th and 18th centuries, Mahars in some villages were granted small plots of land, which made them slightly better off economically compared to Mahars in other parts of Maharashtra. However, this land was usually not as fertile (for details, see ch. 11 of Gokhale-Turner, 1980)

*“By the time I reached there, there were so many people... more than a few hundred.”* Ambedkar was already present.

Her description of Ambedkar is striking for its attention to dignity and presentation. *“He was wearing a black suit; jacket... he was well dressed.”* As a young girl, she understood Ambedkar’s importance relationally before she grasped it ideologically. *“I was aware he helped my cousin, N. G. Uke to go to England... he is a big man; he helped my brother.”*<sup>7</sup> This connection mattered deeply. Ambedkar was not a distant leader but someone whose decisions had materially altered the life chances of people within her kinship network. The possibility of study abroad, of intellectual mobility across borders, entered her imagination through this example. She remembers standing amid the crowd as people contributed small sums to support the movement and Ambedkar’s election campaign. *“Everyone was collecting one rupee or two rupees, and I said I don’t have rupees now. If my father were here, he could have given me 100 rupees.”* The statement is revealing. It signals both pride in her family’s self-sufficiency and an intuitive grasp of political contribution as collective investment rather than charity.

Maadhuri speaks at length about the marriage of her cousin N.G. Narayan Uke and Kamal Meshram, which took place in Delhi in 1949. Maadhuri’s father, Ramnath



In the picture, Maadhuri stands in the last row, second from left (Source: Maadhuri Hireker)

<sup>7</sup>In fact, N.G.Uke was selected on his own merit for the foreign scholarships scheme for Scheduled Caste students was approved by the British Government due to Ambedkar’s intervention and recommendation, as a member of the Viceroy’s cabinet (Nagpal 2025).

Gomaji, attended the ceremony, and Dr. Ambedkar himself was present. The connection between the families came through G.T. Meshram;<sup>8</sup> however, it was her father who told Maadhuri about Dr. Ambedkar. With encouragement from Ambedkar's speeches, and her cousin N.G. Uke's motivation, Maadhuri continued her education four years later. At that time, Maadhuri was sixteen, pursuing secondary education in Nagpur and residing in the Depressed Classes Girls' Hostel while attending Lady Amritbai Daga College of Arts, Commerce, and Science for Women.

She describes the hostel as a mixed and negotiated space: although owned by a Brahmin family, it was rented and managed by Mr. Hirekhand, a cousin of Mr. V.T. Hireker (whom Maadhuri later married in 1961). Predominantly inhabited by students from Scheduled Castes, the hostel reflected the complex intersections of caste, education, and everyday institutional life. It was from this space that she and thirty other girls volunteered to assist at the mass conversion ceremony at Nagpur.

Hireker's description of the 1956 mass conversion to Buddhism (*Deeksha* ceremony) stands out as one of the most emotionally intense and evocative moments in her narrative. Preparation had been ongoing for weeks and was extensively covered in Marathi and national newspapers. On the day, 14 October, the scale was unprecedented: "*You could not find your way, there were so many people; you could not see from one side to the other.*" Estimates would later range into the hundreds of thousands, but for Maadhuri, the experience exceeded quantification. As a volunteer, her role was practical and communal rather than ceremonial. "*Showing people around; diverting the crowd; helping those who lost their child in the crowd; we were helpers.*" This labour, often feminised and rendered invisible, was nonetheless essential to the event's success.

Adopting Buddhism was a long process for Dr. Ambedkar. It took him 20 years to explore the teachings and philosophy of Buddhism after his declaration on October 13, 1935, at the Depressed Classes Conference, Yeola (district Nasik) that "*Unfortunately I was born as a Hindu Untouchable, but will not die as a person who calls himself a Hindu.*" (BAWS, 432). He said that it was within his power to refuse to live under ignoble and humiliating conditions. Ambedkar described caste as a system that survives by producing psychological injury.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>G.T. Meshram, who owned a very large house in Nagpur. Babasaheb frequently visited Nagpur and would go to Meshram's home, as they were originally friends, though not very close (from the interview of Mrs. Hireker on Friday, 19 December 2025).

<sup>9</sup>After his declaration, Dr. Ambedkar read extensively about every faith. He also met the Catholic Pope. Having heard from Dr. Ambedkar about the miseries of Indian outcastes, replied: "*My son, it may take three or four centuries to remedy these abuses, be patient.*" This was published in the *TIME* magazine which wrote "Dr. Ambedkar is probably the only man alive who ever walked out in a huff from a private audience with the Pope of Rome, His Holiness Pius XI." (*Time Magazine*, March 16, 1936).

Maadhuri recalls the moment in Nagpur on October 14, 1956 when Ambedkar adopted Buddhism with more than 100,000 people,<sup>10</sup> announcing he would first take the twenty-two vows he had devised and then lead the assembled audience in taking those vows collectively. The ceremony was conducted in Marathi, ensuring accessibility and collective participation. *“From that day onwards, I was feeling spirited... I was changed at that moment.”* The language she uses—change, freedom, happiness—suggests an internal realignment rather than mere religious affiliation. When asked whether the event was transformational, her response was unequivocal: *“It was life-changing.”* Pressed further, she elaborated: *“You feel like you are free; you can do whatever you like; nobody is going to interfere.”* Importantly, Maadhuri rejects the notion that she had been psychologically diminished before the conversion. Instead, she emphasises how caste society persistently attempted to diminish her. *“I didn’t feel that way [inwardly], but still the caste people used to remind you... oh you low caste; you can’t do[this and] that.”* Conversion functioned not as the origin of self-respect, but as a mechanism through which it was preserved and reinforced.

The Deeksha ceremony also consolidated her understanding of Ambedkar’s critique of Hindu society and Hinduism. She recalls earlier incidents, being segregated at weddings, denied equal participation, expected to accept symbolic inferiority, that retrospectively clarified Ambedkar’s decision to leave Hinduism. When attending a village wedding as a child, she recalls, *“This is a wedding, why are they asking us to sit on one side away from the guests?... I am not eating here; I am going home.”* Such refusals, enacted even in childhood, found philosophical vindication in Ambedkar’s rejection of a religious order that sanctified inequality.

On December 6, 1956, news of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s sudden death spread rapidly, inducing a profound stillness across the Dalit heartland and transforming individual grief into a shared historical consciousness. In Nagpur’s girls’ hostels, the ordinary rhythms of student life gave way to disbelief and silence; for many, “Babasaheb” had seemed an almost immortal emancipatory force, rendering his death initially inconceivable. This disbelief yielded to the stark reality of 7 December, when a funeral procession of over half a million people filled the streets of Bombay, requiring five hours to traverse a five-mile route (Ankit 2023, p. 153).

As the enormity of the loss settled, a collective sense of rupture emerged. For individuals such as the sixteen-year-old Maadhuri Hireker, the event was viscerally felt yet not fully comprehended, even as it marked a decisive moment of historical responsibility from a singular leader to a broader generation. At this moment, Ambedkar’s followers confronted the imperative to carry forward his emancipatory project. Ten days later, Nagpur again became a focal site of spiritual and political

<sup>10</sup>‘Nagpur Homage’, *TOI*, December 17, 1956.

reaffirmation, as thousands gathered at the location of where mass conversion to Buddhism took place. These commemorations, alongside parallel gatherings in Ambedkar Nagar, Nasik, where over 50,000 mourners paid homage, constituted not merely acts of mourning but deliberate assertions of continuity.<sup>11</sup> Through collective prayer and renewed conversion, followers transformed grief into a reaffirmation of Ambedkar's vision, enacting a form of temporal reclamation that sustained his project beyond his death.

In the years immediately following 1956, Ambedkar's death would transform his presence from living leader to moral authority. Yet for young Maadhuri, his influence remained active, shaping her decisions around marriage, education, and public life. On September 1, 1961, Maadhuri married according to Buddhist custom to an Ambedkarite Marathi man who was working in the UK. While formally arranged, the union was underpinned by a shared ideological commitment. Shortly thereafter, she migrated to the United Kingdom. Maadhuri's Ambedkarism was already fully formed: grounded in education, enacted through refusal of humiliation, and sustained by collective Buddhist practice. Her encounters with Ambedkar in 1952 and 1956 were not isolated memories but constitutive moments in a political life that would soon extend beyond national boundaries.

## Post-Conversion, Gender, and Ethical Self-Fashioning

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar consistently warned against interpreting conversion to Buddhism as a merely symbolic or spiritual act. For him, conversion was an ethical rupture: a deliberate exit from a moral order that normalised humiliation and a conscious entry into a life organised around dignity, reason, and equality. Maadhuri Hireker's post-1956 life illustrates this rupture not as an abstract philosophical shift but as a set of everyday practices through which she re-fashioned herself as an Ambedkarite woman. She describes conversion as "*From that day onwards, I was feeling spirited; I was feeling so happy; laughing; helping people. You feel like you are free; you can do whatever you like; nobody is going to interfere; nobody is going to say anything.*" The repetition of feeling words—spirited and happy—signals an embodied transformation. Conversion did not impose restraint; it expanded capacity. This affective register is crucial, because Ambedkar insisted that liberation must be experienced in the body as well as understood in the mind.

This reinforcement found its clearest expression in Maadhuri's approach to gender and marriage. Ambedkar had argued that endogamy was the keystone of caste and that women were made its principal enforcers. For Dalit women, refusal of ritual hierarchy within marriage constituted a direct challenge to caste reproduction. Maadhuri's

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<sup>11</sup>"Nagpur Homage", *TOI*, December 17, 1956

decisions around her own wedding exemplify this challenge with striking clarity. She recalls that Brahmin families in her village proposed attending her wedding on the condition that they would cook the food themselves. Her response was immediate and categorical. *“I said, no. This is my wedding. If they want to come, whether Brahmin or whatever caste they are, they can eat food cooked by our cook, otherwise...”* The sentence trails off not because her resolve weakens, but because refusal required no elaboration.

Maadhuri’s understanding of womanhood further diverges sharply from dominant norms. Throughout her narrative, she resists the expectation that women should be shy, dependent, or confined to private space. *“Before that, because of your background, you were not timid, like girls are [generally] timid, but we were all girls; we equally did the hard work like boys.”* This statement is not a claim to masculine equivalence but a rejection of gendered diminishment. Her childhood memories reinforce this stance.

*Dhamma Deeksha* (a mass conversion to Buddhism led by B.R. Ambedkar) deepened this gendered confidence by providing an ethical vocabulary that rejected hierarchy altogether. Buddhism, as articulated by Ambedkar, offered an alternative conception of moral worth grounded in conduct rather than birth. This allowed Maadhuri to evaluate social practices independently of caste sanction. Her choice to reject segregated seating of lower castes at weddings in India, *“Why are they asking us to sit on one side?”* resembles a Buddhist act of defiance, hinting at a future movement and representing an early inclination before she adopted Buddhism.

Equally significant is her rejection of ritual deference within everyday interactions. She recalls questioning her mother’s habit of offering seats to high-caste visitors: *“When you go to their house, do they ask you...or give you anything?”* This insistence on reciprocity reflects Ambedkar’s critique of Hindu ethics as asymmetrical and exploitative where dignity is not granted; it is practised. By the late 1950s, Maadhuri had fully integrated Ambedkar-inspired-Buddhism<sup>12</sup> into her sense of self. It shaped her decisions, her refusals, her understanding of gender, and her expectations of social life.

Maadhuri’s ethical self-fashioning also involved redefining service and care. Her volunteer work at *Deeksha Bhoomi* of helping lost children, directing crowds and supporting pilgrims did not end with the ceremony. *“30 girls from my hostel went to the Dhamma Deeksha ceremony in Nagpur as volunteers, wearing white saris; white blouse; flowers in the hair”*, she describes an enduring impulse *“as volunteers to do more; help more people in the event, we built the tent, the preparations of the event started weeks before and the news of this program was covered everyday in the local media”*. She recalls being very close to the stage. From where she stood, she could clearly see all the Buddhist monks (*Bhikkhus*) and Babasheb Ambedkar

<sup>12</sup>It is a socially engaged school of Buddhism, also called Navayana Buddhism, which Dr. Ambedkar adopted for half a million people; it is also known as Ambedkarite Buddhism.

arrived with his wife Savita Ambedkar. Maadhuri remembers that Babasaheb first formally took the Buddhist vows himself and then administered the same vows to the gathered crowd, initiating them into Buddhism. After the Deeksha ceremony, Maadhuri expressed that *“it felt like gaining something higher and deeply meaningful—almost like a moment of awakening. It was a new way of thinking that many had never experienced before. There was a strong sense of a community and feeling that something had changed outside and within— I felt freer, more independent, and less bound by social restrictions. It gave the feeling that one could live with dignity, make personal choices, and no longer be controlled or judged by others.”* This orientation aligns closely with Ambedkar’s vision of Buddhism as a social religion, one that binds individuals into a moral community rather than isolating them in private salvation. In an unfamiliar social landscape marked by racialisation, class stratification, and migrant precarity, Ambedkarite Buddhism offered her both a moral compass and a political language and ethical grounding when she migrated to the U.K. in 1961.

### **Migration to the United Kingdom and Education**

Maadhuri Hireker’s migration to the United Kingdom did not represent a departure from Ambedkarism but its extension into a new social field. By the time she left India, her political and ethical commitments were already settled. Migration, therefore, functioned not as reinvention but as translation: the task of making Ambedkarite principles legible and liveable within the racialised hierarchies of post-war Britain. Her arrival in Britain coincided with a period in which South Asian migrants were both needed as labour and subjected to social suspicion (Desai 1963). Maadhuri recalls encountering a society structured less overtly by caste but no less rigid in its stratifications. *“Here it was not caste they were asking,”* she notes, *“but they were looking at color; accent; whether you belong or not.”* The shift from caste stigma to racialisation did not erase hierarchy; it altered its grammar.

For Maadhuri, this recognition did not produce disorientation. Having already learned to name and resist graded inequality, she approached British society with a comparative sensibility. She carefully observed differences but did not internalise inferiority. *“I was never scared from anyone,”* she insists. *“Because I knew who I was.”* This assertion of self-definition echoes Ambedkar’s insistence that dignity must be claimed to enable social recognition. Equally important were the social worlds she encountered beyond work. London provided spaces where Indian students, workers, and political activists gathered. These spaces became laboratories for the reconstitution of Ambedkarite networks. Maadhuri recalls meeting people *“from different parts of India, Punjabi and Marathi”* who shared a commitment to Ambedkar’s ideas, even if their regional or linguistic backgrounds differed. Maadhuri’s pursuit of education in

Britain must also be understood in gendered terms. As a migrant woman, she negotiated expectations that women should prioritise domestic stability over intellectual growth. She rejected this hierarchy. Just as she had travelled alone as a schoolgirl in Maharashtra, she navigated British institutions in London with confidence. “*Why should I stop learning?*” she asks rhetorically. The question signals refusal of gendered limitation.

Her move to a new country did not diminish her intellectual enthusiasm. “*My brain was very active that time,*” she asserts. She enrolled in evening classes at the “*North London Polytechnic in Camden*” and set an ambitious goal: “*And I wanted to do it at the London School of Economics, actually, where Babasaheb Ambedkar went.*” Her ambition was consciously linked to the path of the Dalit icon who had shaped her community’s aspirations. To qualify, she tackled British A-levels with remarkable speed, taking “*actually 5 A-levels*” in subjects like Economics, Economic History, Constitutional Law, and Marathi, passing them in just “*three months.*” Maadhuri’s academic momentum was deliberately paused for family before she launched her public sector career. She did so with competence and authority, joining the “*Greater London Council... in the finance*” department. Her role involved significant responsibility: “*Actually, I was managing a huge budget because we used to look after all the playing fields, all the people.*” She notes with quiet pride the institution’s stature: “*Greater London Council had great power.*” She worked there for seven years until its abolition in 1986. Afterward, she worked part-time with the University of London, assisting in the evaluation of examination papers, including A-level scripts, often at Senate House. She continued this work for one to two years but declined full-time employment offers because she prioritized caring for her children and supporting their education.

## **The Emergence of Ambedkarism in the UK**

Maadhuri’s engagement with Ambedkarite groups in Britain soon moved beyond discussion into organisation. Celebrations of Ambedkar Jayanti, study circles, and commemorative meetings became regular features of migrant life. These gatherings served multiple functions: they affirmed identity, transmitted political memory to younger generations, and countered the erasure of caste within dominant narratives of the Indian diaspora.

Maadhuri emphasises that such work requires persistence. British society did not readily recognise caste discrimination, and sections of the Indian diaspora actively denied its relevance. “*They say, there is no caste here,*” she recalls, “*but we know it is there; it is just hidden.*” Her insistence on naming caste in diaspora reflects Ambedkar’s warning that caste adapts rather than disappears when confronted with new social environments. Education, for Maadhuri, thus became inseparable from

political responsibility. To study was to equip oneself for argument; to understand British institutions was to intervene within them. She viewed learning not as private enrichment but as preparation for public engagement. This orientation would later shape her involvement in formal Ambedkarite organisations and campaigns in Britain.

Migration also sharpened her appreciation of Ambedkar's internationalism. Ambedkar's own education abroad and his engagement with global ideas provided a model for thinking beyond national boundaries. For Maadhuri, living in Britain made this dimension of Ambedkarism tangible. "*Ambedkar did not think only about India,*" she reflects. "*He was thinking about the entire humanity.*" By the time she was established in the UK, Maadhuri Hireker had successfully translated her Ambedkarite ethics into migrant life. Education, work, organisation, and refusal of humiliation remained central. The following section examines how these commitments crystallised into institution-building, as Maadhuri and her contemporaries worked to secure a lasting Ambedkarite presence in Britain.

Importantly, Maadhuri does not romanticise unity within Ambedkarite circles, nor does she deny the internal tensions that shaped the movement. She openly acknowledges disagreements, personal ambitions, and conflicts, particularly among male leaders, while carefully distinguishing these dynamics from the ethical clarity that Buddhism afforded her at a personal level. Reflecting on a male-dominated discussion in 1962 concerning the political direction of the Ambedkarite movement in the UK, she remarks with gentle irony, "These men want to be like that... me, me, me, it's all about them." She spoke publicly, organised actively, and intervened in debates. Her pointed question, "*Why should only men speak?*", extended Ambedkar's critique of patriarchy into the diasporic public sphere, asserting women's political voice within anti-caste movements abroad. Although women were often relegated to organisational and reproductive labour—cooking, arranging venues, and managing logistics Maadhuri refused to remain in the background. She identified status-driven leadership, and her own political practice remained rooted in collective responsibility rather than individual recognition.

## **Building Ambedkarite Institutions in Britain**

For Maadhuri Hireker, the work of sustaining Ambedkarism in Britain was neither episodic nor symbolic; it involved creating organisational forms capable of carrying memory, political commitment, and ethical discipline across generations. These institutions emerged not from state patronage but from collective labour undertaken by migrants who refused political invisibility. Maadhuri contextualizes the early Ambedkarite movement in Britain within modest material conditions. Meetings were held in private homes, community halls, and borrowed spaces. Resources were limited,

but conviction was not. “*We didn’t have money,*” she recalls, “*but we had belief and we had our Babasaheb.*” This formulation echoes Ambedkar’s own emphasis on moral capital over material abundance.

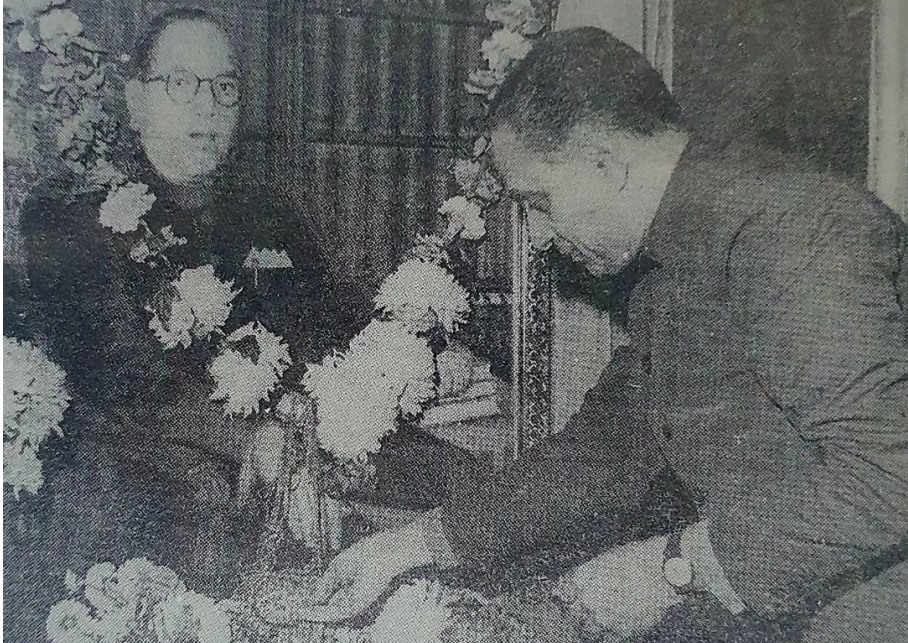
Central among these efforts was the strengthening of the Indian Buddhist Society (IBS) founded in 1962 in the United Kingdom. For Maadhuri and her peers, the IBS was not merely a religious association but a political and educational platform. It provided a structured space for study, commemoration, and mutual support. “*We used to meet, discuss Ambedkar, discuss Buddhism,*” she explains. At that time, Dhananjay Keer’s *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* was a popular book to read among the circle. Such discussions functioned as continuing political education, ensuring that Ambedkar’s ideas were not reduced to slogans.

The annual event of Ambedkar Jayanti (the birthday of Ambedkar) emerged as a key site of institutional consolidation. In Britain, where Ambedkar was largely absent from public discourse, these celebrations served as acts of assertion. Maadhuri recalls the deliberate care taken for these events: arranging speakers, preparing readings, and ensuring inclusivity across regional and linguistic lines. “*Ambedkar Jayanti was not just a celebration,*” she insists. “*It was education.*” These gatherings also countered the erasure of caste within dominant narratives of the Indian diaspora, which often portrayed Indian culture as homogeneous and harmonious. Maadhuri was explicit about the political stakes of visibility. “*If we don’t speak, nobody will know our history*”, she argues. This insistence aligns with Ambedkar’s warning that silence is itself a form of consent to oppression.

One of the most symbolically charged moments in the British Ambedkarite movement was the installation of Dr. Ambedkar’s portrait at London’s India House, a student residence that became a hub of Indian nationalist activity. Maadhuri’s husband worked at the Indian High Commission. One day, when Maadhuri went to meet her husband at work, she recalls: “*I saw Nehru’s sister’s picture there, and I saw some other people’s pictures there, then I said to Mr. Hireker... What about Babasaheb? He wrote the constitution of India; and there was no memory of him; we needed to do something about it; and he said it’s a good idea.*”

Her initiative was born from a sense of historical justice and symbolic erasure. Recognizing that the visual landscape of India House told a partial story of the nation’s founding, she demanded the inclusion of the Dalit architect of the Constitution. She took direct action: “*on behalf of Indian Buddhist Society (IBS), I wrote a letter to Indian High Commission... The first letter was informal. I personally visited the Indian High Commission.*” She made a principled, irrefutable case: “*Dr Ambedkar deserves a better place there.*” The painted portrait of Ambedkar by M.G. Ghate

was later installed at the India House by the IBS in 1970, inaugurated by the High Commissioner of India.<sup>13</sup>



H. E. Appa B. Pant, High Commissioner for India, unveiling the portrait of Dr. Ambedkar at India House, London, on December 6, 1970. (Credit: Sat Pal Muman Archive)

For Maadhuri, this was not a decorative gesture but a political victory. India House, as a representation of the Indian state abroad, had long marginalized Ambedkar's legacy. At the time, installing Ambedkar's portrait was far from straightforward, as Ambedkar and his contribution were not highlighted by the Indian government until the 1980s. Although the portrait was initially installed at India House (High Commission), it was later moved to a back room of the British Commission, away from public view. This action reflects the Indian authorities' anti-Ambedkar stance and prompted opposition from UK-based Ambedkarites. In response, K.C. Leal, president of the Indian Buddhist Society, formally urged India House to display the portrait permanently in a public space. Securing his presence there marked a recognition wrested through persistence rather than granted through goodwill.

Maadhuri recalls the negotiations surrounding this achievement with characteristic clarity. Resistance was subtle rather than explicit delays, deflections, procedural obstacles. Yet the campaign succeeded. *"That portrait is there because people fought for it,"* she states. The word *"fought"* is used deliberately, underscoring that institutional recognition required struggle even in diaspora.

<sup>13</sup>The first portrait was created by a man named Nagdeve, according to Maadhuri Hireker. IBS finally selected Mr. Ghate's painted portrait.

Maadhuri speaks candidly about disagreements within Ambedkarite organisations, particularly around leadership and recognition. “*Some people want names, positions,*”



she observes. Her critique is not based on petty personality objections but based on an ethics of care. Drawing on Ambedkar’s emphasis on collective responsibility, she distinguishes between ambition that serves the movement and ambition that undermines it.

Ambedkarite activism reveals how homeland inequalities persist in the diaspora, shaping identity and belonging, while Ambedkar’s legacy endures through committed activists like Maadhuri Hireker. As a woman activist, Maadhuri’s role in these institutions was both central and contested. Through these institutional efforts, Maadhuri Hireker helped establish an Ambedkarite public presence in

Britain that was at once political, educational, and ethical. These institutions did not seek assimilation into dominant narratives but asserted a counter-history rooted in struggle, dignity, and collective self-definition.

### **Analysis: Embodied Ambedkarism**

Maadhuri Hireker’s life, as narrated through her own words, demands to be read not simply as a biography but as a political archive. Across village, nation, and diaspora, her experiences reveal how Ambedkarism is not transmitted as doctrine alone but cultivated through practice—through refusals, assertions, and sustained ethical labour. Her story demonstrates that the annihilation of caste, as Ambedkar envisioned it, is neither instantaneous nor abstract; it unfolds through everyday decisions taken under conditions of constraint.

This article traces Maadhuri Hireker’s trajectory from a Mahar farming household in rural Maharashtra to the institutional spaces of migrant Britain, showing how caste and gender consistently structured opportunity and expectation. Yet she appears not as a passive subject but as an active agent who questions, intervenes, and makes deliberate

choices- first through acts of childhood defiance, later through educational aspiration, and ultimately through institutional leadership, thereby embodying Ambedkar's vision of the political agency of the oppressed. Her narrative indicates that education becomes genuinely emancipatory only when it cultivates political consciousness; the two are mutually constitutive. It further suggests that conversion, as a political strategy, intensifies rather than dissolves struggle, while migration serves as a site where Ambedkarism is both tested and rearticulated.

Gender occupies a central place in this account. Ambedkar identified women as both victims of caste oppression and potential agents of its disruption, and Maadhuri's life stands as a testament to this. Her rejection of ritual segregation, compromised forms of hospitality, and intellectual confinement illustrates how Ambedkarite ethics actively reshape the meaning of womanhood. Rather than seeking equality by conforming to dominant norms, she asserts dignity by redefining the terms of participation. Her narrative highlights a key limitation of the Ambedkarite movement: the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions.

In her narrative, institution-building emerges as the bridge between individual ethics and collective politics. Through the *Indian Buddhist Society*, Ambedkar Jayanti commemorations, and campaigns for public recognition, Maadhuri and her contemporaries transformed memory into infrastructure. These institutions did not merely preserve Ambedkar's legacy; they produced new political subjects capable of sustaining it. In this sense, Maadhuri's contribution lies as much in what she helped build as in what she personally endured.

Scholars of education (Ilaiah 1996; Kale & Acharya 2022; Kumar 2016; Paik 2014; Pathania 2018, 2020; Paraskeva 2023; Rathod 2023; Rege 2006; Sukumar 2020; Thorat 2025) have long emphasized that Ambedkarite pedagogy—*Educate-Agitate-Unite*—aims to forge critical, self-determining subjects rather than obedient laborers. Maadhuri Hireker's life brings this vision vividly to life. Her biography does more than reflect Ambedkar's thought; it extends it, negotiating caste, gender, religion, and geography to demonstrate how Ambedkarism is enacted in everyday choices, ethical refusals, educational pursuits, and institution-building across unfamiliar terrains. By centering her narrative, this article treats lived experience not as data but as theory-revealing how power, dignity, and resistance are produced in practice. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Dr. Ambedkar argues that caste oppression is perpetuated through the control and regulation of women's bodies, thereby rendering women's educational empowerment a crucial strategy for dismantling entrenched systems of social injustice. Maadhuri's journey affirms that Ambedkarite movement is not confined to history or geography; it endures wherever individuals challenge hierarchy and assert their right to self-definition. In this ongoing struggle, education and activism are not merely instruments

but lifelines of emancipation for Dalit women across the diaspora. Maadhuri's life story invites us to understand the Dalit diaspora not as a passive extension of struggles rooted in the homeland, but as a living, evolving archive of Ambedkar's unfinished project of human liberation, one that continues to be reimaged and realized through Ambedkarism.

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## Archival Resource

Personal Archive of Sat Pal Muman, UK.

# The Legitimacy of the Derogated Caste ‘Chandal’ till the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Ranjit Biswas<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article explores the process of caste stigma and questions about its reliability. The Chandals were a social group primarily comprising the aboriginal peoples of the Indian subcontinent, later placed at the bottom of the Hindu caste system. In the case of Bengal, the first literary mention of Chandal is found in *Charyapada*, which is a Bengali-speaking community. Immediately later, two Puranas of Bengal were designated as Adham Shankara and Antyajas, along with the other lower castes. Through the ages, Mukundaram mentioned the occupational changes and their multitasking efficiency shifted their profession from cremation to salt and water chest-nut seller. The ethnographic evidence of the colonial times also provides information about their rituals, occupational efficiency, purity, and an increasing consciousness of social stigma, along with evictions. Exploring the ethnographic data, the article argues that modernity and environment-based ritual knowledge were at an extreme level. Following this tradition and derogatory perception of the upper castes, this article traces the position and legacy of the term Chandal, a lower caste in Bengal.

## Keywords

Untouchability, Chandal, Cultural practice, Derogation, Development, Legitimacy

## Introduction

The practice of untouchability is full of questions, such as: What were the reasons for this, and when was it applicable to certain communities? A uniquely Indian social structure known as ‘untouchability’ encourages and upholds prejudice and unfair, exclusive, and exploitative treatment of those who are born into particular castes. Similar types of discrimination exist all across the world, but what distinguishes

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, | I10067  
Email: ranjit61\_ssb@jnu.ac.in

untouchability is that its central institution—the caste system—is exclusive to the Indian subcontinent (Shah, Mander, Thorat, Deshpande, & Baviskar 2006). The new approach to the genesis of untouchability has revealed two possible origins. The first is the overall circumstance of hostility and disdain created by Brahmins against Buddhists, and the second is the tradition of eating beef held by broken men. The first situation was insufficient to place the stigma of untouchability on the shattered men (Ambedkar 1948). The reason why Broken Men only became untouchables is that, in addition to being Buddhists, they maintained their beef-eating habit, which gave the Brahmins additional grounds for taking their newfound love and respect for the cow to its logical conclusion.

Dr. Ambedkar believes that 400 CE marks the beginning of permanent untouchability because cow slaughter and beef consumption were illegal and regarded as a crime after that time. His theory is based on the belief that beef consumption was the sole source of untouchability and that until it was forbidden by legislation during the Gupta period, Chandals and other lower groups were only deemed unclean momentarily, and then only during sacrifice by Brahmins (Ambedkar 1948). However, consuming beef was not the sole cause of untouchability because all the four varnas in the hierarchy had their practice of beef eating but this is difficult to distinguish the exact time of prohibiting the practice (Macdonell & Keith 1912). On the other hand, the rigidity of the caste system began in the second century BCE which indicates the Shunga Dynasty and the period of Manu (Jha 2018). Therefore, being Shudra in the hierarchy was not only laid on impure food habits, rather it was driven through the process of inclusion in an exclusion manner on the several bases of economical, societal forms.

## **Chandals and Untouchability**

Vivekananda Jha explored the legitimacy of the Chandals to be untouchable. According to him, at least till the later Vedic period Chandals, Dosadhs and other lower castes in the present times did not have any social stigma of impurity or unclean practices which was fully unlawful to the other Varnas. With the example of Chandals, he indicated all the castes under untouchability and mentioned the inclusions of the indigenous people into the Aryan society on the other hand tagging the untouchable theory excluded from the fourfold structure as well (Jha 2018). Both the process of inclusion and exclusion were the result of building up the convenient position of Aryans in society. Because there is no trace of untouchability in the *Rig-Veda*, nor any mention of the Chandals. The Shudras came to form an integral or equal part of the Aryan social order in the Vedic period because they were born from the same primordial entity to which the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas owed their origin, with no stigma attached. However, the first mention of the Chandals is found in the *Vajasaneyi Samhita* and some Brahmanas in the context of *Purushmedha* (symbolic human sacrifice). In addition to the four main

castes, many other tribes such as the Nishadas, Parnakas, Kiratas and Pukkasas are mentioned, so it seems that the Aryans came into contact with many tribes, including the Chandals, during their expansion. However, the stigma of impurity did not attach to the Shudras or the Chandals in the later Vedic period. Even in the earliest texts of this period, the Chandal appears as a victim in the *Purushmedha* sacrifice and there is no indication of his being untouchable (Vyas 1967).

However, the *Upanishad*, later developed literature is the first which derogated the position of Chandals and despite that applied some of the characteristics of the theory of untouchability. The *Dharmashastras*, another lawbook developed after the Vedic period talked about their sinful touch. There were strict instructions on the Chandals in the Smriti literature also. According to the Sutra literature, a promiscuous coupling between a Brahmin woman and a Shudra man gave birth to the Chandals. They are referred to as *adham*, *nirvasita*, *apapatra*, untouchable, and *apasada* (base-born) in the *Manusmriti* (Manu 1886).

Between the time of Manu, approximately from 300 BCE to 300 CE, the degradation of the Chandals had reached its high-water mark. The possibility of the lower classes rising the social ladder and entering Aryan society was prevented by the strict injunctions of connubia and communalism laid down by him. The door of the *chaturanga* or fourfold caste system was thus closed forever to the Chandals and other lower classes (Manu 1886). Not only in the sphere of occupation, but restriction was put on the right to education for the Shudras and, more especially untouchables. This strict restriction on education was a significant catalyst to sustain the untouchability. Manu speaks of people like Aryans and *Vahyas*<sup>1</sup> and orders that they should live outside the villages, near the graveyards, on the hills, and in the ravines. Thus, Manu describes almost all the disabilities that still exist in the definition of modern-day untouchability. Although similar descriptions are found in some other *Dharmasutras*, it is in Manu that the lower classes are declared ineligible to be exploited, even though he denied the existence of the fifth caste. Therefore, we can consider Manu's date of the second century BCE as the approximate date of the origin of the permanent untouchability of the entire population in Hindu society (Jha 2018). The existence of a milder form of untouchability can be traced back to 200 BCE, which is the lower limit of the date of the Jataka and *Dharmasutra*.

The interesting fact from the second century of occupational duty for each Varna severely varied throughout the period. The occupations, such as priesthood applied to Brahmins, administration to Kshatriyas, commercial activity to Vaishya, and, along with agriculture, other polluting and menial occupations were designated for Shudras. Later, these traditional occupations became interchangeable among the Varnas or castes

<sup>1</sup>In *Manusmriti*, the *Vahyas* (or *Vahya-jatis*) are mentioned as excluded or outcast groups—those who live outside the boundaries of the four-fold Varna system (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra).

in a peculiar manner. However, especially in Bengal, the migration of Brahmins from the northern and middle parts of India into the land created an important scenario. The land grants of the Pala and Sena rulers to these migrated Brahmins had given birth to a landed Brahmin society (Furui 2020). As a result of the land grants, many aboriginal peasants who were labelled Shudras were absorbed into the Brahmanical classes. As a result, early medieval sources allude to the Shudras as agriculturists and farmers. But in the post-Gupta era, the economic and social divide between Vaishyas and Shudras grew less as the Vaishyas, particularly in the developed regions, lost their standing as independent farmers. The emergence of a class of landowners who lived off the products grown by the peasants was the most important effect of land concessions. One cannot claim that ancient Indian civilisation was static. It cleared the path for a new kind of social structure that may be referred to as feudal by the fifth and sixth centuries (Sharma 2005).

Thus, in many cases, Brahmins engaged themselves in agricultural production despite their traditional occupation. Hence, an agriculture-based occupation was the primary factor in designing the Shudras. The exact profession initiated by Brahmins never degraded them from the Brahmin Varna. On the other hand, Shudras later created untouchables who couldn't receive higher positions even after upgrading their occupations. For instance, Rajbanshi rulers of the Koch community established a kingdom and patronised the Brahmins. Brahmins also upgraded them to Kshatriya, who shifted their occupation and land during Parshurama's Kshatriya execution. Therefore, Brahmins of King Viswa's court proclaimed their Kshatriya origin and were termed as *bratya* Kshatriyas (Sanyal 2002). Although in the early ethnological survey reports, Rajbanshis are mentioned as a semi-Hinduised caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy (Bourdillon 1883). Similarly, in the sixteenth century, Chandals, along with agriculture, sold water chest-nut and salt in the market (Chakrabarty 1921) and they were confined to the occupations of agriculture, cremation, cleaning corpses, etc. Their social position and stigma of untouchability were the result of their occupation, but the same stigma has not been applied to Brahmins (Furui 2020). The more specific cause of these discriminations in equality lay in education, which was strictly followed since the later Aryan period. Moreover, throughout the Muslim period, rulers did not interfere much with the traditional Hindu laws and customs, which helped in cherishing the unequal customs (Moosvi 2011).

## **Chandals of Bengal**

Now, it is important to ask who the Chandals of Bengal were before delving into the research. The Chandals of Bengal undoubtedly were part of the same lineage mentioned in the late Vedic literature, involved in cremation and other menial professions. Along with being carpenters, fishermen, and boatmen, they also worked as agricultural labourers, cultivators, roofers, weavers, and vegetable and egg vendors

when they relocated from the wetlands of Far East Bengal to the settlement areas. However, according to contemporary theory, at least throughout the Rig-Vedic era, the name 'Chandal' was not employed to denote a disparaging difference. Equal status as Aryans is provided by the dialogue between Guhaka Chandal and King Harishchandra, as well as the dialogue between Vishwamitra, one of the authors of the Rig-Veda, and Chandal. In order to convey his honesty, the Jataka literature also referred to the Bodhisattva as a Chandala on many occasions. In this way, the words Chandal, Asura, Naga, etc. did not refer to a disparaging group; rather, they retained a positive and qualifying connotation. Although the term was initially derogatory to Namasudra in the 1911 census, following the change, the truth actually dates back a long way.

The *Brihadharma* and *Brahmavaivartya* Puranas of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries were designated as lower caste with the occupation of cremation and cleaning as mentioned before. Significantly, Chandal is described in the seventeenth-century manuscript *Chandimangal* as a vendor of salt and water chest-nuts (Chakrabarty 1921). Their numerous occupations, which probably resulted from their break from formal caste structures because each occupational group was dependent on the others in turn, allowed them to be mostly independent. As an established farmer population in the nineteenth century, the Chandals were cut off from society and were only lately included in the Hindu caste system. They were exempt from the debilitating effects of caste prejudice and continuous humiliation until the last two centuries. The Matua Dissenters could advance economically through their secular work ethic since their beliefs promoted the community's sense of independence and dignity. Despite their 'low' caste community's ban on education, they started to adopt literacy in the nineteenth century when their leader, Harichand, repeatedly emphasised the importance of education. Later, this resulted from Guruchand's association with Cecil Silas Mead, an Australian Baptist missionary. It was a difficult journey with a fragile economy and limited social amenities. The first book produced by the group was *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, a hagiography of Harichand. The 1911 census of India changed the name of the community from Chandal to Namasudra. Its significance as a text lies in its time of publication, a time when the community, hitherto on the fringes of society, changed its name as it moved into a stronger social and political position.

As mentioned through the Namasudra Movement in 1911, *Chandalas* received a new term as an identity, *Namah*, short for Namasudra, the title of *Chandalas* in Bengal (Risley 1892) And as James Wise said, *Chandal* is one of the most interesting castes of Bengal. These *Chandala* people were mainly concentrated in the various districts of East Bengal, Dinajpur, Faridpur, Dhaka, Khulna, Mymensingha, Barisal, Khulna, etc., and were the second largest caste (Biswas M. 2013). *Chandalas* were a totally unrecognized caste, at least before 1872. A prominent person of the concerned caste, Harichand Thakur, initiated the campaign of praising the marginal *Chandala* people for many centuries.

Now, we find many scholarly works on the Namasudra people between 1872 and the present time, but we can't find any firm knowledge about the socio-cultural conditions and evaluations of this caste throughout the centuries before 1872. According to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, the term Namasudra could not be found in any texts or public domain until the mid-nineteenth century, as their actual identity was *Chandal* (Bandyopadhyay 1997). The Namasudras have a serious difficulty that other Bengali lower castes do not have in tracing their previous history and determining their origin and identity (Das & Yadav 2021). When the Chandal community started to recognise itself as a separate socio-political entity in the middle of the nineteenth century, the neo-Matua religion began to take shape within the community. The president of the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sansthan, Manohar Mouli Biswas, believes that Matua is incompatible with Brahmanism, the Vedas, and their ceremonies. When rice and jute started to become popular cash crops among Muslims and some Hindu 'low' caste groups, this idea emerged at a time when finances were relatively stable (Bhaumik & Sarangi 2017).

The Chandals were outcasts from the beginning of recorded history; they resided outside of the towns where the supreme Aryans dwelt and did menial work for the Brahmins. Manu portrays them as 'the lowest of men', a mix of Brahmin women and Shudra men, who were not allowed to execute their forefathers' duties and whose touch was as unclean as a corpse (Beverley 1872). They are presented as hired killers in the Mahabharata, but their compassion protests the killing of a defenseless child. Wearing blue or yellow robes, red linen on the shoulders, bear skins around the loins, and iron decorations on the wrists, they are portrayed in the Ramayana as weird and terrifying. The sixteenth-century Chandals were characterised as murderers who consumed dead bodies by even the liberal Abul Fazl. Currently, Terra Chandal is solely used in contempt across India, and no caste recognises it as a unique identity (Wise 2017).

Regarding the age of the Namasudras or Chandals' racial heritage, there are numerous contradictory reports. Some people believe that they were once Brahmins but were demoted from a higher social status (Beverley 1872). According to others, they were servants of Brahmins, and similar beliefs must be supported by the local Brahmin influence on the Namasudras, who were denied access to education and other fundamental rights. The strong prince of Oudh was also portrayed in the Ramayana as a Chandal chief named Gohaka's supporter (Beverley 1872). Concerning the region, as the Rarh region was an isolated rolling plateau covered with dense forests, it was mainly inhabited by *Chandals*, along with Bauris, Hadis, Doms, and other aboriginal communities (Saha 1995). There is another story articulated by O'Malley, and according to the story, Chandals were the legitimate children of upper-caste, beautiful women (Malley 1909). According to Beverley, the Chandals are simply a common tribe that is identical to the Mals of the Rajmahal hills in both name and status. They are unquestionably of Dravidian ancestry, and census data indicates that the Chandals

are more numerous in many areas than the Mals. Buchanan, however, believed that the Dosadhas of Bihar and the Chandals of Bengal were the same. There are significant disparities there, even though both are characterised by an uncommon degree of independence and self-reliance and are equally low on the caste scale. A significant difference is that Chandals never worshipped their tribe's gods, but a Dosadha did.

Against these backgrounds, historical interchanges between the Chandals and other social communities created turbulence, especially in the nineteenth century. The so-called turbulence is associated with the caste hierarchy only, where the developmental process and endeavour towards the caste hierarchy of a lower caste were never permissible. On the other hand, for the concerned caste, social awareness is the only path to be mobilized. The upper layers of society applied the impure theory to their designated occupation was nothing but a stigma that continued hereditarily in nature. The ethnographic studies throughout the nineteenth century mentioned Chandals as semi-Hinduized in the region, confirming the hardship of the hierarchy towards them during the previous centuries. I have explored the historical facts related to the Chandals, which suppressed them despite raising the question of the popular belief of the derogatory caste.

## Legitimacy of Chandals

The thirteenth-century literature *Brihaddharma Purana*, the first manuscript which listed all the thirty-six castes in the Bengali caste structure, but in descriptive form, there are forty-one castes, and Chandals are listed as Adham Shankara (Tarkaratna 1893), Niharranjan Roy opined that during the formative period, the actual number of castes might be thirty-six castes, and by the time, more than five castes were somehow included (Ray 1949). *Brahmavaivartya Purana* also provided more or less the same number, and both the *Puranas* ascribed menial professions, cremation, and butchering to Chandals (*Brahmavaivartya Purana*), but the seventeenth-century manuscript *Konkanchandi* by Mukundaram Chakrabarty depicted the Chandals as salt and water-nut sellers (Chakrabarty 1921). However, between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, the caste-wise occupation underwent a change. Since the middle of the eighteenth century, more specifically by the leadership and their spiritual god Harichand Thakur, Chandals were seen as a profound social community in every sphere.

The *Chandals* of Dhaka retained a vague tradition that originally migrated from Gaya and referred to a certain Govardhana Chandal as their ancestor. However, according to James Wise, there is no question that they are members of a strong Dravidian or aboriginal tribe that sought safety in Bengal's wetlands either prior to or during persecution by the Aryan invaders. A Chandal monarch ruled from this fort, the remains of which may still be seen in the Bhowal jungle, demonstrating that they were

the only people in Lower Bengal to employ the *Kayathi Nagari*,<sup>2</sup> the common written language of Dinajpur. In pursuit of religious freedom and security, a well-organised commonwealth was expelled from its northern homes (Wise 2017). According to Wells, the Chandals of Faridpur were formerly a wholly Hindu community made up of people from every caste, from Brahmans to lower castes, who were cursed by bad fortune, according to Wells. They left their ancestral home and travelled bodily to the southern deserts of Faridpur, Jessore, and Bakharganj, where they were executed by a vindictive Brahmin of unimaginable sanctity in Dacca (Beverley 1872).

After considering Chandals' racial antiquity in East Bengal, Wise went on to list a few of the occupations they practised. He noted that, despite being divided into several trades, Chandals are capable of working at anything. They are the only Hindus working in the boats—*bajra*— that Europeans rent. They make up a sizable portion of the peasantry and work as shopkeepers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, oilmen, and prosperous traders. The Tiyars held a precarious position in Dacca; five Shudra servants worked for them in the *Pancha-barta*, or pure, half of the district, while members of their own caste served in the impure part (Wise 2017). Although the Tiyars of East Bengal were mostly fishermen, they also worked as boatmen, cultivated the land, and ran businesses in areas where rivers had silted up or fisheries had become unproductive. The Chandals built their long, narrow boats, known as *jalkas*, but they built their own fishing nets (Risley 1892). In Bengal, the snake goddess Manasa Devi is revered throughout the month of Shravan, which falls between July and August. Along with worshipping Manasa Devi, the Chandals of East Bengal celebrated '*nao-ka-pooja*', or boat worship, or *chanda-kudni*, on the thirtieth day of the month (Wise 2017).

Dalit poetry even dates back to the early days of the Bengali language, when it was adopted following a voyage via Sanskrit, Pali, Prakriti, and Avahatta. Dalit individuals from communities like Savara, Chandal, Sunri, Kapalika, Dom, and others wrote literature in the local language during this time, which is the tenth and twelfth centuries A.D. The majority of their early writing was in the *Charyapad* poetry genre. One of the *Charyapada poets*, Vusuka, is mentioned by Achintya Biswas. He claimed that Chandal spoiled his wife, which is why he became Bengali:

*"Niya Gharani Chandala Leli..... Aji Vusuka Bangali Veli"*.

From this, Biswas raised a pertinent question: "Should we accept that Bengali was synonymous with Dalit in those days? Otherwise, what is the reason to call him a Bengali (Biswas A. , 1995)?"

Chandals took caste prejudice very seriously; the fact that they never allowed a European to stand or walk over their cooking area in the boat is fascinating. If his master did this by accident while the food was being made, it was promptly thrown

<sup>2</sup>From at least the sixteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, Kaithi, also called Kayathi, Kayasthi, or Kaite, was a common historical Brahmic script in Northern and Eastern India, especially in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand.

out. They also took great care to clean their pots and pans and bathe before meals. Even so, he is proud of his boat, and the clean state he maintains it in stands in stark contrast to the appearance of one that is armed by Muslim boatmen (Wise 2017). This practice of hygienic livelihood among Chandals, seen in pre-modern times, raised the inevitable question about the theory of untouchability. Also, it is significant that back to the later Vedic period, Chandals were degraded due to impure practices. It confirms that though they were compelled to practice menial occupations because of the social obligations, the purity and hygienic livelihood continued even without the basic component of economic sustenance. However, Chandals, hereditary butchers, traditional agriculturists, and boatmen, were also engaged in carpentry, especially making bullock carts and wheels (Nicholas 2008). Therefore, soon a section of Chandals established themselves as shopkeepers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, oilers, as well as successful traders (Risley 1892). Gradually, due to the Aryanization of lower caste people, Chandals abandoned many customs of the non-Aryan tribes. They stopped practicing widow marriage, which was formerly practiced, and *Chandal* brides, who used to walk in the public spheres in the olden days, were compelled to stay within the boundary. Although they adopted many Hindu meditations, *Chandal* still maintained his preference for spirits and pork (Wise 2017). Commercial activity has an obvious connection with boating; some hagiographies and songs provide a reference to trading practices within Chandals. Ashwini Sarkar's *Shri Shri Hari Sangeet* provides:

Bideshe banijyo diye, maa achen potho pane cheye

*Bhule roli ki sukh peye, edeshe tor bondhu ke re* (Goswami 1932)?

[By doing business abroad, the mother is looking for a way,

Forgot to get happiness, who is your friend in this country?]

Ishwarchandra Sarkar's *Kartike Jhorer Panchali* gives adequate evidence of the *Brihadharma Purana*; he mentioned, '*Dwija hon puja tyagi, Chandaler ghore Chandi*' [Dwija left worshipping whereas goddess Chandi is in Chandal's house].<sup>3</sup> He also mentioned that in this topsy-turvy world, the owl sings a tune and the bird roars like a lion; Brahmins forgot to worship while lower caste Chandals set up shrines; Shudras took up the profession of being twice born; And the king fled from his kingdom like a lowly washerman wearing a costly shawl (Sarkar I. C. 1857). These activities are identical to the deeds of the Sadgops and Tili castes, which upgraded themselves into the caste hierarchy in pre-colonial Bengal. Sadgops built up an agricultural economy, leaving their traditional occupation of pastoralism. Donated several lands and other pieces of property to Brahmins and built several temples. Tilis also upgraded

<sup>3</sup>*Brihadharma Purana* mentioned that such a time will come when a Brahmin will leave the *puja*/ worshipping, and a Chandal or lower caste will replace the occupation. But since pre-modern times, Chandal has not only denied the Brahminical gods in their worship but also social customs, such as gender inequality, which were their common tradition since indigenous inhabitation.

themselves by following the same, but in the case of Chandals, the consequence was not equal. However, these two castes were not categorized into the Antyaja section but into the Asat-Shudra, and that might be the reason for not being recognized in the Hindu caste hierarchy.

However, singing was a favourite pastime of the Chandals, and a *Chandal Dol* was seldom without some musical instrument with which to enliven the evening after a day's toil. We cannot find any written form of these songs or songs before 1872. Before 1905, neither the Muslims nor the Namasudras posed a serious challenge to the gentry's dominance in education, occupation, or, in most cases, even control of land resources (McLane 1975). But, after the rise of Chandal reformers Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, along with other consciousnesses, we receive a variety of songs about their livelihood and spiritual beliefs. Chandals were extremely self-conscious about their outfits from a young age. A Chandal girl always had her hair long and commonly combed, oiled, and styled while she was wearing a holiday outfit. They are well-known as clubmen and guards, and many of them are tall and powerful. The waterways of Bengal were overrun with thugs or robbers during the chaos that followed the fall of the Mughal empire, making passage dangerous and inland trade impossible. The Chandals provided the majority of these criminals, but since they dispersed, they have developed into a tranquil and admirable group under colonial rule (Wise 2017).

The position of women in a community defines the actual status of the concerned caste in society. Being marginalized and deprived of all sorts of rights, *Chandal* women were free from various obligations in their family, unlike other upper castes. Upper-caste women usually couldn't go out in the public sphere in any case, but the women from *Chandal* or other lower castes were the catalysts of their households. They were on behalf of their spouse as they worked hard to provide for the survival of their family. From agricultural labour, fishing, boating, and small artisans to household workers, they were the primary pillar. We receive another kind of instance about Chandal women back to the fifth century B.C. from Rabindranath Tagore's *Chandalika*, basically a work of fiction. The short drama *Chandalika* tells a very exciting story that holds our attention and keeps us spellbound from the beginning to the end (Tagore 1966). But there are numerous occasions in the play that catch our attention. In addition, the first scenario itself is highly instructional and fascinating. When Buddhist monks want water to quench their thirst, the Chandal girl's dread of giving it to a man causes her to feel conflicted, and she dares not touch him because of her social standing. The monk tells her not to embarrass herself. The Chandal girl's realisation of her human identity and her inferiority are the true conditions, and they undoubtedly pique our curiosity as well as our empathy for the child and our respect for the monk who held that all men are created equal and should not be classified according to colour. A young *kayet* or Kayastha woman, generally considered high caste, although disputes over

their true status continued into the late nineteenth century, fetched 40–100 rupees, but an untouchable Chandal woman could be bought for 10–20 rupees. Even after slavery, slaves retained their caste status, and caste determined their duties (Sarkar T. 1985). Upper-caste servants cooked and provided childcare, and they often enjoyed an imaginary kinship with the owner's family. However, some Chandal women were truly good at cooking and cherishing children, even though they were marginalized and couldn't receive the fame they deserved.

In the case of social consciousness, the Chandals were among the few cases that raised their insurgency against the orthodox social powers in India. Even the Mahar community, from which Dr. Ambedkar belonged, started campaigning only after the emergence of Ambedkar. The first uprising happened in 1872. Choron Sapah, a wealthy Chandal of Amgram village in Bakarganj district, organized a feast and invited all castes, including Brahmins and Kayasthas. The Kayasthas persuaded all caste Hindu invitees not to accept the invitation through taunts and taunts: 'Men who allow their women to go to the market and... are employed as cleaning servants in the jails... what next?' The refusal of upper-caste Hindus to participate in the feast created intense racial animosity between Chandals and upper-caste Hindus. The Chandal headmen of all the villages in this part of the country held a meeting and decided that the Chandals would not accept food cooked by upper-caste Hindus except Brahmins (Owen 1873). The exceptional case of Brahmins was only considered because of the *hateva* proclamation<sup>4</sup> of Kayasthas against Chandals. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, they could not bear the brunt of their derogatory caste name (Chandal) and untouchability. In protest, the Chandals of Bengal staged a general strike in the Faridpur district in early 1873. A letter from the Faridpur Magistrate documents "resolved not to serve any organization of the upper classes until they had a better position among the Hindu castes. They were given what they currently occupy (Magistrate of Furreedpore Vide Letter No. 340, 1873). The strike started under the leadership of the Chandals. Rai Chand Mondal, Neelmani Biswas of Dout Kura, and Sibuh Dhal, Ramchand Bagsha, and Bhojan Bala of Pursur, these leaders of the Chandal movement of 1872-73 were fairly wealthy. And this civil unrest expanded not only in Faridpur but also in the neighbouring districts of Bakarganj and Jessore. The strike was so complete that the Magistrate of Faridpur, during his official inquiry into the affected areas, four months after its commencement, found the fields... acquired, the houses empty, and

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<sup>4</sup>The Hateva Proclamation (also spelled *Hathua* or *Hatwa Proclamation*) refers to a historical declaration made by certain Brahmin leaders or religious authorities that formally excommunicated or ritually degraded the Chandals- a community later known as Namasudras- from the orthodox Hindu social order. However, it is important to note that there is no single, officially documented text called the Hateva Proclamation in Sanskrit literature or colonial archives. Instead, the term is used in social history and Dalit studies, especially in Bengal, to describe a symbolic Brahminical decree or religious sanction that declared Chandals impure and untouchable.

not a Chandal to be found in an upper-caste Hindu or Mohammedan house, or Chandal woman in any market (Magistrate of Furreedpore Vide Letter No. 340, 1873).

The three divisions of the Indian population based on religion in the Census Report of 1909 also suggest the retaliation from the lower castes towards Brahminism. Dr. Ambedkar listed ten reasons for being untouchable, and he emphasized one reason for not receiving mantras from Brahmins or other recognized Hindu gurus. (Ambedkar, *The Untouchables* 1948) Chandal began to embrace the mantras from several Matua spiritual *gosains*<sup>5</sup> after the social uprising of 1872. As a result, the Brahmin dominance assumption that a certain caste is inferior to others and that an untouchable person cannot be a priest is questioned. Chandals were organising under the leadership of many spiritual *gurus* and *gosais*, who were adherents of Harichand Thakur, the community's ultimate leader. It is important to note that they have not taken into account any Hindu deities; instead, they have blamed the gods and Hindu texts for their societal decay. This idea was sparked by Harichand, which is why a new way of life was formed. Regardless of caste or religion, Bengalis have denigrated Vaisnavism since the Chaitanya era. Although Harichand's father was a devout follower of Vaisnavism, it is unclear why he established a new religion that advocated for the complete elimination of the caste system. Undoubtedly, finding the solution would be important, but I'm not going overboard here.

## Conclusion

The practice of untouchability in India stems from complex historical, religious, and social factors. It represents a uniquely Indian form of discrimination rooted in the caste system, unlike any other social hierarchy in the world. The evolution of untouchability in India was not an immediate or singular process but a gradual socio-religious development rooted in the transformation of Vedic society and the Aryan social order. The institution of untouchability reflected the Aryan pursuit of hierarchical stability through inclusion and exclusion. This evolving process transformed flexible early Vedic social structures into a rigid, hereditary system of inequality. The historical evolution of the Chandals of Bengal, later known as Namasudras, reveals a long and complex journey from occupational diversity to social marginalization and eventual self-assertion.

Over time, religious reinterpretation and Brahmanical dominance gradually transformed Chandals from socially independent occupational groups into ritually impure "outcastes." However, the Aryans' implementation of occupational classification produced numerous lesser castes in addition to the Chandals. The upper caste society continued to retain truths that were exclusively related to them over the decades. However, they neglected the Chandals' association with handicrafts,

<sup>5</sup>The term *gosain* denotes the preachers of the Matua religion, and were compared to missionaries in Christianity, Brahmins in Hinduism, and Imams of Islam.

construction, and agricultural production—the main pillars of the society—which were almost completely disregarded. Above all, the social equality among Chandals, regardless of gender, occupation, and cultural assets of singing and playing musical instruments, is fully unrecognized in the Brahminical texts. Despite these subjects, the Chandals and their relatively modern social customs were disparaged by the Bengali upper castes. This process intensified between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries, as Puranic and regional texts increasingly tied their identity to “polluting” occupations. Despite these restrictions, Chandals maintained economic independence through multiple trades and agricultural work, becoming a significant rural population in Bengal by the nineteenth century, and that should be studied.

The Matua movement harnessed the cultural richness of Chandals by the second half of the nineteenth century. The movement was initiated by Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, marking a turning point. It encouraged education, dignity, and self-organization among the Chandals, culminating in their renaming as Namasudras in the 1911 Census, a symbolic act of social reclamation. This re-identification represented both a rejection of Brahmanical stigma and the beginning of a socio-political awakening. Although earlier literature and colonial ethnographies portrayed Chandals as degraded or semi-Hinduized, modern scholarship reveals that this perception was a product of centuries of exclusion, not inherent inferiority. The Chandals' historical trajectory—from inclusion to exclusion and finally to conscious assertion—demonstrates how caste identity in Bengal was not static but constantly reshaped by economic change, religious power, and collective resistance. In addition, along with Chandals, the other officially recognised lower castes, such as the Mallas, Rajbanshis, Bagdis, Pods, Kaivartyas, and others, were and still are well-known social groupings with respectable occupations that uphold sanitary culture and customs while still encountering the same animosities. These days, this social barrier is a major source of social disputes, which the upper castes refer to as 'wild activity', while the lower castes see it as social consciousness.

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# Ethnographic Tradition of Positive Hailing: Dalit Women, Caste-gaze Inversions and Celebrations of Body and Identity in *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable*, India

Roja Suganthy-Singh<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article engages *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* (1995), one of the earliest ethnographies to foreground a Dalit woman's voice, marking thirty years since its publication. Viramma's oral testimonies in this work continue to influence Dalit women by fostering positive body image, participatory knowledge production, and self-love. Ethnomusicologist Josiane Racine and anthropologist Jean-Luc Racine present Viramma's life through affirmative stories that invert the caste-gaze that has traditionally cast Dalit women as passive victims marked for sexual violation. This article argues that through her narrative, Viramma inaugurates an ethnographic tradition of "positive hailing" calling attention to Dalit women's embodied self-understanding and agency as vital to Dalit feminist ethnography. Her life stories enunciate Dalit women's values, beliefs, and political agency, as countering both casteist and caste-neutral feminist frameworks, and redefining knowledge production as solidarity, healing and shared life. Viramma's deliberate linguistic and narrative choices become acts of resistance that challenge casteist tropes attached to Dalit womanhood. In meticulously constructing her life narrative, Viramma establishes a tradition of self-chosen visibility that resists caste-imposed invisibility and stigma; she affirms Dalit female-focused ritual practices as necessary for life-sustenance.

## Keywords

Caste and gender, Autoethnography, Dalit women, Dalit feminism, Dalit culture, Oral narrative, Testimonial narrative

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<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor of Sociology/Anthropology, St. John Fisher University, 3690 East Avenue, Rochester, NY 14618  
E-mail: jsingh@sjfc.edu

## Introduction

On the thirtieth anniversary of its publication, I engage with *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* (1995) as one of the earliest significant ethnographies primarily carrying a Dalit woman's voice.<sup>1</sup> This work continues to profoundly shape my Dalit identity-formation, especially as I recall struggling with self-acceptance as a young woman after being told I was Dalit.<sup>2</sup> The narrator Viramma elatedly forges a beloved Dalit female identity in an intricate ethnographic tradition centering Dalit body and voice as testaments of positive self-understanding and self-love. She deliberately chooses words and stories to rise above victimhood and firmly establishes female-centered practices of caste-gaze inversions. In this oral narrative based in the *ceri* (segregated hamlet) of Karani near Puducherry, Tamil Nadu, India, Viramma self-identifies her belonging community as that of the *Paraiyar* and her female identity as a *Paratchi*.<sup>3</sup> Viramma narrated her life stories in the Tamil language to ethnomusicologist Josiane Racine native to Puducherry over a period of ten years (1980s). Josiane<sup>4</sup> and cultural anthropologist Jean-Luc Racine transcribed, translated and published this narrative in 1995 in French, and 1997 in English. I argue that Viramma inaugurates a Dalit feminist ethnographic tradition of positive hailing through the chosen visibility of her life. In doing so, she enunciates a subjectivity rooted in self-love and affirmation that directly counters the imposed invisibility and stigmatization of the Dalit body as the "polluted other" within caste society. I examine how as an active subject, she spontaneously weaves method, purpose, and centrality of her narrative as she takes control of the details of her life that she decides to share with Josiane Racine. Further, I advance my interest to understand Viramma's forging of such a tradition on her own terms in foregrounding voice, body, and communal culture of Dalit women as sites of validation. This essay carries twofold discussions on impacts of a Dalit feminist ethnography carrying lived experiences intertwined with suffering and affirmation: 1. Ethnography of self-chosen visibility of body and community, and 2. Critical pedagogy for feminist cultural ethnographers. My objective for these observations

<sup>1</sup>Translator Will Hobson notes that the ethnomusicologist Josiane Racine and Viramma engaged in spontaneous conversations for over 10 years resulting in the ethnography. The original names of people and places are changed upon request.

<sup>2</sup>See Singh's chapter on "Embracing Dalit identity" in her ethnographic work rooted in Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu. She shares her dilemma in declaring her new found Dalit identity fearing impending consequences.

<sup>3</sup>Each Dalit community regionally chose to embrace local communal identities such as *Paraiyar* originating from the *parai*—meaning "to announce"—the drum that Dalit men play in funeral processions. *Paratchi* is feminine equivalent to *paraiyan*, the *Paraiyar* have since subverted the *parai* to represent Dalit cultural identity. See work on this by Clarke. Also, see footnote 8.

<sup>4</sup>I use Josiane Racine's first name throughout this essay since her partner Jean-Luc Racine shares the same last name.

is that the readers might recognize the transformative power of organic narratives by Dalit women to weave new cultural feminist traditions into ethnographic work processes that replace institutionalized rules. This tradition involves discarding epistemic positions of caste power and shifting research objectives when subjects become embodiments of active subjectivity.

### **Viramma and Positive Hailing**

I adapt positive hailing as a Dalit feminist ethnographic method that subverts brahminical caste-gaze notions that mark Dalit women's bodies as polluted and sexually available laborers. I draw on Black feminist scholar Jacqueline Bobo's adaptation of Louis Althusser's (1971) concept of "interpellation," which examines the role of reader/viewer positionality in interpreting representations of Black women's lives (Bobo, Hudley & Michel 2004). I juxtapose positive hailing with Althusser's notion of ideological "hailing," through which dominant structures summon subjects into subordinate positions. He describes interpellation as a reflexive submission to authority when individuals respond to such summons (pp. 174–175). In caste society, coercive labels imposed upon Dalit women function in a similar way: oppressive ideological hailing reproduces stereotypes that diminish their authenticity of voice and visibility. In contrast, positive hailing summons the listener into self-authored spaces of affirmative visibility where Dalit women appear uncontaminated, beautiful, and secure. Through this immersive method, Viramma confronts brahminical patriarchy and disrupts caste structures that mark Dalit female bodies as sites of exploitation.

Dalit feminist studies scholar Uthara Geetha (2025) positions experience as a crucial epistemic resource for subaltern communities but cautions that lived experience alone cannot sustain knowledge production without conceptual reflection (p. 320). Dalit feminist writers and ethnographers such as Urmila Pawar, Kumud Pawde, Shailaja Paik and Bama Susairaj demonstrate that Dalit women's personal and collective experiences function as vital theoretical interventions in caste-gender analysis. Building on South-Asian gender studies scholar Sharmila Rege's recognition of Dalit feminist praxis and language as central to challenging casteist configurations (2006), I argue that positive hailing emerges from lived experiences through processes of relationality and resocialization to bring hidden meanings to visibility. Rather than dwelling on suffering, Viramma's narrative reveals a Dalit-centered universe in which her body and identity are honored. Her positive hailing reflects a collective *arivaayviyal* (Tamil: epistemology) that challenges brahminical hierarchies of knowledge organized through binaries of sacred and degraded bodies. Viramma's reclamation of the terms *Paraiyar* and *Paratchi*, her celebration of dark skin, sexuality, and communal rituals, does not stop with inverting stigma; it restores symbolic and lived meanings to Dalit

womanhood. Through storytelling she situates the Dalit female body as sacred within her own value system, illuminating joy, erotic pleasure, ritual meaning, laughter, and communal solidarity as constitutive of agency.

Positive hailing reconfigures ethnography where instead of the researcher operating with interpretive authority, they become an apprentice engaged in disciplined listening. Dalit feminist methodology thus requires relinquishing the impulse to dominate analysis allowing Dalit women's experiential and cultural frameworks to reshape the meanings of "ethno" and "graphy." Such narratives transform listeners by redirecting them from dominant caste figurations toward more compassionate understandings. As Geetha observes, Dalit feminist standpoint is an "epistemic and political intervention that redefines the very conditions of knowledge production and its legitimacy" (p. 318). Positive hailing therefore functions as both narrative strategy and methodological compass, challenging caste studies that spotlight only violence and obscure the expansive affirmative worlds within Dalit communities. Through this practice, Viramma's carefully arranged narrative of affirmation despite pain becomes a site of alternate knowledge production that rephrases the terms of imposed recognition.

In theoretically framing positive hailing, I do not suggest that such attention on affirmation should displace the necessity to question and dismantle caste violence. The Racines in their afterword to the ethnography record that this work does not deny the atrocities against Dalits, but on the contrary believe that in the recognition and articulation of dignity by Dalit women, the despised life emerges respectful (p.312). Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran powerfully describe—with evidence on violence against Dalits—how caste and gender relations are sustained through terror, force, humiliation, and the silencing of protest. Reporting incidents such as the public stripping and parading of Muthama from the Golla community, they illustrate how power operates not only through brutality but through the prevention of grievance itself (2025). They argue that the most absolute form of power is one that forbids even seeing the shame when Golla men had to close their eyes, and the fear of articulation of wrong when Golla women had to hide. Positive hailing must therefore be read not as denial of violence, but as a radical feminist method to interrupt silent suffering through an assertion of voices that project self-recognition onto a caste society devised to prevent it.

## **Dalit Feminist Pedagogies of Refusal and Caste-Gaze Inversion**

Thoughts from "Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research" authored by social scientists Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2014) provide an important framework for understanding "refusal" as a form of resistance to the anthropological and qualitative traditions that have historically dehumanized oppressed bodies. They

caution against an economy of pain within academic capitalism, where qualitative research often commodifies women's bodily suffering. Viramma's conscious decision to center celebration rather than pain exemplifies an "organic refusal," embodying Tuck and Yang's pedagogy of refusal; she asserts positivity without erasing the reality of exclusion. They help us understand the urgency of this message to learn from narratives of "dispossessed peoples" that they do not desire to dwell on pain (p. 812). Instead, they guide anthropological inquiry toward recognizing subversive meanings and proactive strategies of living fully and not merely surviving. Tuck and Yang conclude that "Refusal makes space for recognition, and for reciprocity. Refusal turns the gaze back upon power, specifically the colonial modalities of knowing persons as bodies to be differentially counted, violated, saved, and put to work" (p. 817). In refusing commodification of pain, the oppressed reclaim agency through narrative capital, and the act of saying "no" becomes a form of epistemic power. As the primary force of representation and documentation, Viramma controls the narrative, and dissemination of her experiential knowledge.

Tuck and Yang comment that when anthropologists publish the pain caused to their own peoples, either geographically, nationally or communally, the obligatory representation or exposition could come close to reproducing colonial authoritative institutionalized knowledge that controls meanings (ibid). However, in her mode of storytelling, Viramma spares Racine from the wrongs of profiting from the native's pain; she verbally and narratively refuses the traumatization of her body, saying "no" to its reduction as spectacle of suffering, and instead is her own messiah in resurrecting a positive embodied self through her testimony. Her pedagogy of positive hailing is more than liberating body from caste-gaze but freeing qualitative engagement of an eager anthropologist and readers from presumptuous analytical interpretations. In her ethnography, Singh (2018) situates Dalit women's narratives of pain and brutal sexual violence as truth-telling acts of rebellion that reveal a deep desire to call attention to the need to invert the objectification imposed by caste power (pp. 122-138). Journalist and anti-caste activist Smita Narula, reporting for the Human Rights Watch documents violence against Dalit communities—specifically in the Bihar tragedy in 1998—to bring global attention to the ferocity of caste power (Narula 1999).<sup>5</sup> From within such spaces where caste powers are in daily operation to routinely massacre and violate Dalit women's bodies, Viramma instates their life and body as agents of positive value nurtured in the female-centric rituals of Dalit culture. Rege notes, "The testimonios used in a consciously defined modern sense of what it means to be a Dalit woman, challenge the hegemony of brahminical linguistic practices" (2006, p. 93). Likewise,

<sup>5</sup>Narula's work is the first published documentation of violence against Dalits following the massacre in Laxmanpur Bathe, Bihar, of over 60 Dalits including children for demanding higher daily wages in 1998.

I observe that Viramma organically introduces new traditions into institutionalized anthropological studies, mandating ethnographic engagement with lived experiences. This requirement demands ardent labor of learning through listening on the part of the researcher, and to study Dalit women's lives as feminist cultural pedagogy.

The refusals that Viramma voices are not merely personal acts of choice; they are epistemological interventions that muddle cultural codes through which Dalit women's bodies have been rendered as mandatorily legible only within specified caste conventions. In recognizing that signs in any form gain meaning only through systems of patterned representation, Viramma elicits reversal of meanings through active interpretations of personal experiences and in doing so disrupts the patterned relationship between signs, and signified objects within which Dalit women are tied to as embodiments of trauma. In claiming narrative authority over her own body, she reworks representation itself as a cultural practice, transforming testimony into an active site where meanings are set on her own terms. In this regard, positive hailing extends beyond Tuck and Yang's "refusal" in not only rejecting capitalist research that does not hesitate to commodify pain but reformulates the analytic frame itself in the positive hailing of body presence.

### **Regional Contours of Caste, Linguistic Belonging and Resistance**

In the northern part of Tamil Nadu that Viramma speaks from, more than 56 per cent of the population depend on agricultural labor for livelihood (Government of Puducherry, n.d.). The Reddiar, Naicker, Gounder (sub-caste groups of the Vanniyar, traditionally the business caste), Nadar and Vellalar (sub-caste groups of the Shudra, traditionally the laborer caste) are some of the sub-caste groups that Viramma encounters daily (Census India, n.d.). Though Brahmins occupy the highest status in the caste hierarchy, these other caste communities claim immediate supremacy over Dalits in their daily lives as their employers and demanding servitude. Common to caste operations, here as well, land is the major source of wealth, investment, and mark of social and economic status where Dalits work as laborers for daily wages. Paraiyar form the major Dalit group in Puducherry, and the Vettiyan sub-group of the Paraiyar live here as well. *Sakkillee* (those who work with animal hide), *Thotee* (cleaning sewers and toilets), *Sanar* (toddy tapping) and *Tomban* (barbering) are some of the other Dalit groups (census.co.in). As Viramma states, most Dalit communities work for the Reddiar who are the most prominent native caste group continuing their traditional family heritage as landowners (p. 241).

Though the word Paraiyar is used as a derogatory term by caste communities, Viramma activates her resistance taking pride in that identity and re-signifying the terms Paraiyar and Paratchi repeatedly in her narrative. The caste people call out to a woman as a Paratchi when they mean to degrade them as a “prostitute” or “bitch;”<sup>6</sup> Viramma overturns that stereotyping in proudly referring to herself as Paratchi. In her communal autobiography *Sangati* (2009), Bama applies the same term when referencing her Dalit identity-based social placing while living among caste communities as a teacher. In listing the rigid expectations caste women are bound by in comparison with Dalit women’s freedom to quarrel, or leave an abusive marriage, she states, “I could see that in some ways I was lucky to be a parachi” (p. 113). Bama reminds Dalit women that “We tend to forget it all [good things] and believe that to be upper caste is best” (ibid). She describes the physical beauty of Dalit women, their unique way of wearing a sari: “The way we wear our saris with the pleats as the back and the way we pull our hair back and knot it to one side – all these have their own beauty” (ibid). Such usage of Paratchi and Paraiyar is a common subversive linguistic strategy among Dalit families to dilute and mock the intended injury of verbal abuse (Satya 2024).

Further, in her linguistic reclamation, Viramma rejects the term “Harijan,” (children of God) coined by Gandhi:<sup>7</sup> “‘The Harijans!’ My son corrected me, coming out of the house. ‘You can keep quiet, boy, that name will never cross my lips!’” (p. 165). This refusal to accept a new name for her community is Viramma’s strong political statement against the celebrated Mahatma. She adds, “In the past, in the time of the ancestors, someone called us Pariahs and that word has stuck for generation after generation. Eh, boy! What do you want to hide from Sinnamma [Josiane]?” (pp. 165-166). As Tuck and Yang insist, saying “no” to articulations declared on behalf of the dispossessed (p. 812), and in this case, without involving them in the decision-making is an act of resistance to a colonial pattern of image control. Viramma’s choice of the word “hide” indicates that in her understanding, Gandhi imposed this invented name of Harijan onto the *Paraiyar* as a charitable alternative image through a caste

<sup>6</sup>My current learning project in villages surrounding Madurai, Tamil Nadu, is among Dalit women who were formerly employed as “manual scavengers” to clean public toilets. In my conversation with Satya, who works as their community organizer, I learned that “Paratchi” is widely used to scold or degrade caste women indicating “prostitute” or “bitch.” This linguistic control is yet another performance of caste entitlement to Dalit female body in creating and normalizing such linguistic patterns of name-calling.

<sup>7</sup>While in jail, in 1933, Gandhi started *Harijan*, a weekly newspaper to address untouchability as a social evil. The publication’s name, meaning “children of God,” was Gandhi’s term that he chose to use for those traditionally considered untouchables in Indian society; however, the Dalit movement rejected the term as charitable because Gandhi did not condemn caste as a systemic issue. Leaders in the Dalit movement, especially Dr. Ambedkar chose to popularize the Marathi term Dalit – meaning broken people.

person's eye. Thus, the Gandhian gesture functions as a benevolent mask concealing caste power; Viramma's rejection exposes and subverts it. When Viramma says that the name will not cross her lips, one speculates an implication that Gandhi did not want to utter the words Chuhra, Valmik and Vankar (words for Dalit in Gujarati) and chooses a comfort-term as an entitlement of caste and political power. Her refusal not only rejects Gandhi's paternalism but reclaims the authority to name the self—a critical act of epistemic claim to her linguistic belonging. Thus, Viramma sets directions of resistance to casteist piercings and steers her listeners to recognize and condemn linguistic control of derogation and victimhood.

## **Visibility and Engagement**

I continue to tie my discussions onto Bobo's understanding of "interpellation" where she proposes that the viewer or reader of a text can be "hailed" by the actual subject of a narrative into that very subjecthood, and "...the subject begins to construct meaning from the work and is constructed by the work" (p.186). Likewise, Viramma impresses upon Racine and her reader/listener a methodology of subjective storytelling through organic ethnographic processes that create a tradition of positive hailing built on trust and experiential self-understanding. In that process, the reader/listener recognizes that Viramma's thoughts and words are purposeful as she understands herself in relationship with her family and community. Further, the reader gathers that she intentionally organizes her life and memories into various components that are thematically and sequentially organized to establish a positive identity.

Viramma first hailed me through this ethnography as a thirty-four-year-old Dalit woman in the United States, grappling with the recent discovery of my Dalit roots and the temptation to conceal them. As I returned to her words over the years, her voice continued to challenge and guide me while I confronted internalized stereotypes of Dalit womanhood—dark skin equated with ugliness, immorality, and lack of intellect. Viramma's narrative urged me to reclaim and celebrate my Dalit body, voice, language, and communal culture as sites of agency. Calling forth such identity formations, her stories hail readers into processes of positive selfhood beyond caste definitions. As a transnational feminist cultural anthropologist, I learn from Viramma's narrative of the ethical discipline required of me: to practice attentive listening, and to recognize the real meanings embedded in organic sites of self-assertion.

## **Positional Switching, Trust and Methodology**

Josianne steps into Viramma's world ready to serve the formalized discipline of anthropology, strictly following its institutionalized methodological rubric. However, what surprises her is that the respondent in the ethnographic field work is not Viramma

but Josiane— as the one permitted into a Dalit woman’s circle of trust. This inversion causes a methodological breach where the ethnographer turns into the one “observed” on her capacity to listen and learn; trust becomes the medium of inquiry. Viramma iterates firmly that she is in command, daring to break sociocultural rules by allowing the presence of a caste individual into her physically and emotionally cordoned space, along with the world Josiane represents unbeknownst of the visceral entry of institutionally dictated rules. Trust and unconditional hospitality are the air, wind, and water in Viramma’s ecosystem unbound by western disciplinary conditionalities, formula and methods.

In this study on Dalit culture and identity initialized by Josiane Racine, an organic and spontaneous culture of trust emerges in her relationship with Viramma. In that organic creation, Viramma assumes the position of the methodological innovator who reverses the anthropologist’s expectation that subjects must learn to “trust” the researcher. Here, the reader experiences ethnography as a sensual and relational narrative that is alive and pulsating with touch, breath, desire, joy, and horror. In my close reading of this work, the reflective interrogation that Viramma provokes is: Do you trust yourself to possess the capacity to handle the flesh and blood experiences of a Dalit woman? Viramma interweaves the ambiguous strands of Dalit life into her life story requiring emotional strength on the part of listeners. They should swiftly switch between finding joy in a celebration of life experiences, body, communal strength, and values while simultaneously allowing themselves to heave along with Viramma’s sighs, tears, fears and laments. Such emotional labor of understanding calls for skill development over a long period of time. Viramma’s positionality to hire laborers for her landlord could be noted as possibly influencing such expectations.

For Josiane, the organic trust process becomes a form of on-the-job training grounded in the cultural generosity of freely shared, organically produced knowledge. This work requires uninterrupted commitment to a deeper, foundational connection with Viramma’s lived experiences, allowing them to emerge in the ways Viramma herself chooses to voice them. She brings awareness to a cultural relativist “letting go” of caste informed socializations permeated by observational caste-gaze; this represents the hard work needed in unlearning caste-coded viewing versus comfortable neutrality. The immersive engagement that Viramma leads a willing ethnographer into primarily involves the art of active listening to moral agency and subjectivity. This learning should activate the cognitive processing necessary to engage in the experiential comingling of visceral, and physical sounds and resounds of pain, fear, hope and joy. Such a calling requires physical and emotional energy to unwaveringly follow her place-based and needs-based movements within and outside her living spaces where spatial and psychological shifts are constant. In this ethnography, positionality is

dynamic rather than fixed—ethnographer and subject continuously switch sites of authority and vulnerability. The ethnographer gains knowledge of a constant state of reconciliatory relationships and the seamless existence of self-resolved contrasting emotions within Dalit women.

Viramma converts Josiane into her apprentice who learns her trade well while partnering in this new tradition of hailing positivity and discipleship through experiential understanding. Viramma models a lived practical methodology of trust and relationship to overcome caste and gender fears not from within Viramma's cognition, but from Josiane's and her fears of being allowed into Viramma's world. Josiane will come close to anomalies and ambiguities embedded in this ethnographic activity involving slow-paced movement of time and patience. The following discussions illustrate what she learns as an ethnographer about Dalit life. Viramma's refusal, as Tuck and Yang theorize it, does not simply negate dominant knowledge production but places hurdles for such exchange. Through such reclaiming of epistemic agency and reversing the gaze back upon power, the apprenticeship with Josiane is possible where ethnography is reshaped through trust, reciprocity, and a pedagogy grounded in positive hailing rather than the commodification of pain.

Josiane developed a friendship with Viramma over a period of fifteen years (1975-90) beginning with listening to Viramma's singing as a prominent singer, lamenter, and midwife. Viramma offering a close relationship with Josiane is seen in referencing her as *Sinnamma* (Tamil: kinship term for mother's younger sister) out of respect and affection. There is, however, a deferential relationship in this case because Viramma is old enough to be Racine's mother and the term *Sinnamma* is normally used for an elderly woman. Such adopted kinship claims flow naturally in Tamil cultures only among those sharing a close communal bond. Hence, interestingly, Viramma ignores the socially called for lines of untouchability practice and cajolingly chastises her own awareness of social identities and touches Josiane to claim their bond:

Take an example: You were the one who came to me, I didn't go looking for you. What right would I have had to do that? I'm happy to know you, I love you like my own daughter. When it's just us, I talk to you with an open heart, I touch you when I talk to you. But could I behave like that with you outdoors? No! I owe you respect; you are a higher caste! Everything else is the same. They want to make us one, when Gods said, 'Each of you stay in your caste. Live apart. There'll be no arguments. There'll be harmony and the world will turn in the right direction!' (p. 191)

Viramma demarcates the differences in behavior she must maintain in the two worlds of caste and outcaste because of Josiane's superior social position in the "outdoors" caste world. While Viramma enjoys her relationship with Racine within

her *ceri* community, she fears the consequences of overstepping caste boundaries in the “outdoors.” She believes that by remaining within her community and its territorial limits as an untouchable, she can raise a finger to caution caste rules. Discussing the nature of character of touch in relation to caste, Geetha confirms, “Due to [the] relational nature of social categories, the one who refuses to touch (oppressor castes) ironically turns into the untouched—deprived of touch” (p. 322). This significant thought could be applied to describe the love and trust that Viramma places in Racine and a cautious expression of freedom to disobey the social and religious taboo of untouchability and becomes the first actor of touch—not only of Racine but of the inner source of truth that wells in her narrations. She admits fearing the outside world, where she must suppress such affection toward Racine; nevertheless, Viramma pours out her story trusting Racine within a relationship shaped by love and respect on one hand, and hesitations structured by differences in class, caste, culture, and education on the other. As caste and gender studies scholar, Rupali Bansode notes, though untouchability was officially abolished in post-colonial India, societal attitudes and behavior have not changed (2021). Viramma understands that she embodies the polluted object within caste-governed human contact. In her life story Pawar (2009) illustrates that caste and gender coexist in Dalit women’s experiences of untouchability as caste exclusion and gendered vulnerability. In Viramma’s understanding, untouchability extends beyond stigma; it is a caste rule restricting spontaneous bodily expressions of affection, sexuality, and spatial comfort.

### **Ritualistic Resistance: Birth, Puberty, and Sexuality**

Viramma centers her resistance on positive constructions of self and community that concretize identity through experiences of trusted touch, celebration of body, and ownership of communal identity as Paraiyar and female naming as Paratchi. As Patricia Hill Collins highlights what Audre Lorde (1990) states, “...it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment” (p. 26). Viramma’s practical lessons epitomize that desirous determination to remove imposed meanings in her body. The everyday consciousness of Black women that Collins writes about expands from an individual sense of identity to a collective group consciousness of positivity (p. 111). Bama’s works prove that daily life, rituals and cultural values emanate from *kuzhu unnarvu* (Tamil: Collective identity) as foundational to deconstruct casteist imaging and rhetoric (Singh, p. 231). Lodged in the everyday experiences of Dalit women are assertions of selfhood that resist caste-based negation and erasure of the Dalit female body, contributing to the liberation of Dalit female consciousness.

The community in Velpakkam gain their affirmation from female embodiments of goddess Mariamman as they live into participatory communal celebrations of love and life (Singh 2018, pp. 101-106). Women in the *ceri* help in the birth of a girl, marry her off, guide her into puberty and provide lessons on freeing the body from caste cages into expansive pleasures. Viramma describes her birth as a communal event when Dalit women gather around her mother to aid, witness and jubilantly welcome her arrival in the month of *Markaji* in the Tamil calendar when caste communities observe devotion and avoid celebrations.<sup>8</sup> The Tamil harvest festival of *Pongal*<sup>9</sup> occurs towards the end of this auspicious month, and Dalits gather to honor crops, agricultural work, decorate and parade statues of their gods to endow blessings. Relying on details provided by her mother and grandmother, Viramma speaks of entering the world at such a time celebrated along with the gods, with Dalit women blessing a *Paratchi* baby welcoming Pongal. The repetition of her birth story affirms that it was not just another burdensome birth of a Dalit girl who could be subject to female infanticide. Contrastingly, caste communities around her celebrate the birth of a boy on a larger scale than the birth of a girl due to patrilineality, and economic promise in work and dowry. Though some Dalit communities have adapted to such gender preference, Viramma's family rejoices in her birth as her grandmother draws on the significance of the day she was born as the festival of the god Perumal<sup>10</sup> to support her female surge of loving energy that inverts the curse traditionally associated with a girl child and confirms the arrival of happiness and prosperity (Satya 2024). Mariamman's paradoxical merging of the human and divine appears in Viramma's birth story where her subversive power descends on baby Viramma as the beginning of a beloved identity across the stages of her life.

The cheer-filled descriptions of marriage arrangements and celebrations reflect a shared life within the Paraiyar community. Viramma's matchmaker is a female

<sup>8</sup>*Markaji* is the ninth month in the Tamil calendar which runs from mid-December to mid-January. It is observed as a sacred month filled with regular devotional practices. Traditionally weddings and other major social celebrations do not occur in this time, and people gather only for collective devotion.

<sup>9</sup>The literal meaning of the word Pongal is to boil. As a festival Pongal is celebrated across all castes, but among Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu, it is celebrated as a harvest festival as communities gathered providing significance to agricultural labor and collective survival. They acknowledge the connections between their labor, food and community. They cook the traditional dish of pongal consisting of rice, milk and jaggery and cry out "Pongalo Pongal," when the pot boils over symbolizing abundance and hope for prosperity.

Their gods such as Mariamman, Yellamma are honored to protect the community's health and fertility. Their cattle are decorated and honored as well for their role in agricultural labor. Pongal signifies solidarity, gratitude, and affirmation of life within Dalit communities.

<sup>10</sup>Perumal is a male Hindu god worshipped primarily in Tamil Nadu. His devotees believe that he possesses the power to heal the sick. Women who have difficulty in conceiving a child pray to this god and promise offerings upon the birth of a child.

cousin, and women remain central to the ceremony. Viramma's grandmother and other women in the *ceri* teach her about the experiences she may face in her new home and the expectations on a "good" daughter-in-law. On the wedding day, women dress and decorate Viramma as the whole village gathers to admire her: a vision of their newest goddess. This moment resonates deeply given that Dalits were historically denied entry into temples to view caste gods; thus the decorated Dalit female body seated and celebrated becomes a joyful ritual of *darisanam* [Tamil: divine vision]. The community prepares collectively for the celebration, pooling resources to erect *pandal* [Tamil: makeshift tents] and decorations throughout the *ceri*. Viramma recalls the marriage procession led by women: "The musicians of the *ceri* were in front... The whole *ceri* came with us to the temple of Mariamman" (p. 23). Just as Mariamman is honored during her festival, Viramma is dressed as a bride leaving Velpakkam for her husband's home in Karani.

Viramma returns to Velpakkam after her marriage, entering a period during which she awaits puberty before reuniting with her husband. When she attains puberty the women of the community surround her, welcoming her into womanhood: "Aunt Kanikkai lifted up my underskirt and trumpeted, 'Viramma's got her period! We're going to have *puttu* [rice cake].' ... A celebration was on its way and once again they were going to be invited..." (p. 29). The entire *ceri* takes part in the rites of Viramma becoming a woman. Though overwhelming, the celebration reassures her of the leadership of her grandmother and the support of the community, especially women. Viramma understands that she is being initiated into rites of womanhood celebrating fertility and presence of body within the Paraiyar community confirming reified self-worth. While she initially fears that becoming a woman would mean permanently leaving her family to join her husband, those emotions dissolve as she is lifted by the communal celebration.

Each aspect of the puberty rituals leads Viramma into an awareness of her body as the bearer of beauty, positive meanings and fertility. The women exalt her as a deity just as they elevate Mariamman during her festival: bathed in turmeric water, decorated with flowers, and adorned with makeup. As Viramma recalls: "I was sat down on the ground... I was rubbed with turmeric paste and then rinsed with plenty of water" (p. 31). This celebration reveals complexities that her body harbors: externally polluted in caste eyes yet internally divine within Dalit ritual frameworks. Dalit women demonized by caste society are both deified and humanized in such rituals as menstrual blood carriers like any other woman. After the bleeding stops the women bathe her again: "Then Mum and the seven women gave me the ritual bath... I was put into new clothes which my parents had bought, and my hair was dried with incense smoke" (p. 35). Through these rituals, Viramma gains identification with Mariamman,

and vice versa, accepting practices that convert the “unclean” body in the caste gaze into a divine one.

Viramma’s grandmother strengthens her positivity through her presence at significant moments in her life: when Viramma was born she called upon the stars to confirm the auspicious nature of the day. During puberty rites she pours affection into words and metaphors affirming Viramma’s beauty and love for her body: “Come here my little kid, my sugar candy, my queen of heaven... my piece of gold, my pearl, my ruby...” (pp. 30–31). The grandmother leads the ceremony that recognizes the divine within Viramma and passes on assertive female identity across generations. She becomes the carrier of testimonials of positive body image since much of what Viramma recalls derives from her grandmother’s stories. Through purposeful interactions with everyday symbols, images, gestures, and narratives from her living and work spaces, she trains Viramma to invert caste-imposed inscriptions on her body and thoughts.

Bama describes similar puberty rituals in her communal autoethnography *Sangati* (2009) involving sacred space, turmeric baths, nourishing food, flowers and gifts similar to honoring deities. In an interview Pawar notes that sexual abuse and physical assault against Dalit women have been normalized and observes: “No one has bothered about the Dalit woman’s identity and honor” (2020). Unless this caste fixation on Dalit women’s bodies as sexual prey is negated, it will remain fixed. Pawar believes that it is in spaces where Dalit women bond with one another that the caste imaginary collapses. Singh builds on Rege’s thought that Dalit feminist praxis transforms their bodies into epistemic sites of resistance. Body-centered rituals embedded in Dalit feminist ethnographies invert the casteist gaze that marks Dalit women’s bodies as sites of violence, and instead reassert them as sites of honor.

To maintain body honor, Viramma boasts of sexuality and bodily desirability, breaking into ecstatic poetic descriptions in cultural songs. In a liberating tone she juxtaposes pain and joy within her voice. While she sings of exploitation of Dalit women, she emphasizes the joy of consensual sexuality to discard the deliberate a-sexualization of Dalit bodies by caste patriarchy:

He goes up the hill of Annamalai and notices...  
 He climbs up Clitoris mount and sees...  
 Squeezing your breasts with both hands, my beloved,  
 He enters your hairy, curly fanny,  
 He’s hurt you by entering the hole above,  
 But how good it is, my beloved, how good!  
 You are mature, it’s marvelous, my beloved,  
 It’s marvelous! (33)

Her enunciation of a deep sense of pleasure and a positive body image as desirable signify liberation from the fear-filled subconsciousness as sexual prey.

Importantly, there is a freeing frankness in humorous references to sexuality throughout her lyrical narratives as she reminds listeners that desire and pleasure are bodily rights. In such simultaneity where dominant communities suppress Dalit bodies' sexual pleasure through control of body and mind, she opposes by voicing pleasure. Humor becomes a tool of rebellion as she mocks Brahminical claims to purity while pointing to their hypocrisy in exploiting Dalit women:

It's the *pappan, adi-pappan*  
 Who irrigates by digging a hole,  
 Who fishes in there for a dish of crabs,  
 Who fishes in there for a dish of crabs,  
 While drinking the juices of a young girl  
 That very night, there was no moon,  
 And his sleep was troubled,  
 That man with a *pottu* in the shape of the moon,  
 Wants to welcome Virayi so much!!  
 Nanna, nanna, nanana,  
 Nanna, Nannana, Nananana... (p. 157)

In this song Viramma employs humor as a tool of rebellion in mocking a Brahmin priest's belief that he is the purest of all beings. She exposes his wielding of authoritative convenience that ignores caste rules of touch on food and body and points to his voracious sexual hunger as "crabbing." She ridicules the prominence of *pottu* dotted on his forehead—made up of the holy powder—indicating his Brahmin status while he is engaged in lustful activities of sexually exploiting Dalit women in the secrecy of the night.

Viramma's confidence in her physical beauty is an affirmation of an unerasable female consciousness of body splendor: "In those days I was beautiful, young and healthy. My hips and thighs were as smooth as the trunk of a banana tree. I was small and black as a crow, but my curves were attractive. For a Pariah, I wasn't so bad and, even in the *ur*, everyone said so: I used to hear it as I walked past" (p. 51). What begins in the ritualistic celebration of her body from birth into puberty resiliently continues to ceremonialize self-love and dignity. As Viramma's student, Josiane's task is to carefully document such exhortations of oppositional identity as direct protests to caste-gaze on Dalit women. In her self-declarations, Viramma rejects caste signifiers on Dalit female body as underserving and incapable of sexuality as passive receptors of sexual violence. Such liberated language elucidates Dalit feminist phenomenology in reclaiming sensation, sexuality, and bodily presence. Thus, Viramma transforms the

Dalit female body from a caste-defined object into an active self-embracing subject whose experiences illustrate epistemic authority.

### **Relational Healing: Childhood, Social Exclusion and Mariamman**

Childhood in her village Velpakkam remains etched in Viramma as filled with joyous and playful community building while absorbing and practicing Dalit values of unconditional caring and sharing. Her parents would set off to work quite early, and she was left under the care of her cousin. These years of her life free from awareness of the crude realities of poverty and life was “made up of games and stories,” while her parents and older siblings worked hard in the field (p. 8). The *ceri* of Velpakkam had wide open spaces where, as a child, she could freely roam with other children, developing her sense of freedom and her sense of oneness with nature: My childhood passed as if I was living in the kingdom of the gods on earth” (p. 4). The children in the village moved around in groups and their pastime involved imaginatively creating scenarios, toys and games with whatever caught their eye in the wanderings. They were their own deities with no awareness of the concept of control; unbound by time they effortlessly bonded in spontaneous reciprocity:

My little brothers went around naked. I just put on an underskirt like my sister. Stick in hand, dragging our carts made of coconuts, we went from house to house looking for friends who'd join us, each of them with their treasures: tea sets, marbles, ropes, pebbles, little white shells. And off we went! We'd stop here and there, climb trees, steal fruit, pick grain and plants, collect stones, singing and squawking away the whole time. (ibid)

Such details testify to the formative stages of praxis of spontaneity, creativity and collective identity early in her life. Thriving in such spaces of collective acceptance as a child was integral to her identity formation as a person who mattered in the economy of their play-world resourced by nature and cultural generosity. Mutual investments of trust and affection independently multiplied and naturally deposited personal and communal identity gains with no variables.

Spaces of exclusions where Dalit bodies were forbidden entry were part of Viramma's childhood memories as well but strengthened their bond to stick together. She vividly recalls a religious event when all the kids sat perched on a tree to watch the *golu* festival of dolls celebrated in caste homes: “Finally, we settled down discreetly in a margosa tree, which was facing the *pandal*. Huddled together like monkeys in our tree, we could watch everything” (p. 14). The subversive memory in Viramma does not give up the possibility of placing themselves at a higher vantage point looking down at forbidden spaces and rituals as giggling spectators of the caste world. During such

stinging experiences of rejection, their collective comments on the dolls and laughter provided the required inner strength. Their togetherness, and a sense of belonging with one another mark the beginnings of individual and collective agency to own positive acceptance on their terms. It was from such festivals that the children shared the food still sticking on to the banana leaf discarded by caste people after feasting. Viramma does not state this as a shameful memory, but as a value-based blissful memory of sharing as a normal childhood activity of bonding. Such juxtaposition of pain and positivity is an example of the emotional code switching that Viramma calls Josiane to observe and learn from.

Another example of the coexistence of varying emotional and bodily responses as harbored within one individual's experiential realities is the forbidden temple entry for Dalits.<sup>11</sup> They are not allowed to enter common places of worship that caste people have access to, and Viramma—like other Dalits—lives every moment of her life within this paradox of belonging to a religion that rejects them as polluted and polluting.<sup>12</sup> She warns her son Anban who insists on entering a temple, “No my son! Don't do that! This God will take away your sight! People like us haven't the right to go into these places” (p. 168). In her generous spirit, Viramma does not blame the caste people guarding the temple gates armed with retaliatory violence upon Dalits entering their temple premises. She blames the resident caste god inside the temple as the commander of such violence. Entrenched in that practice of hailing her listeners into her epistemology is the generous invitation not to interpret such statements as internalization of an outcaste position, but an inherent authority to externalize sources of oppression as belonging to the gods and denying that sadistic pleasure to the oppressor as the source of violent power. Such understanding of Viramma's statements calls for more than a peripheral observation-based ethnographic tradition. Disregarding negative impacts that such rejection of Dalit bodies in “holy” spaces might have, Viramma takes pride in her goddess Mariamman where reciprocity of presence is honored. Mariamman seeks refuge among Dalit communities after deposition from a pantheon of Gods, due to patriarchally ordered punishment (Singh, pp. 103-104). According to Viramma, Mariamman's husband rejects her, kicks her out of the pantheon of caste gods and curses her with pus filled spots on her body: “He cursed her and said, “Pueh! [devil] You're not worthy of my household! Get out of here! Sow the spots all around you and

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<sup>11</sup>Traditionally Dalits are forbidden to enter orthodox Hindu Temples. The Temple Entry Proclamation issued in Travancore in 1936 legally permitted formerly “untouchable” castes to enter Hindu temples, marking a major moment in anti-caste reform movements in South India (Menon, 1994).

<sup>12</sup>See Singh's (2018) chapter: Spotted goddesses subvert “Difference”: Traditional narratives and punishment ordinances. She explains how caste dominant narratives such as the *Manusmriti* depict Dalit women as not only polluted, but the carriers of pollution who will transmit pollution onto spaces and people.

live on what people will give you to be cured! People like us saw this woman arriving all naked and covered in spots and wondered who she was” (p. 105). In a rejected state, she enters the generous world of Dalits filled with unconditional care and willingly offers to be one with them; eating, breathing, protecting and healing along with them. She continues to tell the story of the spontaneity of Paraiyar communal response of unconditional caring:

Some launderers at the wash house quickly soaked a white cloth in turmeric water and gave it to her to cover herself and treat her spots. Then she saw some cobblers. They prostrated themselves at her feet and gave her a pair of sandals so she could go around the world without hurting her feet. A bit further on, people from our caste were harvesting rice. They quickly picked a few ears, made flour out of them, offered that to the Mother in an unpolluted coconut shell and gave her *kuj* to drink. And the Mother carried on her way, granting favor to everyone who offered her undershirts, saris, *kuj* and balls of flour. (pp. 105-106)

Without direct mention of contrasts, she proceeds to juxtapose values, rituals and their community’s direct deep relationship with Mariamman as one of their own.

Therefore, Viramma further affirms her sense of strength and positivity in elaborately describing Mariamman festival rites in spaces with no guards against caste entry. In this festival Dalit female bodies are an impressive presence in communal singing, dancing, cooking and eating together. The rituals that Viramma takes pride in during the Mariamman festival include the offering of *kuj* (Tamil: rice porridge) reflected in feeding the entire community that day. They bathe Mariamman with turmeric water (as in puberty ritual) that symbolizes healing wounds and purifying in reciprocity. Viramma believes that Mariamman has the divine power to help them in better yield in crops (p. 246). As Singh observes, irrespective of blessings she might bestow, “[Mariamman] embodies their physical struggles, along with their inner spiritual strength as a community of people who suffer but are resilient; who are forced to accept their state as unclean, but resist; and who formulate strategies of survival against all odds” (p. 104). With faith in her goddess, Viramma is not concerned about the caste gods despising her body, and she in turn disregards the forbiddance to enter ostentatious sacred spaces built by wealthy caste patrons. Instead, she is content and fearless as she establishes her body and community as god-filled by Mariamman in sacred spaces of rites and worship as opposed to a godless state of rejection that caste society forces her to accept. Yet another evidence surfaces here of garnering spiritual and bodily strength to gain control of the co-existence of mental and physical spaces of derisive rejection and celebratory acceptance.

## Conclusion

The ethnographic traditions of positive hailing set in motion by Viramma are a validation of body and voice where the readers share with the ethnographer the privilege to follow the movement of Dalit women breaking objective generalizations. Tuck and Yang's thoughts on decolonizing pain and derogation is a significant lesson from native and other oppressed communities who have established this pedagogy in their testimonial narratives seen in Viramma's stories. She reduces the gap between pain and trust; pain of vulnerable communities is often left unrecognized as alien to an epistemology of trust building.

Viramma disputes labels of passive acceptance of caste-based control on their bodies and voices. She intentionally directs active subjective position of releasing the movement of truth of ethnography as not one directional but reciprocally travelling from outer expanse into inner spaces of subjectivity and agency. In those multipurposed directional movements, Viramma's testament hails us into her world of self-chosen visibility of positivity taking charge of her story as a counter narrative to the caste-gaze which dehumanizes Dalits. Freeing Viramma's words outside the perimeters of Eurocentric traditional anthropological nomenclatures acknowledges her spoken words to soak into a consciousness that is deeply personal, uniquely rebellious, and ideologically value based. As proposed, positive hailing is a Dalit feminist intervention that refuses to passively accept both excepted silence and traumatizing meanings of pain. Through Viramma's self-authored visibility, we witness organic ways by which women-led rituals, erotic self-regard, and communal bonding operate as methodological disruptions to caste society and engender resistant Dalit feminist pedagogy.

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# From the Tea Gardens to the Clinic: *Adibaxi* Health in Assam and Caste and Indigeneity in Indian Modernity, India

Sanghamitra Das<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The tea plantations of Assam, remnants of the British *Raj* in postcolonial India, comprise an important epistemic site for interrogating transformations in the ancient caste system within Indian modernity. Two theoretical interventions become possible through a social inquiry that begins in the plantations of North-East India. First, refuting the alleged “castelessness” of Hindu majoritarian societies like Assam in North-East India, the article discusses how articulations of Indigeneity in India are inflected by the caste-system. Second, it demonstrates the embeddedness of caste-based human differentiation within a central node of postcolonial development—the clinic. Analyzing caste as a trenchant ordering principle in India, in this article, I argue that practices and experiences of caste-based human differentiation have transformed in postcolonial India. The article describes how caste inhabits India’s postcolonial medical institutions in a new scientized garb, bolstering overt casteizing practices with a euphemistic discourse of bio-behavioral deviance. I demonstrate how the Indigenous Adivasis, specifically the tea plantation laborers of Assam colloquially termed as the *Adibaxis*, became the object of caste-based socio-biological differentiation both within the plantation and in public health institutions. One of the main conditions of life in the tea plantations of Assam is inadequate medical care. Taking health and healthcare infrastructures as sites of anthropological and critical caste inquiry, I describe how caste-based dispossession is reinscribed onto the bodies of *Adibaxi* tea plantation workers through persistent medical exclusions.

## Keywords

Caste and indigeneity, Tea plantations in Assam, Medical exclusions, North East India

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<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA  
Email: sad545@pitt.edu

## Introduction

It was a hot day in the typical sweltering summer of Assam in 2022. The heat had been intensified by the invisible humidity that hung about in the air, brought on by the seasonal monsoons in this north-eastern region of India. I had just stepped out of the managerial office suite of a tea plantation in Assam that I will call Maikan. Only moments ago, I acquired permission to conduct ethnographic research on the lived experiences of sickle cell disease—an inherited blood disorder—among the plantation workers of Maikan. Stepping out into the veranda of the single-storied colonial structure that made up the plantation management's offices, I was met with a group of Maikan's plantation workers who were summoned to the managerial offices. The people stood forming a neat line in the veranda with curious looks on their work-weary faces, likely wondering why they had been asked to gather in the plantation offices in the middle of what was a busy workday.

Unbeknownst to me, one of the plantation managers, the welfare manager, summoned the workers to introduce me and to inform the workers that I would be a familiar face in Maikan. This eclectic representative of the workforce of the plantation were the descendants of a special group of Indigenous Adivasis brought in the nineteenth century from central and eastern India by the British colonial administration to work as indentured laborers (Sharma 2011). So unique is their history of colonial displacement that today they are referred to as *saah jonogusthi* or the “tea tribes” of Assam.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, these Adivasi communities are colloquially termed as *Adibaxi* (pronounced as aa-dee-baa-xhi). This Assamese inflection of the Indo-Aryan term ‘Adivasi’ makes for a linguistic classification that distinguishes the *saah jonogusthi* from other native Indigenous communities of Assam or the tribal communities. Within such linguistic distinction, *Adibaxi* connotes displaced Indigeneity marked by coerced migration whereas the term “tribal” connotes emplaced Indigeneity representing ancestral relationships to land. In the postcolonial tea plantations of Assam today, owing to these social histories, *Adibaxi* communities are largely locked into poorly compensated plantation labor living in abject socioeconomic conditions.

That day, the welfare manager, a privileged caste Hindu Assamese man in his early twenties, spoke in a definitive voice addressing the gathered workers: “This *Baideo* (meaning ‘older sister’ in Assamese, a term of respect for women) will be coming to our plantation to work amongst you. She is interested in learning about your wellbeing. Try to cooperate with her.” Such a directive introduction was essential to legitimate my presence on the plantation. After exchanging these initial greetings and

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<sup>1</sup>Assamese is the connecting language in Assam and is also the language in which this research was conducted.

cursory introductions, the workers left to resume their workday. Once they were out of earshot, the welfare manager said to me in a gentle yet cautious voice:

I will connect you with an ASHA<sup>2</sup> *kormi* (government-affiliated female community health workers). Please go to the *Labor Lines* only accompanied by an ASHA *kormi*. Please keep in mind, and I strongly advice you, do not under any circumstances, go the *Labor Lines* alone.

*Labor Lines* are the iconic dwelling spaces of *Adibaxi* workers located at the edges of the plantation, at some distance from well-built and well-serviced managerial bungalows. These are mostly mud huts arranged serially on either side of a sometimes paved, often unpaved, alley. These *lines* of mud huts frequently lack the basic amenities of life, like running water and a built toilet. The welfare manager's warning to me to never go to the *Lines* alone perplexed me. It became a defining moment in my ethnographic research capturing the asymmetries of regnant caste and class relations within Assam's plantations. I wondered, what was the portent of hostility that was so palpable to the welfare manager and yet that which remained elusive to me throughout my engagements with the workers, both during and after that summer day? Quite predictably, caste and class relations in the plantations constituted the essence of the omen that motivated the welfare manager to warn me: "do not...go to the *Labor Lines* alone." This article, in analyzing caste as an ordering principle that inflects articulations of Indigeneity in India, traces caste and class power in Assam's tea plantations from labor relations to the clinic.

Within Assam's post-colonial plantations, the management predominantly comprises "upper caste" men or Brown *Sirs*, 'Sir' being the formal term used by *Adibaxi* workers to address the managers. In stark contrast, the labor force of the tea plantations constitutes almost exclusively of the Indigenous *Adibaxis* working in the plantations for notoriously low wages. These casteized labor relations spill over to the clinical domain, reflecting on one hand in caste-based clinical expressions of *Adibaxi* backwardness as the cause of their poor health. On the other hand, tensions arising from these casteized labor relations are expressed through deep-seated resentment among the workers regarding the crumbling tea plantation hospitals and the difficulties of accessing care in the public health system. (I detail these tensions in a subsequent section.)

Being from Assam, long before embarking on ethnographic research in the tea plantations, I was aware of the tenuous relationship between the plantation management and the *Adibaxi* workers. It was also public knowledge that these tensions spilled over

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<sup>2</sup>ASHA stands for Accredited Social Health Activist. These are female community health workers associated with the national and state-level public health systems.

into the clinical domain, with newspaper articles reporting on confrontations between plantation medical establishments—involving physicians, nurses, and community health workers—and the *Adibaxi* tea plantation workers. These confrontations made it to the news only when they turned violent, particularly in the event of the death of a community member either during or after medical care. The welfare manager's warning to me not only brought these everyday realities to stark relief. But it also situated my anthropological investigation of caste-based human differentiation in the clinic within the structural dynamics of caste and class power within the plantations.

While my broader ethnographic research focused on the lived experiences of sickle cell disease among the *Adibaxi* workers of the tea plantations, in this article, I focus on overall *Adivaxi* health to demonstrate how caste-based dispossession is reinscribed on Indigenous bodies through persistent medical exclusions. Moreover, medical care and healthcare infrastructures within postcolonial plantation assemblages aptly represent how caste-based human differentiation shape Indigenous belonging (Rycroft & Dasgupta 2011) in Indian modernity. Considered “primitive” through the logic of caste hierarchy (Dasgupta & Basu 2012), the Indigenous peoples of India are already relegated to an evolutionary alterity. As an Indigenous region in a Hindu majoritarian nation, North-East India inheres this alterity, colonially described as a “Mongolian fringe” inhabited by *junglee* or wild people with peculiar cultures, customs, religions, foods, and sociality (Baruah 2020; Kikon 2021). Contrary to settler colonial histories of Indigenous dispossession in the Western world, such *Brahmanical* characterizations of Indigenous “primitive” alterity in India justifies either persistent dispossession among these communities, or continuing threats of dispossessing. Diminished health and failing healthcare infrastructures are central components of this structure of indentarian disempowerment.

Drawing upon long-term ethnographic research conducted between 2021 and 2024, the article discusses how difficulties in access to healthcare among the *Adibaxis* of the tea plantations of Assam—embodying a troubled Indigenous identity—demonstrates a transformation in the practices and experiences of caste-based human differentiation in postcolonial India. Furthermore, even within the existing medical infrastructure, *Brahmanical* notions of Indigenous alterity seep into clinical spaces, consolidating a constructed *Adibaxi* alterity through an essentialist language of biological difference, scientizing in turn an ancient hierarchical order of organizing human bodies in Indian societies.

Within the everyday lives of the *Adibaxis*, through my ordinary interactions with the plantation worker community, what was palpable to me was not an inherent hostility embodied by the “primitive” *Adibaxi* bodies inhabiting the *Labor Lines*. Rather, the violence immediately evident to me was the structural violence (Farmer 2004) embedded in the socioeconomic and medical institutions of the plantations that

continually disempowered these historically displaced Indigenous communities. Such structural violence takes the form of low wages on one hand and dilapidated plantation hospitals and medical discrimination against the *Adibaxis* in public health institutions, on the other. Thus, the possibility of hostile confrontation shaped by caste and class positionalities, expressed notably by the plantation managerial staff and health workers, formed a complex backdrop for my ethnography of *Adibaxi* health in the plantations. At times, this backdrop materialized as lithe PVC banners prominently displayed outside scantily equipped plantation hospitals, explicitly stating that violence against medical personnels was a punishable offense. At other times, as the welfare manager expressed, it was spoken in hush tones as lived accounts of “primitive” hostility, within and without clinical spaces.

The remainder of the article discusses these complexities within two broader contexts: first, *Adibaxi* and Indigenous becoming in the allegedly “casteless” Hindu majoritarian society of Assam; and second, the embedding of caste-based human differentiation in the medical clinic as experienced by the *Adibaxis* in the public health system. The next section hence begins with a discussion of the first context, exploring how caste-based notions of human difference shape Indigenous belonging in Assam in particular, and North-East India more broadly. The section that follows discusses the manifestations of these structural dynamics as health inequality, with a focus on the tea plantations. The final section analyzes *Adibaxi* experiences of identity-based human difference within clinical spaces. The conclusion reflects on the transformations of caste-based human differentiation in modern India through “euphemistic” discourses of perceived human difference (Bridges 2011), repackaged as the bio-behavioral deviance of the *Adibaxis*.

## **Caste, Indigeneity, and being *Adibaxi* in Assam**

In the introductory section, I mentioned how Indigeneity in India cannot be adequately explained through the framework of settler colonialism employed elsewhere, one based on a clear conceptual distinction between Indigenous original inhabitants and colonial settlers. Elaborating on it in this section, I align with social theorists who have raised similar arguments with respect to Indigenous identities and histories in Southeast Asia (Chua & Idrus 2022). Contrasting with theorizations of Indigeneity in the Western world, in South Asia and Southeast Asia therefore, continuous and repeated migrations make clear conceptual distinctions between the original inhabitant and the settler not only difficult, but futile for comprehending the lived realities of Indigenous positionalities. Adivasi scholar, Virginius Xaxa instead called for a need to acknowledge how the “non-recognition” of the rights of the tribal or Adivasi communities over their “land, forest, water, minerals, and other resources in their own territory...has led to increasing articulation of the idea of indigenous people by

the tribal people” (Xaxa 1999). In other words, continued disempowerment rather than histories of migration and settlement shapes Indigenous identities and contours Indigenous belongings in India.

In this section, I argue further that this “non-recognition” of the rights of the Indigenous peoples is based on *Brahmanical* notions of Adivasi alterity that is at once social and biological, conferring a less than civilized and hence, less than human status to the Adivasi peoples. This is even as the Adivasi is increasingly sought to be assimilated into the caste order as a Hinduized tribal. Nowhere is this constructed alterity more apparent than in the tea plantations of Assam.

Let us return for a moment to the welfare manager’s warning in Maikan: “do not...go to the *Labor Lines* alone.” This caution is a pithy representation of how identity-based systemic exclusions—structured through an amalgamation of caste and class privilege (Teltumbde 2016)—construct Indigenous alterity in India. The *Labor Lines* that I was warned about are those spatial assemblages of the plantation ecology that are attached with an almost folklorist symbolism pertaining to the social reproductive sphere of the workforce of the tea plantation industry. This identarian symbolism denotes a discrete Indigenous identity that simultaneously embodies colonial displacement and postcolonial exploitation, framing the *Adibaxi* as an ahistorical descendant of indentured tribals. Drawing upon this folklore tinged with the tensions of casteized labor relations, the welfare manager’s warning constructs the *Labor Lines* as an intimate sphere where only a “primitive” sociality may be reproduced. Extrapolating this “primitive” sociality to the constitution of bodies and behavior, cautionary expressions ultimately reframe the *Adibaxi* as prone to hostility, characterizing the *Adibaxis* as unreasonable and intractable. Such characterizations shift the causality of violence onto the working-class body while erasing the everyday structural violence that structures the intimate sphere of the *Labor Lines* within the plantation economy.

Going beyond casteized labor relations, such cautionary tales as narrated by Maikan’s welfare manager confirm how even managerial objectives relating to the welfare of the workforce, a subset of the managerial responsibilities that is concerned with sustaining the health of the tea plantation workers, is laced with caste-based assumptions of *Adibaxi* alterity. These assumptions and their discursive expressions serve to overlook the material circumstances of medical infrastructures available for pursuing *Adibaxi* health in Assam’s tea plantations. The erasures of structural violence become apparent when one considers the severely resource-constrained conditions of the plantation hospitals, as detailed in a subsequent section. Moreover, in the context of Assam, *Adibaxi* loss of health and well-being trouble broader assertions about a post-caste Assamese society (Sengupta & Bharadwaj 2021). Rather, the *Adibaxi*

body exemplifies how interpersonal relationalities and regional political identities are shaped by the dynamics of unequal caste power, particularly in a Hindu majoritarian state like Assam.

In Assam and more generally in North-East India, due to constitutionally recognized ancestral claims of territorial belonging among the native Indigenous communities, caste is often undermined as an ordering principle in Hindu majoritarian regional states like Assam and Manipur. However, decadal attempts at assimilating the tribal communities—each with their own language, culture, customs, and often animist religions—into the Hindu order (Baviskar 2005) belie the pervasion of caste within these societies. In the case of Assam, my own lived experience as a Dalit woman from Assam, my ethnographic research as well as ethnographic research by other Assamese scholars have demonstrated that not just caste but “untouchability”, including “untouchability” practiced against Indigenous communities (Barman 2022), are deeply embedded in the socio-religious fabric of Assamese society. In the light of such misrecognitions of the influence of caste in Hindu majoritarian states in the Indigenous frontier of North-East India, specifically the masking of the practices of caste-based human differentiation and “untouchability” in relation to the Indigenous peoples, it becomes not only important to interrogate how caste-power continues to operate in the Assamese society. But it is imperative to interrogate how caste permeates and prevails in clinical spaces through medical discourses and practice.

The remainder of the article situates this interrogation in the continuum between caste-based labor relations in Assam’s tea plantations and medical discrimination in the surrounding public health institutions. Tracing this continuum illuminates, first and foremost, how conditions of labor and life in the plantations manifest as poor health outcomes among the *Adibaxi*. Relations of production in the tea plantations of Assam lock *Adibaxi* communities into circumstances of survival wherein the social reproduction of workers is sustained for the capitalist motives of the tea industry. However, when theoretical focus is shifted to the worker bodies, caste-based inequalities begin manifesting as various bodily afflictions among the *Adibaxi* communities. For instance, malnutrition is rampant in the tea plantations and worker bodies are chronically afflicted by anemia, aches and other preventable ailments (Dutta et al. 2016; Konwar et al. 2019). Further, the health indices of *Adibaxi* communities, particularly for girls, women, and children, are among the lowest in Assam. These indices are also largely true for other Indigenous communities of Assam.

Second, the body of the *Adibaxi* tea plantation worker is not only an empirical analytical category. But it is also a conceptual category through which to understand how caste-based practices of human differentiation have transformed within Indian modernity. Consolidating casteizing practices, such transformations highlight how

caste has adopted euphemistic discourses of Indigenous social and biological alterity. As the ethnography below demonstrates, *Adibaxis* are indeed treated differently within medical institutions. It is noteworthy that one of the pertinent insights that emerged from my broader ethnographic research on Adivasi sickle cell experiences is that these communities face caste-based discrimination within medical institutions in the public health system. Such discrimination is routinely masked through euphemistic medical discourses that construct the Adivasis or tribals as “backward” and hence, unable to care for themselves in a manner that can augment their health.

Elsewhere, I write about the biologization of caste through sickle cell genetics, naturalizing caste-based notions of Indigenous Adivasi difference through scientific discourses of the genetic basis of human difference. Here, my focus is on medical compartments towards the Indigenous *Adibaxi* body in its totality within clinical spaces. In the context of Dalit experiences in medical institutions in southern India, Sobin George has shown how identity determines the quality of healthcare received by Dalit patients in rural Karnataka (George 2019). Likewise, the *Adibaxi* plantation worker body is central to illuminating the euphemisms of caste-based human difference operating in the medical institutions of the supposedly “casteless” (Deshpande 2013) society of Assam, highlighting how caste persists through scientized languages within a central node of Indian modernity, that is, biomedicine. As the following sections demonstrate, these euphemisms manifest as perceptions of the *Adibaxi* as a bio-behaviorally deviant, clinically suspect medical subject. Such euphemisms of caste in clinical spaces hence raises the following pertinent question: What becomes of Nehruvian “scientific temper” (Arnold 2013), the foundational basis of the developmental trajectory of postcolonial India, when confronted by the transformations of caste in India modernity?

In Assam as in the rest of India, socioeconomic capital and institutional power largely rests with the *Brahmans* and the so-called “upper castes.” This has meant that most physicians within public health institutions also belong to these privileged castes. When the broader Assamese society is stratified along the lines of caste and Indigeneity in this manner, it follows naturally that such hierarchies are embedded in medical systems. Writing about the embeddedness of racism in the biomedical systems of the United States, anthropologist Khiara Bridges discusses the “deracialized racial discourses” that proliferate and persist in healthcare in the United States (Bridges 2011, pp. 179-182). Similarly, the subsequent sections in this article demonstrate caste in Indian modernity have adopted euphemistic biomedical discourses on caste-based differences in bio-behavioral tendencies, transforming caste into a socio-biological moral normative. Rearticulating the rhetoric of perceived Indigenous alterity is central to this moral normative.

Before unpacking this euphemistic moral narrative that masks caste-based medical discrimination as inherent tribal deviance, it is important to analyze how *Adibaxi* loss of health is constitutive of the plantation economy and ecology. The following section thus begins with a discussion of the health infrastructures that shape *Adibaxi* health experiences within the tea plantations of Assam and the surrounding public health institutions.

## **Adibaxi Health, Medical Infrastructure and Inequality in the Tea Plantations**

Besides the identity of *saah jonogusthi* or “tea tribes,” the *Adibaxis* of Assam have another ontological classification, that of the “ex-tea tribes.” These “ex-tea tribes” are descendants of indentured plantation workers who have left the realm of plantation labor to find employment opportunities in mainstream society. Some among this community of ex-tea plantation workers live in collective settlements neighboring the tea plantations. For others, socioeconomic mobility allowed their integration with the larger Assamese society. Deep, an *Adibaxi* man in his mid-thirties, was a member of the “ex-tea tribe” community who lived outside such communal settlements, as an ordinary member of Assamese society. Deep’s parents and grandparents were plantation workers, and his siblings too continued to work in the same plantation where their paternal ancestors were coercively translocated by the British colonial administration. As is inevitably the case, owing to the acquiring of college degrees and the ensuing relative economic empowerment, members of the “ex-tea tribe” community like Deep are adept at critiquing the systems that continue to keep *Adibaxi* communities in abjection. In conversations with me, many have poignantly articulated the structural violence that permeates life in the plantations. Lack of access to adequate healthcare and the crumbling tea plantation hospitals, aspects that directly impact the life chances of the *Adibaxis*, become objects of pointed critique. Such legacies of imposed privations have instilled a sense of deep indignation, be it among the *Adibaxis* who live and work as plantation laborers or the “ex-tea tribes.” Deep’s own indignation is important to register in this regard.

During a conversation with me in early 2022, Deep expressed his exasperation with the medical infrastructure in the plantations as follows: “To tell you the truth, *baideo*, when one visits these plantation hospitals, one can see what state they are in. There, sometimes, one cannot even find a piece of suture to close our wounds.” [*“Xosa kobole gole, Baideo, ei baganor hospital keikhonoloi gole tar obostha tu gom pua jai. Ketiyaba tate gha seelaboloi xuta edalu bisari napai apuni.”*] A suture for surgically closing any bodily wounds, a *xuta* in Assamese, is a basic medical device, one that is as quintessential as a stethoscope in the clinic. This medical device is a

necessity for dressing physical cuts or wounds routinely sustained by workers during everyday labor and life. Yet, as Deep expressed, even such fundamental medical devices are scarce in the plantation hospitals. Deep's indignation hence communicated a sense of injustice that he felt at the persistent scarcity of even basic medical care in the plantation hospitals. However, his indignation is also diagnostic of the trenchant fissures in *Adibaxi* belonging in Assam.

Constitutionally, the Plantation Labor Act of 1951 mandates that the managerial bodies of all plantations across the country must establish and maintain adequate medical infrastructures within their premises to address issues of worker health. However, in Assam, as testified above by Deep and as is common knowledge, the plantation hospitals run by the managerial bodies are severely deprived of financial and human resources, being perpetually underfunded and chronically understaffed. These plantation hospitals are hence incapable of meeting even the basic health needs of the worker communities. The political economy of the tea industry justifies such inadequacies in legally mandated healthcare infrastructure with the plantations. This political economy has been continually reported in the media as undergoing an economic crisis due to diminishing auction rates and increasing costs of production compounded by climate change.<sup>3</sup> However, notwithstanding the economic vagaries in the prices of Assam tea, there is a more or less constant stream of supply and demand for this global commodity. Even as my ethnographic research was underway, I learnt that certain varieties of premium Assam tea are sold for an exclusive price of Rupees one lakh per kilogram (about 1100 US Dollars per two pounds).<sup>4</sup> In the wake of sustained domestic and international consumption of Assam tea, claims of economic crisis as a justification for underfunded medical infrastructures serving the workers therefore indicate a loss of managerial accountability towards worker health.

From the perspective of the plantation management dealing with this perpetual industry-wide crisis, it is sufficient to provide just enough financial compensation for the labor extracted from *Adibaxi* workers to sustain the social reproduction of a productive workforce. Additional financial investments in plantation health infrastructures are weighed against the cost-benefit calculations of overall profit motives. Predictably, investments in health infrastructures are almost always against managerial interests of profit maximization. Thus, the colonial era plantation hospitals remain in a state of constant dilapidation, teetering on the brink of collapse. Regarding the state of the medical infrastructure in the plantations, community members have often said to

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<sup>3</sup>For a media report, see: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/assam-tea-industry-facing-crisis-amid-rising-costs-and-declining-exports-say-atpa/articleshow/116602721.cms> <Accessed November 2025>

<sup>4</sup>See: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/rare-assam-tea-sold-for-record-price-of-rs-1-lakh-per-kg/manohari-gold-tea/slideshow/88314677.cms?from=mdr> <Accessed December 2021>

me: “The plantations hospitals were much better during the time of the British. We have heard our grandparents say this. We were much better off during the time of the British.” “*Baganor hospital keikhon British r xomoyote besi bhal asil, koka-aita hote kua xunisu. Britishor dinot ami besi bhale asilu.*” When I first heard this familiar refrain, I was confounded. It was unimaginable to me that the workers felt they were “better off,” “*besi bhale asilu*” under colonialism than under postcolonial plantation administrations. This familiar refrain by the *Adibaxi* workers made evident to me how the political economy of the plantation necessitated the diminishing of *Adibaxi* health and life chances to maintain the poorly recompensated reproductive workforce.

Notwithstanding such exploitative reproduction, conditions of medical scarcity justified by the managerial bodies of Assam’s tea industry have resulted in the worker community’s loss of trust in the larger enterprise of biomedicine. A consequence of this loss of community trust, both in biomedical institutions and its practitioners, is that violent conflicts spontaneously emerge in the plantation hospitals when community health needs are not met, as I discussed above. In the aftermath of such episodic conflict, many plantation hospitals are left without a physician in regular attendance equipped to provide basic healthcare services to the plantation workers. Fearing for their safety in events of unanticipated medical conflict, physicians are known to be reluctant to serve in plantation hospitals further constraining community access to much needed medical care.

These infrastructural conditions thus force the *Adibaxi* communities to seek medical care in the neighboring public health institutions even for minor ailments. However, sequestered in extractive plantation ecologies, the communities find the bureaucracies and pathways of these overburdened public hospitals difficult to navigate. The resulting problems of access mean that many individuals and families in the plantations continue to live with unmet medical needs, even for avoidable medical afflictions. For a critical caste analysis (Ayyathurai 2021; Brueck 2023) of medical spaces as spheres of identity-based exclusion, it is important to interrogate the nature of difficulty of navigation that is routinely faced by the *Adibaxis* in Assam’s public health institution.

In the summer of 2022, I accompanied Deep’s cousin on a visit to a public hospital neighboring the plantation where his extended family lived. Rather than the visit itself, what I witnessed during the visit became important for me to understand the complexities of navigating the hustle and the labyrinths of public health institutions for the *Adibaxis*. That Deep’s cousin, who lives with her family on their ancestral plantation, asked me to accompany her to the public hospital is telling of how members of the *Adibaxi* community anticipate in advance difficulties in navigating public health spaces. To add to the conundrum, the regional and national public health system in India—the primary interface of affordable care for millions of ordinary Indians—grapple with their own shares of funding crisis with an increasing rollback of state

funding for public health infrastructures. The public hospital we visited that day was similarly stricken by resource constraints even as it catered to the everyday medical needs of the Assamese citizens. Most of these citizens have limited or no economic means to afford privatized healthcare.

As I walked into a colonial era building of the outpatient department (OPD) in the hospital, a familiar yet perturbing sight greeted me at the entrance. Along the edge of the outer wall in the OPD's veranda, once again forming a neat line, were a group of about eight *Adibaxi* plantation workers squatting on the floor. They seemed to be patiently waiting, appearing to have been instructed to do so. As I walked past them, they looked at me with faces scrunched up with concern. For an ordinary human being, a visit to hospital spaces can be stress-inducing even on a good day. Being a second-generation learner whose parents utilized educational degrees as a means of exiting caste-based ancestral professions and entered the middle class, I have always had access to adequate medical care. It was therefore hard for me to contemplate how much additional stress can accompany being asked to obediently squat in the veranda of a clinical compound until it was one's turn to receive routine and/or essential medical care. That day, although I did not stop in order to chat with the waiting workers to find out more about their situation, while also being pressed by the immediacy of accompanying Deep's cousin on her consultation visit, I knew the exact circumstances in which this set of workers came to be huddled in this manner in the hospital premises.

Due to the socioeconomic fact that *Adibaxis* continue to be largely locked into the life of a plantation worker, the aggregate level of education in these communities is depressingly low. Most *Adibaxi* children attend primary schools run by the plantation management, institutions that are also mandated by the Plantation Labor Act 1951. However, the fate of these foundational educational institutions is not very different from the legally mandated plantation hospitals. The education imparted in these schools is not of the best quality. Furthermore, owing to the economic burden faced by worker families in the plantations, there is a high rate of school dropout among *Adibaxi* children.<sup>5</sup> Those who do acquire college degrees acquire upward social mobility through white collar professions and become members of the "ex-tea tribes" community. However, the percentage of *Adibaxis* who can attain upward social mobility as well as a life outside the plantations is relatively low.

Lack of educational attainments is therefore one of the primary reasons that make hospital bureaucracies and clinical pathways difficult to navigate for *Adibaxi* community members. However, this is not the sole reason. As educated members from among these communities have often narrated to me, *Adibaxi* patients face repeated discrimination in Assam's public hospitals. Such socio-material circumstances

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<sup>5</sup>For a media report, see: [https://cracr-pd.org/children-of-tribes-in-india-tea-tribes-in-assam/#:~:text=Therefore%2C%20it%20can%20be%20concluded,risk%20of%20substance%20abuse%20etc.<Accessed December 2025>](https://cracr-pd.org/children-of-tribes-in-india-tea-tribes-in-assam/#:~:text=Therefore%2C%20it%20can%20be%20concluded,risk%20of%20substance%20abuse%20etc.<Accessed%20December%202025>)

ultimately necessitated the formulation of a sub-ontological classification among the plantations workers, historically known as the *Sirdars* or the supervisors (Bates & Carter 2017). These supervisors acted as intermediaries between the British and Adivasi communities, playing an important role in the coerced recruitment of the Adivasis from central and eastern India as indentured laborers in the nineteenth century. Today, this supervisor acts as an intermediary between the plantation management and the workers, mediating contracts and workloads. What is relevant for the context presented in this article is that there exists a role similar to that of the supervisor in the clinical domain, an aspect pertaining to worker welfare. These roles that are usually assumed by *Adibaxi* men are known as “Case Attendants.”

I first learnt of “Case Attendants” during a conversation with an ASHA worker, the female community health workers who I was asked to take with me to the *Labor Lines*, in a different plantation. The primary duty of the “Case Attendant” is to accompany *Adibaxi* workers to the neighboring district hospitals. The hospital can be an alienating space to such *Adibaxis* who have poor literacy and are wary of being treated differently while going through vulnerable moments of ill-health. Such experiences of alienation arise from challenges in filling medical forms, comprehending which tests have been ordered by the physicians, where to locate the ward in overcrowded public hospitals where the designated tests are carried out, how to arrange money for the tests, when to collect the test reports, and how to interpret physician diagnoses. Compounding these concerns, physicians presume *Adibaxi* “backwardness” and often become frustrated when a community member is unable to understand or adhere to the prescribed treatment regimes. These are also moments when physicians behave more brashly or distantly with an *Adibaxi* patients, more so than they would with other patients. The *Brahmanical* perception of *Adibaxi* unreasonableness and intractability thus follows the workers from the tea gardens to the clinic, much like “untouchability” shadows Dalit communities in postcolonial liberated India.

It is these difficulties of navigating casteized medical spaces that the “Case Attendant” is assigned to mitigate, to make sure that the plantation workforce is sustained at the baseline of health through access to preliminary medical care. The “Case Attendant” therefore becomes a sort of temporary custodian of *Adibaxi* bodies within the medical institution, with sick *Adibaxi* members being dependent on the intermediary’s agency. Hence, I encountered a row of patiently waiting *Adibaxi* workers on a hospital verandah in Assam, likely waiting for their “Case Attendants” or an accompanying community health worker to tell them what to do next. However, even this mode of manufactured dependence is not available uniformly to all members of the “tea tribes.” No “Case Attendants” were available for assigning to sick *Adibaxi* members in the two plantations where I worked extensively. This special intermediary is most extensively employed in large and well-functioning plantations. However,

what is important for the present discussion is not whether “Case Attendants” should be a mainstay of all plantations across Assam. That a “Case Attendant” is a necessary intermediary for a group of adult workers in acquiring access to medical care is itself evidence of the subtle yet significant manifestations of identity-based discrimination in the public health system. The manner in which an entire Indigenous community may be made to become dependents on another’s agency within medical systems owing to these manifestations demonstrates how caste-based notions of human difference inhabit biomedical spaces in contemporary India.

### **From *Adibaxi* Difference to Inherent Tribal Deviance**

This section discusses how a euphemistic moral narrative in biomedicine mask caste-based othering in clinical spaces in Assam, framing and redefining the *Adibaxi* as an always medically suspect subject embodying an inherent tribal deviance. To analyze how such notions of inherent *Adibaxi* deviance became embedded in medical practice and its discursive domains in the supposedly post-caste Assamese society, it is necessary to contextualize where such euphemisms stem from and how they are mobilized as casteized medical folklore. In introducing casteized medical folklore—prevalent in health landscapes of Assam—as an analytical category, I build upon Khiara Bridges concept of “racialized folklore” surrounding Black women’s bodies prevalent in the biomedical systems in the United States (Bridges, 2011 pp. 103-143). The concept of casteized medical folklore demonstrates in addition the assimilative capacity of caste as an ordering principle, folding into this order even those Adivasi ontologies that were traditionally outside the caste system. This assimilative capacity of caste as an ordering principle absorbs the Indigenous ontology into the Hindu, albeit maintaining an alter less civilized ontological ascription for the tribals. Casteized medical folklore normalizes this caste-based othering of Indigenous communities through the acceptable euphemisms of socio-biological difference. Such euphemistic articulations of Indigenous socio-biological difference are rooted in notions of inherent tribal deviance. In Assam, *Adibaxi* “backwardness” and hostility are a constitutive element of the casteized medical folklore surrounding the “tea tribes.”

As described in the previous sections, the dilapidated medical infrastructure within the plantations invokes an indignation among *Adibaxi* communities that is rooted in the injustice of their economic exploitation and ensuing bodily privation. On occasions that are replete with medical strife, this indignation bursts out as episodic violence in response to the regnant medical injustice that conditions *Adibaxi* struggles for health and survival. At the same time, *Adibaxis* are also known to be treated differently within clinical spaces. As a result, there is a deep mistrust of the biomedical enterprise, its institutions and its personnel among the plantation workers.

For instance, during the global coronavirus pandemic, ASHA workers in the tea plantations had great difficulty in convincing the communities to voluntarily receive their COVID-19 vaccinations. During my ethnographic fieldwork, from conversations with these community health workers assigned to the plantations, I learned that the ASHA workers themselves faced defensive questions from certain community members while trying to carry out their COVID duties. Some community members asked: “How much did the government pay you to make us take this poison?” This is even as the *Labor Lines* and the plantations saw a severe outbreak of this fatal and contagious viral disease.<sup>6</sup> These questions reflect how the communities in the plantations viewed biomedical institutions and its health workers as an extension of the state, entities that have repeatedly failed them. Thus, these essential health workers at the frontlines of the coronavirus pandemic in India often bore the brunt of community mistrust during an exceptional time of global health crisis (Das & Das 2021). This was also a time when inequalities in healthcare systems, reflections of broader social and economic fissures, were rarified through the global circulation of a viral particle.

Notwithstanding the exceptionality of COVID-19 experiences, there is little that is extraordinary about the medical mistrust that multiplied along with the coronavirus in the social reproductive sphere of the plantation. The above accounts of the coronavirus pandemic that the ASHA workers shared with me formed a continuum with, rather than an exceptional phase in, the medical experiences of everyday *Adibaxi* life. The arrival of a globally circulated viral particle to the tea plantation, its tea factories, and its cramped *Labor Lines* simply capitalized on regnant inequalities to ironically manifest as both increased infection and increased medical mistrust.

To contextualize this continuum, consider an ethnographic scene from my fieldwork in the second tea plantation where I carried out my ethnographic research, a plantation that I call Bokulia. One afternoon in mid-2022, I was in a smooth mud-smear front yard of a mud and thatched roof hut in one of the several *Labor Lines* in Bokulia. While many houses in the *Lines* are now built with brick, cement and steel, known as *pucca* or permanent houses, there are several houses that are still built with mud, straw, bamboo and other natural materials owing to their cheap costs. That day, I was accompanied by an ASHA worker, Padma who was my assigned companion in Bokulia. Padma and I would arrange in advance how and when I would go to the *Labor Lines* and which specific *Line* we would be visiting together. As was sometimes the case, Padma, a native Indigenous woman in her early forties from a neighboring village, would sprinkle in her own medical duties towards the end of my field visit. That summer afternoon in Bokulia, we were in the smooth mud-smear courtyard after the field visit because Padma wanted to check off one on her long list of daily

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<sup>6</sup>At the time, coronavirus outbreak in the tea plantations became a major health news in Assam, further adding to the myriad crises of the tea industry.

community health duties. Although the hut before us seemed empty to me, Padma called out to someone from the yard. At length, a painfully thin woman ambled out reluctantly. I watched on as Padma looked at the woman with a considerable degree of concern and said in informal Assamese, “Hey, I have come to see how you are doing.” “*Tur khobor lobo ahisu akou.*”

The women began talking and I stood as a silent companion. But I soon became absorbed in my own observations. At first, I was struck by the woman’s almost emaciated figure, uncommon even for the plantation worker community maligned with malnutrition. It was not immediately evident to me that Padma came to check in on the woman for a specific medical issue. After a while, I noticed that the woman’s forearms were covered in dark scars from what seemed to be an aggravated skin infection. Feeling a sense of urgency for the woman’s well-being, I could not help myself from asking whether she had been to the doctor to treat her skin condition. The woman seemed absolutely disinterested in speaking with me. I left it at that and Padma, gradually and with kindness, broached the topic of her going to the nearest public hospital to get a doctor to examine the skin condition. The woman did not seem convinced. After talking with her for a little while longer, Padma, too, was forced to leave it at that and we left the neat mud-smear courtyard.

Later, as we were walking out of the *Labor Lines* to leave for our respective homes, I asked Padma what skin condition the woman was suffering from. Padma answered in an exasperated tone: “I don’t know what is wrong with her skin. I have told her several times to go to the doctor. But the people get angry with me if I push them too much.” Padma’s frustration at the woman’s obstinance is not simply a subjective reaction to the ailing woman’s refusal to visit a doctor. But it is a form of frustration that is shaped by an important epistemic and discursive element of healthcare delivery. In the biomedical domain, such behavior is interpreted through the objective concept of “health seeking behavior.” This psycho-clinical index evaluating subjective decisions to seek modern biomedicine for disease and sickness, as opposed to opting for traditional medicine, becomes a sort of scientized measure of the tendencies toward integration with mainstream society, or lack thereof (Kar 2016; Sarmah & Dutta 2019). “Health seeking behavior” is of significant public health interest amongst the *Adibaxi* communities of the tea plantations and the native tribal communities of Assam. Embedded in this scientific approach to measure community acceptability of modern biomedicine is the assumption that the *Adibaxis* and tribal communities of Assam are somehow far from health infrastructures because they are distant from civility. Overlooking intermittent and underfunded plantation and public health infrastructures, such public health categories reiterate that Indigenous loss of health exists because of their “backwardness” arising from their “primitive” ways. Such scientized concepts as “health seeking behavior” are evidence of prejudiced

medical compartments towards tribal bodies, that in turn mobilize public health categories as euphemisms for caste-based notions of Indigenous difference.

It is such scientized discourses of *Adibaxi* and tribal alterity that constitute the euphemistic moral narratives that permeate public health institutions in Assam. The moral burden of seeking healthcare and hence maintaining good health is shifted onto the communities, exonerating the structural conditions that lead to a loss of community trust in the biomedical enterprise. Furthermore, such euphemistic moral narratives percolate to the bottom of the public health pyramid made up by community health workers like Padma. In this manner, casteized medical perceptions of the “backward” Adivasis become normalized through the subtle language of poor “health seeking behavior.” Due to the alleged objectivity of such scientized language masking *Brahmanical* constructions of Indigenous “primitiveness,” the casteized medical folklore of hostile unreasonable *Adibaxis* become a subconscious justification for holding the *Adibaxis* solely accountable for their loss of health, even by *Adibaxi* and tribal community health workers.

However, what gets erased in this shifting of accountability is that medical mistrust has become deep seated among the *Adibaxis* because the state, plantation hospitals, public health institutions, and the biomedical enterprise have collectively failed to address their loss of health and bodily privations. Being denied basic and dignified medical care, emaciated bodies and depleted life chances are an everyday reality for these worker communities. Consider for example that in Bokulia, I made several attempts to meet with the resident doctor at the plantation hospital. But each time, Padma and the scanty hospital staff comprising a pharmacist, an auxiliary nurse and two other ASHA workers told me that the doctor was not in the hospital at the time. Upon inquiring seriously, the health workers told me that Bokulia had not had a hospital physician for about five years. The only physician who had been coming to the hospital was a visiting physician who had originally been assigned to a neighboring Primary Health Centre run by the state’s public health department. Even when the visiting physician was in attendance, it was only for a couple of hours and infrequently throughout the week.

Here, it is worthwhile to critically analyze how the absence of an attending physician shapes conditions of medical access in the tea plantations. Physicians are reluctant to serve in tea plantation hospitals because their own decisions to serve, or not, are influenced by the figure of the hostile *Adibaxi* worker who has by now acquired a portentous folklorist status. Such portentous medical folklore erases how the structural violence of the plantation economy as well as medical discrimination in public health spaces foreshadows any capacity for eruptive hostility displayed by some members of the plantation worker community.

An anthropological investigation of the euphemisms embedded in casteized medical folklore is hence important for understanding why certain communities are reluctant to engage with modern biomedicine. Rather than inherent tribal deviance, it is such medicalized narratives of caste-based notions of Adivasi difference that determine health outcomes for the *Adibaxi* communities in the tea plantations of Assam. When episodic violence becomes the center of analysis, what gets erased and normalized are the systemic exclusions that are a product of the ancient practices of differentially ordering human societies according to their location of birth within the purity-pollution scale. These ancient practices are entrenched within not only the socioeconomic and political institutions of India, but also the medical. When the biomedical “gaze,” theorized by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, is refracted through the lens of the entrenched caste system, caste as an ordering principle finds a biological basis for consolidating its power in postcolonial modernity. During the anti-colonial era of the Independence struggle, when Dr. B. R. Ambedkar called for the “annihilation of caste” in modern India, he drew attention not only to the peopled practices of caste, but also to such structural components of the caste system (Ambedkar 2014). These structural realities, despite claims of a post-caste society in Assam, leave nobody and no body “casteless.” Critical attention to casteized medical folklore is hence pivotal for analyzing not only the assimilative capacity of the caste system. But it also important for highlighting how caste repackages itself through an appropriation of biomedical discourses in the contemporary era of scientific, technical and medical progress.

## Conclusion

Contemporary scholars of South Asia have illuminated novel arenas in which caste exerts its differentiating power, be it in the affective dimension through expressions of disgust or, sensory perceptions of odor lingering about “Untouchable” bodies (Kapoor 2021; Lee 2021). This article contributes to this emerging body of scholarship by theorizing clinical spaces as a significant arena within which caste-based othering happens. More importantly, it demonstrates how caste as an ordering principle has transformed in Indian modernity, adopting biomedical logics to justify caste-based practices of human differentiation. Furthermore, situating anthropological inquiry in Assam highlights how Indigenous communities—whether the *Adibaxi* tea plantation worker or the native tribal—are conferred with a differential socio-biological status through casteized medical practices. Such practices sustain a *Brahmanical* medical discourse of inherent tribal deviance, one that has far-reaching implications for communities thus differentiated.

However, transformations in the caste-system in Indian modernity does more than solely differentiate the “primitive” tribal—who is also subject to persistent practices

of “untouchability”—within medical institutions. Through such transformations, caste as an ordering principle also reinvents itself via the normativity of euphemistic moral narratives. Such moral narrative falls back on the principles of purity and pollution, with the “untouchable” and the “primitive” being ascribed with a lesser degree of purity and hence lesser human worth. Within these euphemistic moral narratives of health, one is healthier if one is more moral. Analyzing this transformed moralizing health discourse through the historicity of caste, the moral logic of this discourse appears to be that one is healthy if one behaves morally, and one is more moral if one aspires to socio-biological purity. This transformed moral discourse on health therefore belies the subtle embedding of caste logic in biomedical narratives. To comprehend the impact that these euphemistic narratives of socio-biological difference have on the life chances of historically oppressed communities in contemporary India, such subtleties must be foregrounded in critical caste scholarship.

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# From Agrestic Slaves to Untouchable Gods: Remembering the Repressed History of Caste Slavery and the Resistance of Pulayas in Kerala through Ritualistic Folk Art, India

Bincy Mariya Nirichan<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

The empirical ordering of the upper castes through scriptural doctrines delegitimized the subaltern epistemology and impeded the possibility of any form of resistance. The article finds relevance in delving deep into the subversive acts of the most marginalized against Brahmanised hegemonic discourse and examines how they developed it as an epistemology of resistance. It particularly makes an in-depth inquiry into the past of Pulaya, a Dalit community in North Malabar, Kerala, and their history of resistance through a ritualistic folk art, Mari Theyyam. By closely examining the performance, paraphernalia and rituals associated with Mari Theyyam, this article emphasises that Mari Theyyam functions as a living archive and a counter-hegemonic epistemology sustained by the most marginalised community to challenge the erased or repressed history of caste slavery. The spatial mapping of Mari Theyyam also holds significance as it provides critical insight into the deeply entrenched caste system and the prevailing caste dynamics in Kerala. The article argues that, in a dark epoch that made Dalits voiceless and prevented them from raising their voice and writing culture, Pulayas of North Malabar made use of their folklore to collate their shared memories and oral testimonies of caste slavery. By conceptualizing Mari Theyyam as an alternative epistemology, the article contributes to Dalit studies and aesthetics, subaltern studies, religious studies, inequality studies and performance studies of South Asia.

## **Keywords**

Caste, Kerala, Theyyam, Resistance, Epistemology

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<sup>1</sup>PhD from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IISER Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India  
Email: bincymariyaa@gmail.com

## **Introduction: Pulaya and their History of Caste Slavery**

Pulaya is a Dalit community in Kerala, India, historically regarded as a slave caste.<sup>1</sup> They endured blatant human rights violations due to their birth-based identity in an unequally stratified caste society. The deeply entrenched caste system caused irrevocable damage to the social ensemble of Kerala. The caste modalities that functioned through slavery, land tenure, hereditary occupation, bonded labor, ritual pollution, and endogamy brought a broad bifurcation of the privileged and the oppressed. The privileged consisted of Brahmins and other upper castes of comparatively lower rank, who exercised power over Dalits and impeded their upward social mobility. The perception of subservient positioning and inferior identity imposed on them through scriptural indoctrination and practical approaches prevented Dalits from fighting back. This section of the article delves further into the impact of the complex configuration of caste and contributes to the later part that critically examines how caste has endured even after the saga of progressive social movements and the much-acclaimed Kerala Model Development.<sup>2</sup>

The social ensemble of Kerala was defined and demarcated based on castes, and it divided people into unequally stratified groups and assigned specific duties based on their birth-based identities. For instance, the previous untouchable caste groups, such as Pulaya and Paraya, were ranked at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. They were also known as slave castes and were categorized as the most denigrated category. P. Sanal Mohan (2015) used the term ‘caste slavery’ to denote a distinct kind of oppressive social structure that existed in Kerala since the early medieval period that made people of the untouchable castes agrestic slaves. It was believed that their presence caused atmospheric pollution. Such caste groups were extensively exploited for unpaid agricultural labor and other degraded works such as manual scavenging, skinning dead animals, rag-picking, and several other laborious tasks.

At the same time, caste, being a birth-based discriminatory system, conferred certain prerogatives to Brahmins, such as autonomy in knowledge production, access to material resources, and several other socio-cultural capitals. Brahmins, who claimed providential authority to control and configure society, designated themselves in the highest order and assigned abject positioning to the Dalits. They were made

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<sup>1</sup>I use the terms ‘slave castes’ and ‘untouchables’ in this article as ‘Dalit’ and “organized Dalit assertion” had not yet taken on a concrete form during the period that the article focused.

<sup>2</sup>The Kerala Model, or Kerala Model Development, is a developmental strategy employed by the government of Kerala to ensure the overall development of the state. By focusing more on social indicators such as literacy, health care, life expectancy rate, low infant mortality, and so on, Kerala sets an example among other Indian states.

to believe that their birth into a specific caste determined the kind of work they needed to undertake. K.S. Madhavan (2001) observed that the Brahmins became a reference group in defining the hierarchical formation and their self-seclusion, and the mechanism of making the rest, especially the lower caste group, into an 'other' was mediated by structural inequalities such as untouchability, unapproachability, endogamy, spatial distancing, agrestic slavery, racial purity, land tenure, and so on. The religious sanction that caste and its abhorrent practices attained resulted in the concretization of its ubiquitous presence in Kerala. Eventually, the preordained structure of caste became the nucleus of social relations and began functioning in virulent forms.

In the nineteenth century, Kerala was notoriously known for the prevalence of caste slavery. The pervasiveness of the Brahmanical ideology paved the way for the legitimization and validation of slavery in Kerala. It was mainly through *Jennum* that the Brahmins asserted their power over the Dalits.<sup>3</sup> It provided them with an absolute right over the land as well as the people. According to Saradmoni (1973), those who belonged to the lowest castes were considered slaves. They were treated as untouchables and unapproachables. It was believed that their presence would cause ritual pollution. So they were forced to maintain a specific distance from the upper castes, which was often determined by a kind of arithmetical precision (Saradmoni 1973, p. 380). People from untouchable castes such as Pulaya, Paraya, and Kurava were sold and mortgaged extensively for exploitative, unpaid labor. In addition to the caste- Hindu and Syrian Christian landlords, temples and the Travancore government also owned slaves (Balakrishnan 2018, p. 68). As per the report of the Temple Entry Committee, which was published in 1934, there were around 1,65,000 slaves or bonded labourers in Travancore in 1647.

The advocates of ritual hierarchy and birth-based labor ignored the perilous positioning of Dalits and their multiple turmoil. Through the unjust and injudicious allocation of resources, the Brahmins and other upper castes sustained as a dominant social class, whereas the slave castes continued on the margin. They were not considered human beings; rather, upper-caste Hindu and Christian feudal landlords treated them like animals. Tying them along with the ox and cows to plow the paddy

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<sup>3</sup>*Jennum* was a type of hereditary proprietary right prevalent in Kerala. The right to huge acres of land was vested in the rich, upper-caste landlords. They managed to get undisputed supremacy through the *Jennum*. In Kerala, the land was distributed among three main categories. They were the kings, the Brahmins, and the temples. *Brahmaswom* and *Devaswom* were the two systems of governance developed by the upper castes to validate their power over land. *Brahmaswom* suggests the ownership of Brahmins, whereas *Devaswom* denotes the land or property of temples.

fields was a common sight in the nineteenth century (Mohan 2015, p. 243). Samuel Mateer explains egregious caste atrocities that the slave castes endured:

For faults or crimes they were cruelly confined in stocks or cages, and beaten. For not attending work very early in the morning, they were tied up and flogged severely. Awful cruelties were sometimes perpetrated. Cases are known in which slaves have been blinded by lime cast into their eyes. The teeth of one were extracted by his master as a punishment for eating his sugar cane (Mateer 1883, p. 58)

As Balakrishnan (2018) observed, caste became a ‘capital’ achieved only by birth. Such a conceptualization helped the upper castes retain a hegemonic position. The feudal landlords had the ultimate power to transact their agrestic slaves like commodities. Their labor power was extensively exploited, and they were severely punished even for minor mistakes. Moreover, the superstitious landlords also used them for human sacrifice to get maximum yield and to prevent natural calamities such as torrential downpours and floods. Affluent landlords bought the slaves in bulk and retained the chain of these transactions. Moreover, they used to buy slaves with any ailments for a meagre amount. After providing better treatment, landlords from the upper castes would sell them again for a higher market price (Chentharassery 2017, p. 10). Most often, they were ruthlessly taken away from their family and forced to serve the landlord till the end of their lives. Amidst the heinous practices of serfdom and servility, the slave castes were liable to pay different types of taxes, such as *Talayara* (poll tax), *Valayara* (net tax), *Kuppakazhcha* (tax for the houses), *Thalakkaram* (head tax paid by men), *Mulakkaram* (breast tax), and so on, which revealed both the casteist and patriarchal nature of Brahmanism. They were forced to pay tax even for their dead family members. Though the British abolished slavery in the nineteenth century, their degraded social positioning and servility did not change much even after the abolition of slavery.

## **Silencing the Subaltern and Structures of Violence**

The adverse impact of caste slavery did not only entail physical enslavement; rather, the sequelae of slavery resulted in low self-esteem. Shaima Ahammed (2019) writes, “The atrocities perpetrated by higher castes were rarely met with resistance or intolerance by lower castes as they were conditioned to believe in the hegemony of upper castes as deeply rooted in a sacred ideology” (p. 91). The collective victimhood and the intergenerational trauma of the slave castes were often undermined, and they were forced to abide by the concocted scriptural ideologies of Brahmanical Hinduism. Moreover, the official historiography often invalidated the voice of the oppressed. The

Dalits were prevented from linguistic modernity for a very long time due to their lower caste identity.<sup>4</sup> They were systematically silenced, and their multiform discrepancies were left unattended. It was a strategy the upper-caste ideologues and feudal landlords adopted to retain socio-cultural, economic, and political supremacy. The ‘silence imposed from above’ was primarily aimed at preventing the lower castes from remonstrating the caste hierarchy and transcending their oppressive status (Heering 2013, p. 40). Kristie Dotson used the term ‘epistemic oppression’ to elaborate on the strategic exclusion of the oppressed from knowledge production, dissemination of their shared epistemic resources, and invalidation of their epistemic agency (2014, p. 115).

The oppressive hegemonic paradigm that prevailed in social relations undermined the cultural articulation of Dalits and indigenous communities. It silenced their voices and perpetuated their marginalization. Their experiences were systematically suppressed, and they were prevented from expressing their discontent. Dalit lives, culture, and system of beliefs have never been the center of elitist writings. Those who have access to knowledge production, whether it is a Purohit or a rationalist writer, postulate everything in the Sanskrit line, as they are rooted in a Sanskritized culture (Ilaiah 2002, p. 14). Such deliberate attempts to validate dominant history and practices would result in the intended consequence of the erasure of indigenous culture and knowledge systems. Ilaiah termed it ‘silent violence’, highlighting the damaging impact of such epistemic erasure and epistemic violence (2002, p. 14). Eventually, it turns out to be the branding of Dalits as incapable of either constructing, conferring, or conceiving knowledge. The phenomenon of monopolizing the epistemological domain, or the operation of epistemic violence, is silent and invisible. Brahmanization, or Sanskritization, often operates silently, and the exclusionary imperativeness it perpetuates makes the Dalits repudiate their own cultural legacy and value system. Dalits started emulating Brahmanic ideologies and adhered to the Sanskritic theologies to level themselves up and fit into the caste hierarchy. It is observed that epistemic violence, which operates imperceptibly and gradually, has an irrevocable impact on the socio-cultural, political, and intellectual lives of Dalit Bahujans. It resulted in the erasure of their unique cultural identity and the internalisation of the dominant culture. Moreover, Dalits bear an ontological wound of self-negation and self-esteem due to their intergenerational caste oppression (Jangam 2017, p. 6).

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<sup>4</sup>The word linguistic modernity suggests exposure to modern language and the consequential changes it makes in an individual or a given group. In the context of Dalit assertion in Kerala, missionary intervention and modern education played a significant role in inaugurating linguistic modernity. It opened a new paradigm for Dalits to revisit their history and reconstruct new meanings.

Being deprived of any agency to fight back against the deeply entrenched caste oppressions and the Brahmanical discourse, Dalits employed their oral traditions and folk culture to raise their dissenting voice. The oppositional aesthetics that the Dalit cultural articulations brought forward demanded a critical interrogation and inquiry into the dominant history enmeshed in Brahmanical ideology. By taking cues from this, the next section of the article addresses the question of Pulaya's means and modes of protest against the interlocking identities and intersectional disempowerment through their folk rituals. It is observed that most of the research on the history of slavery in Kerala centres on the turmoil of the Pulayas in Travancore. So, this study finds the relevance of including the servile past of the Pulayas of North Malabar, as it is important for ensuring inclusivity in the Dalit discourse in Kerala. It seeks to bridge the existing gaps in the textual and digital archiving of this tradition.

## Methodology

The article employs qualitative research methodology to bring a nuanced understanding of the alternative epistemologies of Pulaya. It underlines the productive potential of folk traditions in fostering an inclusive epistemological standpoint by employing critical discourse analysis. Through the close examination of oral narratives, shared experiences, popular tracts and Mari Theyyam performance, this study intends to emphasize that the Pulayas of North Malabar employed their folk tradition as a medium to transcend the inflicted slave identity. The article also relied on interdisciplinary theoretical analysis, especially selected theoretical frameworks of sociology, folklore and performance studies are used to conceptualize Mari Theyyam as a repertoire of subaltern resistance. To broaden the scope of a new epistemology that the Dalits formulate through their folk rituals and cultural representations, I employ Nancy Fraser's (1990) subaltern counterpublics. By situating Dalit cultural articulations in the framework of the subaltern counterpublics, this article initiates further discussion on the new epistemological domain they constructed and the rhetoric of resistance they launched. To conceptualize Mari Theyyam as a performative knowledge, Diana Taylor's (2003) theoretical postulations of performance as an embodiment of knowledge, an epistemic tool and repertoire are used. I have also used archival research and performance analysis. Detailed discourse analysis of the performance, especially oral narratives and *Thottam Pattu* associated with the Theyyam, contributes to the future research on the alternative epistemologies of the oppressed.<sup>5</sup>

## Critiquing Marginality and Towards a New Epistemology

Theyyam is a unique ritualistic performance in Kerala that resonates with interfaith dynamics, intertwined ecologies and cultural synthesis. Theyyam is derived from the

<sup>5</sup>*Thottam Pattu* is an invocatory song performed as a part of Theyyam.

word *Daivam*, which means god. It is a cultural arbiter, functioning as a repertoire of syncretic culture and a site for sustainable social practices, especially in the contemporary landscape of religious tensions. Theyyam underlines how subaltern identity is constructed in the cultural tapestry of North Malabar, and the performance of Theyyam stands in contrast to conventional structures and societal norms. It can be considered a subaltern epistemology in practice, as it is performed by people from marginalized communities such as Malaya, Pulaya and Vannan. Among the broad pantheon of Theyyam in Kerala, Mari Theyyam stands out, as the ritual inversion reveals the hidden history of caste slavery and the memories of caste practices such as untouchability, endogamy, spatial discrimination, unequal access to resources, hereditary servitude and so on. The article acknowledges the creative construction of an alternative lifeworld through Mari Theyyam and further explores how it evolves into a counter-hegemonic cultural practice and an alternative epistemology.

## The Myth of Mari Theyyam

Mari Theyyam usually performs at Madayippara, a barren hillock near the Thiruvarkkadu Bhagavati temple. It annually performs to banish evil spirits, epidemics, fear of floods and other natural calamities. The myth of Mari Theyyam is associated with Thekkancheri Polla, a legendary figure from the Pulaya community. Polla was instructed by the local ruler to exorcise the evil gods, Maari and Mamaaya, as they caused ruptures in the village in the form of disease and calamities (Patrick 2014, p. 87). On the Malayalam month Karkkidakam 16<sup>th</sup>, which has been marked as the day of the ritual performed by Polla, Mari Theyyams visit each home and exorcise evil spirits and bad omens. There are six Mari Theyyams involved in the ritual, they are Marikaliyan, Mamayakaliyan, Maarikalachi, Mamayakalachi, Maarikuliyan and Maamayakuliyan. The performance of Mari Theyyam starts from the hilly terrain of Madayippara and ends near the sea. In the end, all six Mari Theyyams discard evil spirits and bad omens, which they collect from each house on their way to the sea. The ritualistic performance of Mari Theyyam involves *Mariyattom* and *Mari pattu*. *Mariyattom* implies the dance of the Theyyam performers or *Koladhari*s. *Marippattu*, an invocatory song accompanied by the Theyyam, is an act of collective remembrance, largely drawn from the memories of the slaves. Mari Theyyam embodies individual and collective memories of Dalits, which bear deep wounds and scars of a slavish past. Throughout the performances, Pulayas are re-enacting and remembering the horrifying caste practices they endured, including untouchability, slavery, spatial isolation, and unapproachability. The performativity provided them with an alternative space for their agential expressions. The article elaborates two major aspects in the following sections to broaden the understanding of the collective victimhood of Dalits and their acts of

resistance. First, it details how caste functioned as a fulcrum of structural inequalities and injustice. The second section highlights the importance of conceptualizing the performativity and the oral narratives of Mari Theyyam as embodied knowledge and an inclusive epistemological standpoint of the most oppressed.

## **Still an Untouchable God**

Theyyam usually performs inside *Kavu* or sacred groves, and the deities are given fixed sacred positions known as *Aroodam*. In Madayi Kavu or Madayi Thiruvarkadu Bhagavati temple, the major Theyyam forms such as Thiruvarkadu Bhagavati Theyyam, Thai Paradevatha Theyyam, Chuzhali Bhagavati Theyyam, Kalariyil Bhagavati Theyyam, Someswari Theyyam, Veera Chamundi Theyyam and Padikuttiyamma Theyyam are performed inside the temple and are given sanctums of their own. On the contrary, even after the abolition of caste slavery in 1855, proclamation of temple entry by Maharaja Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma on November 12, 1936, colonial modernity, constitutional safeguard, Kerala Model Development, and an array of progressive social movements heralded by the leaders of the slave castes like Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan and so on, Mari Theyyam is still performed outside the premises of the temple since it is performed by a former untouchable caste. By taking cues from this, the article problematizes this prevailing untouchability and argues that despite its significance as an important Theyyam form that is inextricably associated with the social and cultural history of both Madayi Kavu and Madayi *desam* or village, it is still performed outside the temple precinct due to the unaddressed norms of untouchability. It is hardly addressed and often normalized as an unquestionable tradition that has been observed for ages. It is in this regard, I use the term 'Untouchable god' in the article. By examining the existing lacunae in rephrasing the ritual and cultural practices of the Pulayas in terms of caste slavery, the article further argues that if one such ritual or cultural expression of the previously slave caste performs outside the temple, without having a fixed sanctum, even after an array of socio-cultural and political movements, Kerala modernity and the implementation of the Kerala model of development, it is because of nothing but deeply entrenched caste.

It is important to understand how Mari Theyyam unravels the intricate interstices within the cultural tapestry of Kerala through the performativity. It is not just a cultural expression of an oppressed caste, but rather, an embodiment of knowledge and a potential site developed by a historically marginalized community to make the caste society understand the structural inequalities that the Dalit endured. The following section explains how Mari Theyyam exposes the structural injustices which made Pulayas invisible, untouchable, and unapproachable in the social ensemble. The article closely examines the five different stages of Mari Theyyam performance and discusses and seeks to explore how the inclemency of agrestic slavery unfolded at each stage.

## The Ousted 'Other': Enacting the Memories of Untouchability

Untouchability was an inherent part of the incongruous caste society in Kerala. In his speech at the public meeting of Trivandrum, Mahatma Gandhi testified to the existence of extreme forms of untouchability in Kerala and called Malabar the blackest spot in the untouchability map of India (Gandhi 2001, p. 14). The upper caste used caste as a structural solution to assert their "sacredness", and they imposed "impurity" on the Untouchable (Mine 2009, p. 22). Pulayas bore the brunt of double marginalization, being branded as an untouchable community and systematically ousted from the socio-cultural and political ensemble since birth. Though the ritual inversion enabled them to transform their 'defiled caste bodies' to sacred bodies through Theyyam, Mari Theyyam remained as an 'Untouchable god' or an 'ousted other' due to the retention of ritual pollution.

Unlike the other major deities in Madayikavu which are given permanent sacred position or *Aroodam* inside the temple, Mari Theyyam takes place in a hillock, near to the road to Madayikavu. It directly connotes the persistent presence of untouchability and spatial segregation. It is observed that, in the premises of *Kavu* while the performer or *Koladhari* invokes the deity through *Thottam Pattu* or when the offering is being served, most of the Theyyam are usually given a wooden stool named *Peedam*, and they sit in front of their sacred position. However, it is not followed in the rituals of Mari Theyyam. After the *Mariyattom*, the priest of Madayikavu comes with *Payasam*, an offering from the temple to Madayippara where the Mari Theyyam performs. As a part of the ritual, the Theyyam will be seated cross-legged on the same ground where they perform and eat the offering, which is being served in the leaf of any locally available leaf. It directly links to a dark epoch in the history of the Pulayas where they were not allowed to dine with the upper castes. Interdining was strictly prohibited. The agrestic slaves were given water in coconut shells, known as *pela chiratta*, and they were also given a leaf and asked to dig a small pit in the ground to get served the meal. It implies that even after transforming themselves into Theyyam, the invisible caste boundaries remain unchallenged.

## Spatiality of Caste: Remembering Spatial Segregation

The upsurge of temple-centered settlements made a clear boundary between the upper castes and the lower castes. It affirms the concept of purity. The closely knit communities of Brahmins strictly observe the spatial and social discrepancies with the lower castes. They constructed Brahmin villages and exercised sovereignty over socio-cultural and political life. The dwelling places of the Dalits and other marginalized social groups were kept away from the upper castes, and later, such divisions led to the formation of caste colonies in Kerala. Ambedkar's (2014) observations on the ghettoization and

materialization of caste through spatial discrimination is commendable. Ambedkar conceptualized untouchability as spatially codified and discussed how the spatial regulations of caste enforce graded inequalities and structural oppressions. The upper castes had the belief that the Dalit and other lower castes could pollute them simply by being present or even casting their shadow over them. They strictly maintained spatial discrepancy from the Dalits. Even after several decades of the formation of the state, the spatial discrimination of Dalits is a persisting issue in Kerala. In North Malabar, the higher castes used to erect walls to locate their houses away from the Dalit communities (Patrick 2014, p. 45).

As per the myth, it was Cheraman Perumal and Chirakkal Thamburan who decided to invite Thekkan Cheri Polla, the headman of Pulayas, to banish the evil spirits named *Shani*, as the daily worship in the temples was interrupted due to these evil spirits. They decided to perform the Theyyam on the temple's east-north side. It was eventually relocated to the temple's surrounding areas rather than within the premises (Patrick 2014, p. 88). The reason behind this displacement/ forced eviction of the 'untouchable god' is scantily recorded. A small building is constructed near the road to the temple by the community members for the 'displaced Dalit god'. The Pulayas come together at Madayippara on the 16<sup>th</sup> of the Malayalam month *Karkkidakam* and diligently perform their rites. The shift from the temple grounds to Madayaipara's desolate, steep terrain remains underexplored and unchallenged.

### Scattered Lives: Remembering Slave Trade

The space or geographical location that the Pulaya chose to perform Mari Theyyam is significant as it is directly linked to their history of caste slavery. Madayippara is hailed as a historically and ecologically important location on the tourism map of Kerala, and it attracts people with its scenic beauty. But its association with the history of caste slavery has been hidden in the intricate layers of official historiography. It is recorded that the agrestic slaves were freely sold and transacted in this hillock during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Adima Kallu*, a stone slab installed near the southern side of the hillock was the centre of the ceremonial slave trade.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that along with the forced human transaction of the local slaves, untouchables who migrated from Thulu Nadu and Andhra Pradesh would surrender themselves before the landlords as slaves. Gradually, it became ritualized and began to be referred to as *Adima Vekkal*. It implies the inherent inferiority that the caste system inflicted on Dalits and other marginalized communities. The caste made them internalize their subservient status, and they were destined to serve the upper castes till the end of their life. On the day of Pooram, a temple festival during the Malayalam

<sup>6</sup>The word *Adima* denotes slave and *Kallu* means stone.

month of Meenam, they flocked near the *Adima Kallu* along with the then Polla and submitted themselves as the slaves of respective landlords. *Adima Panam*, as well as a handful of pepper, were also given as offerings to Madayi Kavilamma (Patrick 2014, p. 63).<sup>7</sup> The observance of Mari Theyyam needs to be rephrased based on the history of *Adima Vekkal* in Madayipara as well. The performance of Mari Theyyam in the same geographical location, which reverberates the hues and cries of the slaves, is highly political. It emphasises the need to find the performance not merely as a cultural and ritual expression but as a socio-political statement. By enacting the unmediated experiences of caste slavery from the same place where the slave trade happened, the performativity creates a space, which can be conceptualized as an anti- caste scape to disseminate knowledge about their untold history and unacknowledged resistance.

### **‘Caste Bearing’ Bodies: Remembering the Violated Labouring Bodies of Pulayas**

In the context of the servitude of Dalits, the recurrent imposition of power resulted in intellectual as well as physical submission to the dominant power structure. Michel Foucault (1977) used the term ‘docile body’ to indicate the construction of the body as an amenable object through disciplinary force. The Pulayas in North Malabar were uprooted from their livelihood and indigenous life world and forcefully dispersed to undertake caste-specific labour. They were traditionally agricultural labourers who had the right to land. The word ‘Pulaya’ is derived from the word *Pulam*, which means agricultural land, and the term ‘Pulayan’ designates a person who owns cultivable land (Patrick 2014, p. 41). Being stigmatized as the ostracized caste group, Dalits were forced to undertake many unclean jobs, such as manual scavenging, cleaning latrines, removing dead animals, and so on. Since caste was ascribed a divine origin status, the slave castes were made to believe that they should diligently undertake their hereditary occupation. They were relegated to nothing but a ‘caste bearing labour bodies’. It aligns with Butler’s conceptualization of ‘abject beings’. Butler (1998) explains ‘abject bodies’ as ‘...bodies whose lives are not considered to be “lives” and whose materiality is understood not to “matter”’ (p. 281). The exclusionary matrices of the caste society made them ‘abject beings’. Being agrestic slaves, Pulayas were deployed to undertake labourious tasks and treated inhumanely. But their indispensable role in the socio-economic mobility was seldom acknowledged. Untouchables were surrendered before the unquestionable authority of the upper castes and believed that it was their responsibility to obey the orders of the upper castes. They were even forced to accept sin-laden objects as customary offerings from the Hindu households. Mine (2009) observes, “Sometimes Hindus dispose of sins and other kinds of faults

<sup>7</sup>*Adima Panam* refers to the money that the slave castes were given as offering to the deity during the ceremony. Madayi Kavilamma indicates the deity of Madayi Kavu

such as the evil eye through a two-stage spatio-temporal process. First the evil or fault is removed from the person and transferred to some object (often a foodstuff). Second, the object is removed from the person's environment and in this way discarded" (p. 20).

Similarly, on the day of the performance, Mari Theyyam visit each home and collect *Shani* or evil spirits on their body. It is important to note that their 'untouchable bodies', which are considered as the sites of systemic violence and oppression, become touchable and approachable for the duration of the performance. The slave castes were denied entry to the upper caste household in the temple-centred agrarian settlement. On the contrary, Mari Theyyams are allowed to visit the upper castes' households to exorcise all the evil spirits from their home. The upper castes were not only to make use of the indigenous epistemologies of the Dalits but also materialise their bodies as vessels or channels to collect evil spirits and discard the same far away from their households.

Unlike other Theyyam performances, which begin and end at the temple premises, the Mari Theyyam begins at a barren hillock and ends near the sea. After an arduous stroll through the village, they finally discard all the evil spirits that collect at the sea. This act in the Theyyam performance directly connotes the birth-based job ascription of Chathurvanya under which the Dalits were forced to handle sin-laden objects, wastes and other polluting substances. As mentioned, the performers have to stroll with their bare feet from dawn until dusk. Finally, the exhausted bodies of all six Theyyams will be dipped in the sea, which symbolically indicates discarding the evil spirits. All these acts symbolize the rigorous and onerous work they were forced to undertake in a social ensemble where job ascription was based on birth. Though it is observed as a traditional practice, it implies the strong undercurrents of casteism.

Theyyam in general accommodates several changes in its external appearances as well as movements to retain the visual appeal in accordance with the changing times, despite its status as an ancient, ceremonial art form. But Mari Theyyam does not have remarkable changes in its attire, headgear and face painting or *Mukathezhuth*. Mari Theyyam resembles the laboring bodies of the oppressed. It is important to note that the Dalit body is the site of multifarious oppression. They were not allowed to use clean clothes. Both the Pulaya men and women were prevented from covering the upper part of their bodies. Their poverty-stricken, dark-skinned bodies were never considered beautiful but filthy and unclean by the upper castes. It is evident in the costumes and facial make-up of the Mari Theyyam. They use fresh coconut fronds for the skirt and the upper part of the body. Instead of the finely detailed patterns on their face, Mari Theyyam performers wear face masks. There will be smearings on the faces of Kaliyan and Kalichi. It also implies that their caste-bearing body is depicted in their art form in its most natural state.

## Can the ‘Voiceless’ be Heard?: Remembering their Silenced Cries and Resistance

Unlike the Brahmanical grand narratives of the upper caste intellectuals and ideologues that followed a predetermined formula to maintain their superior culture, Dalit cultural representations evolved from their lived experience. In an unequally stratified society, the division of labor made them agrestic slaves and led to their intellectual and physical bondage. It stunted their ability to speak for themselves for a long period. Eventually, Dalits made use of their oral and folk traditions to communicate with the world about the blatant injustice they endured. Placid (2021) writes, “The oral tradition of the subaltern simultaneously interrogates the un-representation and misrepresentations of the caste subaltern in the mainstream and offers an exemption to the notion that the caste subaltern is incapable of musings beyond mundane existence” (p. 31). *Mari Pattu*, or the invocatory song of Mari Theyyam, exemplifies this. Mari Pattu is sung by the community members who accompany the Theyyam. Interestingly, Mari Theyyam do not sing but make shrieking sounds during the performance. It is directly associated with their lived experience as ‘submissive and silent’ servants of the upper castes. Dalits were asked to emit sounds to signify their presence in the immediate vicinity. So that proximity between the upper caste and the Dalit can be avoided. Additionally, they were instructed to cover their mouths with their hands whenever they encountered the upper caste. At the same time, the palanquin bearers of Brahmin priests, kings, and prominent landlords also used to make a *hoi-hoi-hoi* sound as a sign to keep the untouchable castes away from their roads.

Language is one of the major instruments through which the upper castes silenced the Dalits. Discrediting the language of the marginalized accelerated structural inequalities, fueled exclusionary policies, and erased their epistemology. Mari Theyyam uses the same ‘unscripted and unsophisticated’ language of their community to challenge the cultural superiority of the upper castes. Through *Thottam Pattu*, they narrate the history of the Theyyam and the instrumental intervention of their headman, Polla, as the guardian of the upper castes in crisis. It is important to note that through similar oral renderings and folklore, Dalits subverted the established canon and transcended the unchallenged caste codes. By critically inquiring such ‘resistance narratives’, a term used by Ajay Sekher (2018) to denote the counter-current initiated by the Dalits to question the cultural elitism and hegemonic discourse, the article emphasizes the need to acknowledge the rhetoric of resistance that the oral renderings launched in Kerala’s socio-cultural and political history, and it encourages further discussion on counter-hegemonic culture and new epistemology.

## **Mari Theyyam: Subaltern Counterpublic and Embodied Knowledge**

Mari Theyyam is an unacknowledged act of assertion, which helped the most oppressed community to revisit their history of caste slavery. It provided them with a renewed consciousness to create an inclusive space. The syncretic culture it promotes invites people to engage in the performativity and rethink their positionality. It does not only entail the creation of counter-hegemonic creation; rather, it facilitates an alternative mode of power that brings the paradigm of social justice to fruition (Krishna 2022). The reversal of roles, even though it extends only till the end of the performance, helped the Pulaya challenge the outsider's version of their history. The epistemological inquiries of this kind are inevitable for the internal revival of marginalized social groups. It also helps them to transgress the elitist cultural fabric. The realization or a renewed consciousness about their sense of self, not as an 'untouchable slave' but as a political subject, would encourage them to construct a counterpublic of the oppressed. Subaltern counterpublics are, "...parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourse to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Fraser 1990, p. 67). According to Fraser, the subaltern counterpublic, which emerged in response to exclusionary mechanisms, helped to expand discursive spaces. The proliferation of the same means the widening of discursive contestation (p. 67).

Mari Theyyam is an embodied knowledge, as the performativity, oral narratives, including the *Thottam Pattu* exemplify how the collective memory of Dalits turned into Dalit epistemology. Taylor's (2003) critical lens of embodied knowledge and repertoire is well-suited to bring a theoretical foundation of Mari Theyyam. It needs to be highlighted that Mari Theyyam serves as a living repertoire that connects the past with the present and addresses the contemporaneity of caste. Most importantly, it serves the purpose of providing an alternative medium to transcend caste slavery and also directly addresses the intellectual imperialism and epistemicide that have made Dalits silent over the years. According to Jangam (2018), memory functions as a protective layer which carefully retains the individual as well as the social memory of the Dalits since they have been historically prevented from writing culture. So they make use of their folklore to voice their individual as well as collective memories.

In the context of Dalit history in Kerala, it is evident that Dalits were subjected to the authority of multiple sovereign powers and were compelled to conform to their norms. Dalits either succumbed to the oppressive structure or emulated an elitist tradition. In this process, their indigenous epistemologies will be either completely erased or discredited. Such deliberate erasure and invalidation would result in epistemicide. Boaventura De Sousa Santos (2015) observed the predominance of

‘institutionalized harmful lies’ that laid the epistemological foundations. To counter this, Santos puts forward an epistemological proposal based on a radical inquiry into the knowledge construction of the oppressed social groups and finds that such marginalized social groups develop epistemologies from their experiences of violence, inequalities, and resistance. Similarly, Mari Theyyam serves the purpose of developing a new scholarship or counter-history to challenge the enforced marginality. It became an alternative way of knowing the situatedness of Dalits and making them as well as the other caste groups aware of their positionality and standpoint.

## Conclusion

Being an epistemic tool, Mari Theyyam shows how Dalit cultural assertion became a collective contestation against socio-cultural and political authority, intellectual imperialism, sub-caste politics, and related disputes and textualized stigmatization. It provides a cathartic experience for Dalits and makes them realize the transformative potential of their ritualistic and cultural expressions. Undoubtedly, it serves a dual purpose of becoming a rhetoric of resistance while also providing a kaleidoscopic view of Dalit life. This article emphasizes that Dalits used their oral tradition and ritualistic performances to challenge hegemonic history even before Dalit political assertion attained a concrete shape. It emphasizes the idea of debrahmanizing religion, society, and state apparatus to actualize a liberative praxis of Dalits. They questioned the outsiders’ version of their history and projected them not as victimized objects but as agents of social change. The counter-hegemonic epistemology they developed is rooted in their experiential realities, and Dalits demanded a practical approach to their historical marginality and persisting oppression. Dalit’s cultural articulations provide an alternate way of delving deep into social realities. Such spaces foster transformative, transitional and liberative epistemologies of the most oppressed. Most importantly, through their oppositional aesthetic acts, they invite everyone, irrespective of their religious and sub-caste identities, under the same purview of the solidarity of the oppressed. In such spaces where the inclusive, intersectional epistemologies practiced, the ‘invisibilized’ become visible, and the ‘inferiorized’ become celebrated.

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# Social Boycott: Caste, Informal Power, and the Reinvention of Village Governance in Rural Telangana Economy, India

Mahesh Admankar<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article examines social boycott as a contemporary form of caste power in rural Telangana society and economy, focusing on the role of Village Development Committees (VDCs) originating from the informal caste councils. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 20 respondents (8 women and 12 men; 8 from Scheduled Castes and 12 from Other Backward Classes) and autoethnographic reflections, the study reveals how social boycott operates through economic exclusion, control of commons, religious coercion, and gendered surveillance. The article argues that social boycott represents a form of informal sovereignty that thrives in the gap between constitutional law and everyday governance. By situating boycott within broader debates on decentralization, caste capture, and rural democracy, the study highlights the limitations of existing legal frameworks and the failure of state institutions to protect marginalized communities. The article concludes by proposing sociologically-grounded policy interventions aimed at criminalizing social boycott, regulating informal caste bodies, protecting livelihoods, and re-democratizing village governance.

## Keywords

Social boycott, Caste-based governance, Informal sovereignty, Rural Telangana

## AI Use Disclosure

Artificial intelligence tools were used solely for grammatical correction, language clarity, and stylistic refinement. The intellectual content, empirical data, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions of this article are entirely the author's own.

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<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor of Economics, Laurence Simon Department of Economics, Woxsen University, Kamkole, Sadasivpet Sangareddy District, Hyderabad, India-(502345)  
Email: mahesh.uoh123@gmail.com

## Introduction

Caste in India has survived not because it is static, but because it is adaptive. While the Constitution of India outlawed untouchability and promised equality before law, caste has continued to organize social life through informal institutions, moral sanctions, and everyday practices that rarely enter legal records. One such mechanism—social boycott—remains both pervasive and under-theorized in sociological literature. While untouchability was outlawed and equality before law enshrined, caste power has migrated into informal institutions and everyday practices that operate beneath the threshold of legality. One such practice—social boycott—has emerged as a central mechanism through which caste hierarchy is enforced in contemporary rural India.

Social boycott refers to the organized withdrawal of economic, social, and symbolic relations from individuals or groups who defy caste norms. It includes denial of work, refusal of trade, exclusion from religious and social life, prohibition from accessing commons, and reputational shaming. Unlike physical violence, boycott is slow, accumulative, and often invisible within legal and policy frameworks. Its power lies in its normalization as “community decision-making” or “village discipline,” even as it produces severe material and psychological harm.

This article examines social boycott as a mode of informal governance in rural Telangana. It argues that caste domination today is exercised less through overt ritual exclusion and more through extra-legal institutions that discipline labor, regulate markets, control commons, and punish dissent. Central to this process are Village Development Committees (VDCs), informal bodies that have evolved from traditional caste councils but now operate under the legitimizing language of development, welfare, and community consensus in the state.

VDCs, as informal bodies claim to represent collective village interests. VDCs are typically formed through caste councils, with a central committee that rotates annually. While they adopt the language of development, participation, and welfare, they function as extra-legal authorities that regulate markets, discipline labor, control commons, and influence electoral behavior.

Growing up in a village in Telangana, I experienced caste not as an abstract structure but as a daily regulation of space, dignity, and survival. Where one could live, work, sell goods, or access infrastructure was shaped by caste norms enforced without written rules. These lived experiences inform the autoethnographic dimension of this study and anchor its sociological analysis. Based on autoethnography and qualitative fieldwork across Karimnagar, Nizamabad, and Adilabad districts in the state of Telangana in India, the article documents how VDCs enforce social boycotts against Dalits, OBC artisanal castes, migrants, and women. These boycotts involve denial of services, prohibition of trade, religious coercion, fines, and reputational violence. Though constitutionally illegal, such practices persist due to dominant caste social

regulation, political patronage, administrative inaction, and the structural dependence of marginalized communities on village economies.

Following Ambedkar's insight that the village is "a sink of localism," this article argues that VDCs represent not participatory governance but the reinvention of caste sovereignty under decentralization and neoliberal development discourse. Social boycott, far from being a remnant of tradition, is a contemporary technology of power.

## **Review of Literature**

### *Caste as Structure, Not Culture*

Classical sociological accounts treated caste as a religious or cultural system (Dumont 1970). Ambedkar (1936), however, theorized caste as a system of graded inequality, maintained through endogamy, occupation, and social sanctions. Later scholars emphasized caste as a material structure shaping access to land, labor, education, and political power (Guru 2009; Deshpande 2011).

Despite economic change and democratization, caste continues to structure social relations in rural India (Jodhka 2015; Ingole 2019). Studies consistently show that Dalits and OBCs face systemic discrimination in housing, labor markets, education, and access to commons (Thorat & Newman 2010).

## **Violence, Atrocities, and the Limits of Legal Protections**

Much of the literature on caste violence focuses on atrocities such as physical violence, massacres, sexual assault, and honor killings (Kannabiran & Kannabiran 1991; Berg 2020). While crucial, this focus risks treating caste oppression as episodic rather than structural.

Everyday forms of coercion such as economic strangulation, social isolation, and symbolic degradation often escape legal recognition. Social boycott occupies this grey zone: it is violent in effect but non-spectacular in form.

## **Social Boycott: Fragmented Engagements**

Social boycott has received limited academic attention, often appearing in legal discussions or activist reports rather than mainstream sociology. Studies from Maharashtra document caste panchayats enforcing boycotts against Dalits who assert rights (Teltumbde 2018). The Maharashtra Prohibition of People from Social Boycott Act (2016) remains a rare legal recognition of the phenomenon. This article addresses these gaps by conceptualizing social boycott as everyday governance and VDCs as its institutional backbone. However, three gaps persist:

1. Social boycott is treated as exceptional, not routine
2. The institutional mechanisms enforcing it remain underexplored
3. Victims' lived experiences are marginal to theory-building

## **Caste, Community, and the Illusion of Harmony**

Mainstream sociological narratives have often portrayed the Indian village as a site of moral community, shared norms, and participatory governance. Even critical accounts of caste have sometimes implicitly assumed that violence and exclusion emerge primarily during moments of rupture—electoral competition, economic transformation, or Dalit assertion. Such approaches obscure the quotidian, normalized mechanisms through which caste power is reproduced in everyday village life.

Ambedkar's (1936) critique directly challenges this romanticization. For him, the village was not a consensual social unit but a spatial and moral organization of graded inequality. Caste, in this sense, is not merely a system of belief but a mode of governance that regulates access to resources, labor, and dignity. Social boycott exemplifies this governing logic. It enforces compliance without visible coercion and produces obedience without formal authority.

Later sociologists such as Guru (2009) and Deshpande (2011) emphasize that humiliation and exclusion are not residual experiences but central to caste's durability. Social boycott operates precisely at this intersection of humiliation and material deprivation. It transforms community into a weapon, mobilizing social relations themselves as instruments of punishment.

What distinguishes social boycott from overt violence is its moral framing. Boycott is justified as protecting "village unity," "tradition," or "collective interest." This framing renders resistance illegitimate while normalizing exclusion as discipline. As a result, victims are not merely punished but morally delegitimized.

## **Informal Governance, Decentralization, and Caste Capture**

The expansion of Panchayati Raj institutions was intended to democratize rural governance by decentralizing power. However, a growing body of scholarship shows that decentralization often facilitates elite and caste capture rather than redistribution (Pai 2013; Jodhka 2015). Informal institutions frequently coexist with formal ones, exercising greater authority through social control.

Gupta's (2012) concept of the "blurred state" is particularly relevant here. Authority in rural India is not monopolized by the state but dispersed across actors who invoke legality selectively. Village Development Committees operate within this blurred zone, drawing legitimacy from both tradition and proximity to elected representatives.

Chatterjee's (2004) notion of "political society" further illuminates how marginalized groups are governed not through rights but through negotiated compliance. Social boycott is one such mechanism of governance: it regulates populations through fear and dependency rather than law.

## **Law Without Reach**

While untouchability is constitutionally prohibited and social boycott can fall under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, victims rarely pursue legal remedies. Dependency on village economies, fear of retaliation, and slow judicial processes discourage litigation (Berg 2020).

The Maharashtra Social Boycott Act (2016) remains an exception, highlighting the absence of nationwide recognition of boycott as a distinct offense.

## **Decentralization and Caste Capture**

Panchayati Raj institutions were intended to democratize governance. Instead, decentralization has often facilitated caste capture, allowing dominant groups to exercise power informally while maintaining formal legality (Jodhka 2015; Pai 2013). VDCs thrive in this gap between law and practice.

## **Why Social Boycott Escapes the Law**

Despite constitutional prohibitions against untouchability and discrimination, social boycott remains largely invisible within legal frameworks. This invisibility is not accidental. Boycott does not rely on written orders, identifiable perpetrators, or single incidents. It unfolds through dispersed acts—silence, refusal, withdrawal—that are difficult to litigate.

Kannabiran and Kannabiran (1991) note that caste violence often escapes punishment not because of legal absence but because of institutional reluctance. Police officers frequently frame boycott as “internal village matter,” reflecting their embeddedness within caste society. Berg (2020) documents how delayed investigations and acquittals further normalize impunity.

The Maharashtra Prohibition of Social Boycott Act (2016) stands out as a rare acknowledgment of boycott as a distinct offense. Its limited geographical scope, however, underscores the broader national failure to recognize boycott as structural violence.

Yet existing literature rarely treats boycott as a systematic technology of rule. This article argues that boycott is not merely a reaction to transgression but a proactive method of maintaining caste order under conditions of formal democracy.

## **Research Questions and Contribution**

This study addresses the following questions:

1. How does social boycott operate as a mechanism of caste governance in rural Telangana?
2. What role do Village Development Committees play in enforcing caste discipline?

3. How do caste, gender, and migration status shape boycott?
4. Why do law and state institutions fail to dismantle these practices?

The article contributes to caste sociology by:

- Theorizing social boycott as informal governance
- Documenting VDCs as rebranded caste councils
- Centering autoethnography and victim narratives
- Bridging Ambedkarite critique with contemporary decentralization debates

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology, combining autoethnography with field-based interviews. Autoethnography allows personal experience to function as sociological data, particularly valuable for studying normalized systems of domination like caste (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011).

As a researcher from an oppressed caste background who grew up in rural Telangana, my positionality shaped both access and interpretation. Respondents often spoke to me not as an outsider but as someone who “already knows.”

### *Sample and Field Sites*

The study draws on in-depth interactions with 20 individuals subjected to social boycott:

- Women (8):
  - 4 Scheduled Caste
  - 4 Other Backward Caste
- Men (12):
  - 4 Scheduled Caste
  - 8 Other Backward Caste

Fieldwork was conducted across villages in Karimnagar, Nizamabad, and Adilabad districts. Participants included dalits, barbers, washermen, butchers, fisherfolk, agricultural laborers, petty traders, and migrants.

### *Ethics, Fear, and Silence*

Fear structured the field. Many respondents refused recording or written consent.

One Scheduled Caste woman stated:

*“You can write this, but if they know it came from me, I cannot live here.”*

Silence itself emerged as data—revealing the power of social boycott to discipline speech.

## Empirical Findings

The findings of this study are organized into two sub-categories. The first set of findings is derived from field visits conducted in selected villages across three districts, using convenience sampling and qualitative inquiry methods. The second sub-category of findings is based on my autoethnographic reflections, which draw on lived experiences to illuminate the everyday workings of caste-based exclusion and social boycott.

### *Field Visit-Based Findings*

*From Caste Councils to VDCs:* This study found that the VDCs are formed through caste councils, with each caste group selecting representatives. These representatives constitute a VDC central committee, which typically changes every year through internal rotation. While presented as democratic, leadership remains firmly controlled by dominant castes due to land ownership, wealth, and numerical strength.

Women's participation is rare; Dalits and migrants are systematically underrepresented.

### *Parallel and Superior to the State*

The study further revealed that the VDCs operate parallel to gram panchayats, often overriding elected representatives.

As an OBC male respondent noted:

*"The sarpanch signs papers. The VDC decides prices, punishments, and votes."*

VDCs regulate:

- Prices of meat, alcohol, and services
- Access to commons (lakes, grazing land, sand)
- Electoral behavior
- Religious and cultural contributions

They function as de facto sovereigns.

### *Price Fixing and Labor Discipline*

Barbers and washermen who attempted to raise prices due to inflation were punished through collective refusal of services. A washerman (OBC, male) explained: *"Inflation is for everyone, but for us price should never change. That is their rule."* When resistance continued, VDCs instructed villagers not to avail services, effectively eliminating livelihoods.

### *Migrants, Outsiders, and Enhanced Vulnerability*

Migrant butcher families were especially vulnerable. A butcher stated: *"First they say you are outsider. Then they say your caste is low. Both together make boycott easy."* Boycotts included denial of groceries, forced supply of meat at lower prices, and heavy fines.

## *Gendered Experiences of Social Boycott*

Social boycott is not experienced uniformly; it is deeply gendered. Women bear disproportionate emotional, social, and material burdens, even when formal sanctions are imposed on households or male earners. Among the eight women respondents (four SC and four OBC), boycott manifested through intensified surveillance, humiliation, and restriction of mobility.

An OBC woman from a barber family described how boycott entered everyday life: *“They stopped coming to our house, but they also stopped talking to us at the water tap. Even other women became silent. Silence itself becomes punishment.”*

Women spoke of being excluded from informal support networks—borrowing food, sharing childcare, attending rituals—which are critical to survival in rural contexts. For widows and women-headed households, boycott translated into acute vulnerability.

Another OBC woman whose family resisted a VDC decision noted: *“Men fight and negotiate. For us, there is no negotiation. We just carry the shame.”*

This gendered dimension of boycott is largely absent in existing caste literature, which often centers public violence while neglecting domestic and affective terrains where caste power is reproduced (Rege 1998; Guru 2009).

Feminist Dalit scholars argue that caste patriarchy operates through women’s bodies and reputations (Rege 1998; Paik 2014). Social boycott weaponizes this logic, using shame as a disciplinary tool.

## *Religious Coercion and Temple Politics*

The study affirmed that religious institutions play a crucial role in legitimizing social boycott. VDCs frequently invoke “village unity” and “religious duty” to extract compulsory financial contributions for temple construction or festivals. Refusal is framed as betrayal of the village rather than dissent.

In one village, three caste groups—Scheduled Castes, fisherfolk, and artisan OBCs—refused to contribute to a temple. The response was swift: “We were boycotted and eventually forced to pay the contributions through pressure of the committee and the humiliation we faced” (SC male respondent)

The VDC instructed shopkeepers not to sell essentials to these families. The boycott continued until the groups paid the demanded amount. This demonstrates how religion becomes a moral alibi for economic coercion, transforming faith into an instrument of caste discipline.

Scholars have noted the politicization of religion in rural governance (Jaffrelot 2003; Srinivasulu 2002), but its role in enforcing everyday caste sanctions through boycott remains insufficiently examined.

### *Control of Commons: Land, Water, and Markets*

The study further found that the VDCs exert control over village commons—grazing lands, fishing ponds, sand, forest produce, and shops built on public land. Access to these resources is conditional on caste compliance. A fisherwoman (OBC) explained: *“Water belongs to everyone, but permission belongs to them.”*

Commons become sites of conditional citizenship, where access is mediated by loyalty to caste authority rather than legal entitlement. This aligns with Ambedkar’s critique that villages operate as moral economies where rights are subordinated to hierarchy.

### *Escalation, Fear, and Forced Compliance*

The field narratives reveal that social boycott follows a predictable trajectory. Initial dissent—often over prices, labor conditions, or religious contributions—is met with warnings. If resistance continues, boycott escalates to denial of services and market exclusion. Eventually, victims face a choice between compliance and displacement.

An OBC male respondent described this progression: *“First they tell you nicely. Then nobody comes. Then nobody sells. Finally, you understand there is no village left for you.”*

Fear is central to boycott’s effectiveness. Even those not directly targeted comply with VDC decisions to avoid becoming future targets. Thus, boycott governs not only its victims but the entire village.

### *Social Boycott as Informal Sovereignty*

Taken together, these findings suggest that social boycott constitutes a form of informal sovereignty. VDCs exercise authority over life chances without legal mandate, yet their decisions shape survival itself. This sovereignty is tolerated—and often enabled—by the state.

Boycott thus represents a form of everyday authoritarianism embedded within democratic structures. It reveals how caste adapts to democracy by governing through society rather than against it.

### *Village Development Committees as Informal Caste States*

The study echoed that the VDCs present themselves as voluntary, development-oriented bodies. In practice, they operate as parallel governments. They regulate prices of meat, laundry, alcohol, control village commons, collect funds for temples, and influence elections.

A respondent from an OBC washerman community noted, *“They say it is for development, but development is only for those who obey.”*

The annual rotation of leadership does not dismantle hierarchy; it merely redistributes authority among dominant caste men. Women are almost entirely absent from decision-making. SC representation is symbolic, lacking veto power. VDCs derive legitimacy from custom and fear rather than law. Their decisions are enforced through social boycott, fines, and threats. As one SC barber explained, *“They didn’t beat us. They told everyone not to come to us. Hunger does the rest.”*

### *Social Boycott as Everyday Governance*

Boycott manifests through denial of customers, refusal of credit, exclusion from rituals, and control of labor. In one village, washermen were replaced by migrants to punish resistance.

Women experience boycott differently. Boycott thus exploits gendered labor and mobility constraints. An SC woman recounted, *“When they stopped selling us groceries, I had to walk to another village every day. They knew it would break us.”*

### *The State, Law, and Political Economy of Non-Enforcement*

*Police as Spectators:* Police intervention in social boycott cases is rare and largely symbolic. Officers often call VDC members for “counseling” but avoid registering cases. As one respondent stated: *“Police come, talk, go. Committee stays.”* Fear of electoral backlash prevents enforcement. VDCs mobilize caste votes, making them indispensable to political actors.

### *Autoethnographic Reflective Findings: Living Under Caste Rule and Social Boycotts*

In this section, I draw on autoethnographic reflections to demonstrate how Village Development Committees (VDCs) do not merely govern disputes or development projects but actively reproduce caste domination through control over infrastructure, livelihoods, mobility, and everyday social life. These reflections are not anecdotal digressions; they are analytically central. Autoethnography, as recognized in qualitative social science, enables access to the lived textures of power that remain invisible in official records and policy documents (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 2011; Chang 2008). Through my own family’s experiences, I show how caste operates as a governing logic, with VDCs functioning as its institutional anchor.

### *The Caste of Sewage: Purity, Pollution, and Infrastructural Power*

It is unusual for a Dalit family to live in the physical center of a village in rural Telangana. My family’s location itself disrupted the spatial logic of caste. As migrants from Maharashtra—where our caste is officially classified as Scheduled Caste—our caste identity was ambiguous in Telangana, where the same caste is listed under Other Backward Classes. This ambiguity initially offered partial protection. Yet it did not dismantle caste; it merely delayed its enforcement.

For nearly three decades, my family was denied access to the village's public sewage system. This denial was not accidental, nor merely interpersonal. It was collectively enforced through dominant caste consensus, mediated by village authorities and later normalized through the informal authority of the VDC. A dominant caste household blocked the sewage line on the grounds that our waste should not pass through their property. Their own sewage flowed freely through lower-caste households, revealing the selective deployment of purity and pollution.

What is critical here is not only the act of exclusion, but how it was sustained. Appeals to the local government failed repeatedly. The village leadership—closely aligned with dominant caste interests and later absorbed into the VDC structure—refused to intervene. The VDC's silence functioned as consent. Through inaction, it legitimized caste-based infrastructural violence.

For almost thirty years, my family was forced into manual scavenging within our own home. This was not a remnant of the past; it was a contemporary outcome of caste governance. Only after a change in dominant caste power relations—triggered by property sale and shifting electoral dynamics—was a new sewage line laid, carefully routed to avoid disturbing dominant caste property. Even then, the solution avoided confronting caste authority directly. The VDC did not dismantle exclusion; it managed it spatially.

This case demonstrates that VDCs govern not only people but pipes, pathways, and possibilities. Infrastructure becomes a site where caste is materially enforced under the guise of administrative convenience.

### *The Caste of Animal Husbandry: Regulating Livelihoods and Sensory Hierarchies*

My family's occupation as butchers placed us at the intersection of caste, economy, and stigma. We raised goats and sheep at home, a practice integral to our livelihood. Dominant caste households objected, citing smell and hygiene. Yet the same households kept buffaloes within their compounds—animals that produced equal, if not greater, sensory disruption.

The objection was never about smell. It was about who was permitted to produce it. The eventual removal of our livestock from the village core was not negotiated as an individual dispute. It was enforced through collective pressure, normalized by village leaders, and later embedded within the regulatory authority of the VDC. Animal husbandry thus became a governed activity, with caste determining which livelihoods were spatially acceptable.

Through such regulation, VDCs transform economic activities into moral hierarchies. Livelihoods associated with marginalized castes are treated as pollutants that must be displaced, while dominant caste practices are rendered invisible or natural.

### *The Caste of Gulf Migration: Governance through Absence*

Migration to Gulf countries emerged as a survival strategy for many lower-caste households in the village. Lack of land, economic security, and social dignity pushed men to leave their families behind and work under precarious conditions abroad. Dominant castes, with land ownership and local power, largely remained in the village.

What is often framed as individual economic choice must instead be read as structural compulsion. VDCs, by regulating local livelihoods and enforcing social boycotts, indirectly produce migration. The governance of caste thus extends beyond village boundaries, shaping transnational labor flows.

The consequences were borne disproportionately by women, children, and elders left behind. Family separation produced long-term emotional, educational, and health impacts—costs never acknowledged in narratives of “development.” The VDC did not merely fail to protect these families; its governance practices actively pushed them out.

### *The Caste of Cattle Herds: Segregating Commons*

The segregation of buffalo herds reveals how village commons are governed through caste. Two herds existed: one exclusively for dominant castes, the other for SC and OBC communities. Dominant castes owned the majority of cattle and controlled the more resource-rich grazing routes.

Membership in a herd was not voluntary. Crossing these boundaries invited fines, social sanctions, and, in some cases, boycott. The VDC oversaw access to commons, converting shared resources into caste-regulated spaces. This practice transformed constitutional entitlements into conditional privileges.

### *The Caste of Wine Shops: Everyday Segregation and Moral Policing*

Even leisure and consumption were segregated. Separate wine shops existed for dominant castes and for SC/OBC communities. Violating this segregation was treated as moral transgression, punishable through fines or social boycott.

These rules were never written. They were enforced through shared understanding, VDC-backed sanctions, and fear of reputational loss. Over time, segregation became habitual. Children learned early where they could go, whom they could interact with, and how far they could aspire.

### *Socialization into Caste Rule*

Taken together, these experiences show that caste is not learned once; it is rehearsed daily. Every child is socialized into a system where dignity, mobility, and belonging are caste-coded. Economic mobility—through migration, education, or business—does not dissolve this hierarchy. Social valuation remains caste-bound.

VDCs play a decisive role in this process. By coordinating exclusion across infrastructure, livelihoods, commons, and social life, they ensure that caste domination is systemic rather than episodic. What appears as tradition is, in fact, governance. What appears as community is, in fact, rule.

Violating these boundaries invited fines and boycott. These practices demonstrate how caste is reproduced through mundane repetition rather than spectacular violence.

## Discussion

### *Social Boycott as Informal Sovereignty*

This study conceptualizes social boycott as informal sovereignty—a mode of rule exercised without legal authority but sustained through social consensus, fear, and economic dependency. VDCs function as caste states within the state, enforcing norms, collecting penalties, and regulating livelihoods. The empirical evidence from rural Telangana demonstrates that caste has not merely survived constitutional democracy; it has reorganized itself institutionally. Village Development Committees (VDCs) represent this reorganization. Emerging from traditional caste councils, VDCs function as caste states within the state, governing everyday life through mechanisms that are extra-legal but socially binding.

Unlike classical caste councils, VDCs operate with modern legitimacy—invoking development, welfare, and participation. This makes them harder to contest and easier to normalize. Social boycott thus represents a shift from ritual exclusion to governance through deprivation.

### *From Ritual Exclusion to Governance through Deprivation*

Classical accounts of caste emphasized ritual purity, pollution, and spatial segregation (Ambedkar 1936; Dumont 1970). While these logics persist, the findings of this study suggest a significant transformation in how caste power is exercised. Social boycott marks a shift from ritual exclusion to governance through deprivation. Instead of merely denying touch, temple entry, or physical proximity, dominant caste institutions now regulate livelihoods, markets, infrastructure, and access to commons.

The cases of barbers, washermen, and butchers reveal how price control becomes a disciplinary tool. Resistance to unfair economic arrangements—such as attempts to raise prices in response to inflation—is reframed by VDCs as moral deviance and disobedience to “village decisions.” The resulting boycott is not symbolic; it is materially devastating. By denying customers, groceries, water access, and credit, VDCs weaponize everyday survival itself. Hunger, debt, and humiliation become instruments of caste governance.

This aligns with Thorat and Newman's (2010) analysis of discrimination in markets but extends it by showing how market exclusion is actively organized and enforced through informal institutions, rather than emerging solely from prejudice or employer bias.

### *Village Development Committees as Caste-Based Parallel States*

The discussion of VDCs in this study reveals them not as community organizations, but as parallel governing authorities. Their structure—representation based on caste population, male dominance, annual rotation of leadership—creates the appearance of democracy while reproducing caste hierarchy. Rotation does not dismantle power; it circulates authority within dominant caste networks that already control land, capital, and political connections.

VDCs decide prices, control village commons, collect compulsory religious contributions, influence electoral outcomes, and settle disputes. In doing so, they perform the core functions of a state: regulation, extraction, punishment, and adjudication. Yet they do so without constitutional accountability. Their power is not written into law, but into social relations.

This phenomenon resonates with Gupta's (2012) notion of the "blurred state," where governance is dispersed across informal actors who selectively invoke legality. It also reflects Chatterjee's (2004) argument that large sections of the population are governed not as rights-bearing citizens, but as subjects within "political society," where compliance is negotiated rather than guaranteed.

However, this study pushes the argument further by showing that VDCs do not merely fill gaps left by the state; they actively undermine constitutional governance by enforcing caste discipline in ways that the state often tolerates or enables.

### *Social Boycott, Fear, and the Production of Compliance*

One of the most striking findings of this research is the predictable escalation of social boycott. Dissent is first met with warnings, then with economic exclusion, and finally with the threat of complete social annihilation. This gradual escalation produces fear not only among the targeted families but across the village. Others comply not because they agree with VDC decisions, but because they fear becoming the next targets.

In this sense, social boycott governs the entire village, not just its victims. It creates what Foucault might call a disciplinary environment, where surveillance and punishment are diffused through society rather than centralized. The absence of overt violence makes boycott appear non-violent, even as it inflicts sustained harm.

The reluctance of victims to approach the police or courts further reinforces this informal sovereignty. As documented in this study, police interventions—when they occur at all—are symbolic. Officers "advise" VDC members but avoid registering

cases. Political representatives, dependent on dominant caste vote banks, remain silent. This institutional failure confirms Kannabiran and Kannabiran's (1991) and Berg's (2020) observations that caste violence persists not because law is absent, but because enforcement is structurally compromised.

### *Gendered Dimensions of Informal Sovereignty*

The findings also demonstrate that social boycott is deeply gendered. While men are often the visible targets of economic sanctions, women bear a disproportionate share of the consequences. Exclusion from informal support networks—borrowing food, accessing water, participating in rituals—intensifies women's unpaid labor and emotional burden. Silence, shame, and social isolation become everyday realities.

Dalit and OBC women's testimonies reveal that boycott operates through reputational violence as much as economic deprivation. Feminist Dalit scholars have long argued that caste patriarchy disciplines women's bodies, mobility, and respectability (Rege 1998; Paik 2014). This study adds that social boycott extends this discipline into the domain of governance, using women's vulnerability as leverage against entire households.

### *Autoethnography and Caste as Infrastructure*

The autoethnographic reflections in this study deepen the discussion by showing that caste operates not only through norms and institutions, but through infrastructure itself. The denial of sewage access for decades, justified through notions of purity and pollution, illustrates how caste is built into pipes, pathways, and spatial layouts. Similarly, the regulation of animal husbandry, segregation of cattle herds, and separate wine shops reveal how caste is reproduced through mundane, repetitive practices.

These experiences affirm Ambedkar's critique of the village as a site where graded inequality is naturalized through everyday life. Caste does not need spectacular violence to sustain itself; it survives through slow, normalized deprivation.

### *Social Boycott as Contemporary Caste Rule*

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that social boycott is not a residual or exceptional phenomenon, but a central mechanism of contemporary caste rule. It allows caste power to adapt to democracy by governing through society rather than against it. VDCs embody this adaptation: they speak the language of development, welfare, and participation while practicing exclusion, extraction, and coercion.

Social boycott thus represents a modern form of caste sovereignty—informal, deniable, and effective. It exposes the limits of constitutional guarantees when everyday governance remains captured by caste institutions.

## Policy Implications and Sociological Interventions

The persistence of social boycott in rural India exposes the limits of constitutionalism, decentralization, and rights-based governance when confronted with entrenched caste power. Addressing social boycott requires moving beyond symbolic legal prohibition toward a multi-scalar strategy that recognizes boycott as a form of collective punishment, informal governance, and structural violence. The following interventions are proposed not as technocratic fixes, but as sociologically informed responses to caste-mediated domination.

### *Explicit Criminalization of Social Boycott Across India*

Despite constitutional guarantees against untouchability, social boycott remains legally under-recognized as a distinct and punishable offense. Existing legal frameworks—such as the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act—address discrete acts of violence or humiliation but fail to capture the collective, prolonged, and economically coercive nature of social boycott.

The Maharashtra Prohibition of Social Boycott Act (2016) represents a critical precedent by recognizing boycott as a specific crime involving denial of social, economic, and religious rights. However, the absence of a nationwide legal framework has resulted in uneven protection and weak enforcement. A central legislation explicitly criminalizing social boycott would provide conceptual clarity and legal legitimacy to victims' claims.

From a sociological perspective, criminalization serves not only as deterrence but also as symbolic delegitimation of caste authority. It disrupts the moral economy that normalizes boycott as “custom” or “community discipline,” reframing it instead as an unlawful exercise of power.

### *Legal Recognition of Informal Caste Bodies as Coercive Entities*

Village Development Committees (VDCs), caste councils, and informal village committees operate in a legal grey zone. While formally unrecognized, they exercise quasi-judicial and executive powers, including levying fines, enforcing boycotts, regulating livelihoods, and controlling access to commons.

Legal systems often treat these bodies as benign cultural formations rather than coercive institutions. This misrecognition allows them to operate with impunity. There is an urgent need to legally define such bodies as potentially coercive collectivities, whose actions can attract criminal liability when they violate constitutional rights.

Sociologically, this intervention challenges the romanticized notion of “community self-governance” and exposes how decentralization can be captured by dominant caste interests. Recognizing informal caste bodies as coercive actors enables the state to intervene without framing such intervention as “interference in tradition.”

### *Livelihood Protection and Relocation Support for Boycott Victims*

One of the most devastating effects of social boycott is economic strangulation. Denial of work, refusal of trade, and exclusion from local markets force victims into debt, distress migration, or coerced compliance. Legal remedies alone are insufficient when survival itself is at stake.

State responses must therefore include livelihood protection mechanisms, such as:

- Emergency income support
- Access to alternative markets and cooperatives
- Employment under public works programs without village-level mediation

In cases of prolonged or violent boycott, relocation and rehabilitation must be treated as a legitimate form of relief rather than as defeat or displacement. Sociologically, relocation acknowledges that caste violence is spatially embedded and that remaining within hostile social environments can reproduce harm.

Such interventions also challenge the dominant narrative that rural rootedness is inherently desirable, recognizing instead that mobility can be a form of resistance.

### *Police Accountability and Institutional Reform*

The failure of law enforcement is a central factor enabling social boycott. Police reluctance to register complaints—often justified as maintaining “village harmony”—reveals the alignment of state institutions with dominant caste interests.

To address this, accountability mechanisms must include:

- Mandatory FIR registration in boycott-related complaints
- Disciplinary action for non-compliance
- Independent monitoring of caste-related cases
- Sensitization training grounded in caste sociology, not merely legal procedure

From a sociological lens, police neutrality is a myth in caste societies. Institutional reform must therefore confront the caste composition, socialization, and local embeddedness of law enforcement agencies themselves.

### *Gender-Sensitive Interventions Recognizing Women’s Disproportionate Burden*

Women experience social boycott in uniquely gendered ways—through intensified surveillance, reputational damage, exclusion from support networks, and increased unpaid labor. Yet policy responses often treat households as homogeneous units, masking intra-household inequalities. Gender-sensitive interventions must:

- Recognize women as primary victims, not secondary dependents
- Provide direct access to relief, legal aid, and counseling
- Address stigma and isolation through collective support mechanisms

From a feminist sociological perspective, social boycott functions as a form of disciplinary patriarchy, where caste control is exercised through women's bodies, mobility, and honor. Any serious intervention must therefore integrate caste and gender analysis rather than treating them as separate axes.

### *Re-Democratization of Village Governance Beyond Caste Representation*

Finally, addressing social boycott requires rethinking the structure of village governance itself. Panchayati Raj institutions, while constitutionally mandated, often coexist with or are overshadowed by informal caste bodies. Mere caste-based representation within formal institutions does not dismantle caste power; it often reproduces it.

Re-democratization must involve:

- Transparent decision-making processes
- External oversight of village-level institutions
- Limiting the authority of informal bodies over public resources
- Strengthening rights-based citizenship over community-based belonging

Sociologically, this intervention challenges the assumption that democracy naturally flows from local participation. In caste-stratified societies, democracy must be actively produced, protected, and institutionalized against capture by dominant groups.

## **Conclusion**

This study has argued that social boycott is not a remnant of a pre-modern past but a contemporary and adaptive technology of caste power. Far from being an occasional aberration, boycott functions as a routine mode of governance in many rural contexts, operating through informal institutions that derive legitimacy from tradition, community consensus, and moral authority. Village Development Committees and caste councils do not merely coexist with formal democratic institutions; they actively reshape and often override. The findings demonstrate that social boycott is a form of collective punishment that disciplines dissent, regulates access to livelihoods, and enforces caste hierarchies without overt violence. Its effectiveness lies in its invisibility within legal and policy frameworks. Because boycott is enacted through everyday practices—silence, exclusion, denial of services—it escapes easy classification as violence as it produces material & psychological harm. By foregrounding gendered and intersectional experiences, this article shows that women bear a disproportionate burden of boycott, experiencing intensified surveillance, social isolation, and emotional labor. These harms remain largely unacknowledged in both academic literature and policy discourse, which tend to focus on public acts of caste violence rather than slow, accumulative forms of exclusion.

The autoethnographic reflections included in this study further reveal how caste operates through infrastructure, space, and sensory regimes—sewage lines, animal ownership, migration pathways, and everyday interactions. Such accounts challenge dominant sociological approaches that treat caste primarily as ideology or identity, instead revealing it as a lived system embedded in material arrangements and governance practices. Ultimately, this article contends that democracy cannot be meaningfully realized in spaces where citizenship is mediated by caste compliance. Addressing social boycott therefore requires more than legal reform; it demands a reimagining of rural governance, community, and belonging. As Ambedkar cautioned, the village cannot be romanticized as a site of harmony when it continues to function as a unit of graded inequality. Social boycott persists not because the law is absent, but because caste power has learned to govern through informal means. Recognizing, documenting, and confronting this reality is an urgent task for sociology, policy, and democratic practice alike.

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## Changing Names, Unchanging Caste, and the Law in India

Ashna Singh\*

### Abstract

In recent times, several claims have been made before Indian courts to seek the change of one's first name or surname. Such claims are being made for many different reasons out of which one reason stands out which is to hide one's caste identity, namely to hide one's untouchable or Dalit identity. While much has been written about concealing caste in autobiographical literature, and socio-political theories have engaged with the question of identity and recognition, the legal framework governing these practices remains under-examined. The Indian courts have interpreted the right to change one's name as an aspect of the right to determine one's identity or the right of self-determination, drawing from existing constitutional law principles and jurisprudence. This jurisprudence on the right to determine one's identity has evolved through constitutional questions on gender identity, sexual expression, and privacy. However, in this article, I argue that the liberal interpretation of the right to change one's name as framed through the prism of the individual right to identity under-assumes the pervasive and structural nature of caste and consequentially severely undermines the metric of dignity. I argue that in effect, the judicial recognition of the right to alter one's name amounts to endorsing a limited right to conceal caste or the right to pass rather than facilitating a genuine right to assert or change one's caste identity.

### Keywords

Caste, Identity, Naming, Dignity, Concealment, Passing, Change

*As is usual among the Hindus, the station-master asked us who we were. Without a moment's thought I blurted out that we were Mahars.<sup>1</sup>*

—Dr. Ambedkar in 'Waiting for a Visa'

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\*Assistant Professor of Law, National Law School of India University, Bangalore  
Email: ashna.singh@nls.ac.in

<sup>1</sup>Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Waiting for a Visa*, vol. 12 (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 666.

## Introduction

When a young nine-year-old Ambedkar blurted out his actual caste-identity in front of the station-master at the Masur station in Maharashtra, according to Dr. Ambedkar, the station-master was ‘overpowered by a strange feeling of repulsion.’<sup>2</sup> What ensued after was a struggle for finding a bullock-cart rider who would agree to take Dr. Ambedkar to his destination.<sup>3</sup> When the travelling party felt thirsty during their journey, they tried their luck at a Hindu toll-collector’s hut by pretending to be Muslims, as advised by the cartman. The Hindu man still refused to provide water perhaps because of Dr. Ambedkar’s inability to convincingly pretend to be a Muslim.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Ambedkar describes this as a ‘shock’ that he had never received, which prior to this incident was a ‘matter of course.’<sup>5</sup> What was matter of course was the knowledge of discrimination as a matter of fact that existed in Dr. Ambedkar’s school (in order to access water) and his neighbourhood (to access laundry and hair cut services).<sup>6</sup> He was aware of his position as being ‘separate’ in his local spaces, but he perhaps was not aware of how pervasive this discrimination was and that it prevailed beyond his neighbourhood.

When Dr. Ambedkar returned to India after his studies abroad in 1916, at the age of 25, he was disturbed thinking about who would give him accommodation, and the strategy of ‘impersonation’ was the only way to seek accommodation at the Hindu hotels.<sup>7</sup> He found a Parsi inn where he was granted accommodation by assuming a Parsi name.<sup>8</sup> Within eleven days, his identity was discovered by a mob of Parsis who confronted him and threatened him to vacate by evening. They threateningly questioned him asking: “How dare you take a Parsi name?”<sup>9</sup> In light of this incident, Dr. Ambedkar notes:

*It was in fact a fraud, and the fraud was discovered, and I am sure that if I had persisted in the game I was playing, I would have been assaulted by the mob of angry and fanatic Parsis and probably doomed to death.*<sup>10</sup>

He further notes that he could never recall this incident without tearing up.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 667.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. After some time, Dr. Ambedkar found one cartman who agreed but on the conditions that Dr. Ambedkar would ride the cart on his own and pay double the fare.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 669. Dr. Ambedkar writes: “I conversed with him in Urdu (which I knew very well), so as to leave no doubt that I was a real Musalman. But the trick did not work and his reply was very curt. “Who has kept water for you? There is water on the hill, if you want to go and get it; I have none.” With this he dismissed me.”

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 671.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 676.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 678.

These incidents in Dr. Ambedkar's life are telling of an important dimension of caste which entails the revelation of one's caste identity which in turn determines the quality of recognition by others as a human being.

The caste-based society has its origins in the scripture of Rig Veda, and in the Purusha Sukhta hymn in particular which assigns a noble and pure origin to the Brahmins and a filthy and impure origin to the shudras.<sup>12</sup> Caste is a cosmically assigned status at birth which is further characterized by pigeonholing the untouchables into filthy occupations, imposing geographical segregation, restrictions on inter-dining and inter-marrying with other castes, restrictions on owning property, exclusion from education, exclusion from accessing public spaces and amenities and so on. The caste system is not just a traditional or customary social system but is a system that prescribes rights and obligations based on caste.<sup>13</sup> For Dr. Ambedkar, the caste system is equivalent to a legal system.<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar aptly conceptualized the caste system as an 'ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt.'<sup>15</sup> Due to the assignment of pride and purity to higher castes and inferiority and impurity to lower castes, what ensues between them is a 'competition for dignity.'<sup>16</sup> It follows that it is not only the material distribution of resources that is impacted due to one's caste location but also the distribution of dignity and equal recognition. Knowledge of one's caste location becomes necessary to this process. A way to ascertain one's caste location is through one's name, particularly surname.

In societies where rigid social hierarchies and pervasive forms of discrimination exist, strategies of passing or concealment are deployed by people to escape potential discrimination and stigma or to experience freedoms that are otherwise denied to them. In the United States of America, the strategy of passing has been deployed by light-skinned black persons to pass off as white-skinned persons.<sup>17</sup> During the holocaust, Jews adopted various strategies to pass off as Christians, including the adoption of

<sup>12</sup>Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Who Were the Shudras?: How they came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society*, vol. 7 (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 22.

<sup>13</sup>For example, see *Manusmriti*.

<sup>14</sup>Dr. Ambedkar writes: "...in Hinduism, there is no distinction between the Legal and the Moral, the Legal also being the Moral." Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Philosophy of Hinduism*, vol. 3 (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 81.

<sup>15</sup>Ambedkar (n 12) 26.

<sup>16</sup>Yashpal Jogdand (2023). Ground down and locked in a paperweight: Toward a critical psychology of caste-based humiliation. *Critical Philosophy of Caste and Race*, 11(1), 33, 40.

<sup>17</sup>See Gerald D. Jaynes (2005). Racial Passing. In Gerald D. Jaynes (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of African American Society*, vol. 2 (685). SAGE Publications.

Christian names.<sup>18</sup> In Latin America, mestizo persons of mixed indigenous and Spanish ancestry have adopted strategies to pass off as white.<sup>19</sup> In India too, hiding one's caste, such as through the use of ambiguous surnames or through upper-caste surnames to pass off as an upper-caste person has been observed. This is the focus of the present article in the context of the law.

Matters of identity and recognition have been theorized extensively which broadly state that one's formation of identity is based on mutual recognition by others in society.<sup>20</sup> In the absence of such mutuality, there is misrecognition which disrupts one's relation with the other as well as with the self.<sup>21</sup> Specific to the Indian context of caste, it is the concept of '*pahchan*' (identity) as articulated by Joel Lee which appropriately sets the tone for this article.<sup>22</sup> The concept of '*pahchan*' is derived from the verb '*pahchanna*,' that is, 'to recognize, discern, distinguish.'<sup>23</sup> 'This conjures a scene of dynamic intersubjectivity in which it is not the self but the other—the discerner, the conferrer of recognition—who holds the relative advantage in determining a given subject's status.'<sup>24</sup>

In the context of the law, jurisprudence in India has developed to recognize what is known as the right to determine one's identity which is based in the individual right of self-determination. The right to change one's name, particularly one's surname that signifies one's caste has been read into such a right. However, it is arguable if the court adequately understands and addresses the caste inequalities that persist despite the articulation of such a right. In this article, I will be centering one marker of caste identity which is one's name, specifically, one's surname and analyze claims about changing names/surnames in Indian courts. I will use socio-political literature to explain the limits and the potential futility of the right to change one's name as recognized in law. I argue that there exists a gap between the court's conceptualization of the right to change one's name and the impact it can have on questions of dignity and on the overall caste system. This study provides a novel critique of the court's interpretation of the right to change one's name considering broader socio-political articulations of caste passing and caste concealment.

<sup>18</sup>See Nechama Tec (1984). Sex distinctions and passing as Christians during Holocaust. *East European Quarterly*, 18(1), 113.

<sup>19</sup>See Ana Paola Gutiérrez Garza (2025). The reconfiguration of *mestizaje* and whiteness in the diaspora. *Critique of Anthropology*, 45(2), 209.

<sup>20</sup>See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 'Recognition' <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/recognition/>> accessed 29 December 2025.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Joel Lee (2021). *Deceptive Majority: Dalits, Hinduism, and Underground Religion*. Cambridge University Press, 27.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

## Ways of Naming, Ways of Passing

II. 31. Let (the first part of) a Brahman's name (denote) something auspicious, a Kshatriya's name be connected with power, and a Vasihya's with wealth, but a Shudra's (express something) contemptible.<sup>25</sup>

—**Manusmriti**

In the first place, the name of the caste forming a surname of the individual prevents the offender in passing off as a person belonging to another caste and thus escape the jurisdiction of the caste. Secondly, it helps to identify the offending individual and the caste to whose jurisdiction he is subject so that he is easily handed up and punished for any breach of the caste rules.<sup>26</sup>

—**Dr. Ambedkar in 'The House the Hindus have Built'**

In a caste-ridden Indian society where caste is an ascribed birth-based status, names, particularly surnames may be one of the signifiers of caste. This is because caste is a system of rules and codes that prescribes rules for naming children as per caste norms.<sup>27</sup> For Sir H. Risley, 'a caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation...'<sup>28</sup> For Dr. Ambedkar, the four caste names, namely, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra 'are names which are associated with a definite and fixed notion in the mind of every Hindu' and which determine 'a person's attitude towards men and things.'<sup>29</sup> Additionally, assigning a 'high sounding' first name to a Shudra was considered as an offence.<sup>30</sup> The *Manusmriti* injunctioned that if a Shudra uttered the names or castes of the twice-born in a disrespectful manner, 'an iron nail, ten fingers long, shall be thrust red hot into his mouth.'<sup>31</sup> Thus, Ambedkar's theory of caste as being a system of 'graded inequality'<sup>32</sup> characterized by an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt applies to naming conventions as well

<sup>25</sup>*Ambedkar* (n 14) 38.

<sup>26</sup>Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *The House the Hindus have Built*, vol. 5 (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 160.

<sup>27</sup>*Ambedkar* (n 14) 23.

<sup>28</sup>See Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Castes in India*, vol. 1 (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 7.

<sup>29</sup>Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, vol. 1 (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 59.

<sup>30</sup>*Ambedkar* (n 26) 21.

<sup>31</sup>Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Why Lawlessness is Lawful?*, vol. 5 (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 66.

<sup>32</sup>Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Untouchables or the Children of India's Ghetto*, vol. 5 (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 101.

whereby a Shudra ‘must be contemptible both in fact and in name.’<sup>33</sup> These are not simply naming conventions but are naming injunctions that are constitutive of what Dr. Ambedkar describes as the ‘jurisdiction of caste’ that is difficult to bypass because one’s name immediately signifies one’s caste identity, thus making the process of caste identification direct and easy.

Often, members of untouchable communities are not born into any surnames. They will usually carry only a single first name. The first name can also become a political site of caste-coded ascription of status. Assigning of derogatory first names to Dalit communities by priestly communities in India is prevalent even today.<sup>34</sup> These include names such as ‘kali’ (black), ‘tolia’ (stone) and ‘rodi’ (animal dung).<sup>35</sup> Regardless of caste, derogatory names are assigned to female children such as ‘kachrabai’ (garbage), ‘bhateri’ (enough), ‘phasibai’ (deceiver), and ‘nakoshi’ (unwanted).<sup>36</sup> If Dalits have chosen decent names for themselves or their children, officials and others in society tend to deform their names so as to make them sound more suitable according to their denigrated status or to make them sound meaningless altogether.<sup>37</sup>

Goffman located the possibility of two types of stigmatized individuals—the discredited and the discreditable.<sup>38</sup> The discredited is one whose stigma is immediately visible and the discreditable is the one whose stigma is potentially visible but unidentifiable at the moment.<sup>39</sup> Goffman also discusses passing as a key strategy to avoid stigma, particularly in the latter case.<sup>40</sup> In order to risk exposing oneself to the

<sup>33</sup>Ambedkar (n 14) 38. As Dr. Ambedkar notes from the *Manusmriti*: “II. 32. The second part of a Brahmin’s name shall be a word implying happiness, of a Kshatriya’s (a word) implying protection, of a Vaishya’s a term expressive of thriving and of a Shudra’s an expression denoting service.” See Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Problem of Isolation*, vol. 5 (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 115.

<sup>34</sup>Amrit Dhillon (2023). India’s Dalits seek to reclaim dignity by pushing back on insulting baby names. (*South China Morning Post*) <<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/article/3208257/indias-dalits-seek-reclaim-dignity-pushing-back-insulting-baby-names>> accessed 30 December 2025. See also recent initiative launched by the state of Rajasthan called ‘Sarthak Naam Abhiyan’ to assign meaningful names to children. Lifestyle Desk, (2026). Inside Rajasthan’s push for meaningful baby names: What you name your child matters more than you think. (*Times of India*) <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/parenting/moments/inside-rajasthans-push-for-meaningful-baby-names-what-you-name-your-child-matters-more-than-you-think/articleshow/130161079.cms>> accessed 13 April 2026.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Bhawani Buswala (2023). Undignified names: Caste, politics, and everyday life in North India, 1 *Contemporary South Asia*, 572-573.

<sup>38</sup>See Erwing Goffman (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. (Prentice-Hall, Inc., United States of America).

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

‘wrath and prejudice’ of the caste Hindu, untouchables began to adopt un-repulsive and un-stinking caste names that Dr. Ambedkar described as ‘protective discolouration.’<sup>41</sup> For example, the Chamars of north India began to refer to themselves as Ravidas or Jatavs, Paraiyahs of south India referred themselves as Adi-dravidas, Bhangis called themselves Balmikis and so on.<sup>42</sup> However, these reformed names have also become signifiers of low caste status.

Other strategies to renegotiate the allocation of prestige and dignity have also been adopted by castes lower in the hierarchy. Dr. Ambedkar in his thesis on caste endogamy analyzed the practice of endogamy in marital relations amongst the lower castes, terming it as the ‘infection of imitation.’<sup>43</sup> Broadly, such ‘imitation flows from the higher to the lower.’<sup>44</sup> One of the conditions of such imitation is that ‘the source of imitation must enjoy prestige in the group.’<sup>45</sup> As caste system is a system of graded inequality that thrives on the basis of competition for dignity, this technique of imitation becomes an important one in order to escape lowly social status and to accumulate dignity.<sup>46</sup> M.N. Srinivas theorized the phenomenon of Sanskritization whereby lower castes adopt higher caste norms, i.e., brahminical norms such as vegetarianism, teetotalism, and other Sanskritic rituals, customs, and beliefs in order to gain respectability and dignity like the upper castes which is otherwise theoretically impermissible.<sup>47</sup> Comparatively, racial passing was a strategy employed by African-Americans in the United States of America during the era of slavery. This strategy involved a light-skinned person of mixed race allowing or encouraging others to believe that they are white.<sup>48</sup> During the Jim Crow era, this meant claiming belongingness ‘to a group to which one was not legally assigned.’<sup>49</sup> Sanskritization was openly attempted on a collective basis by lower caste groups whereas passing was a more clandestine and individualized phenomenon. Sanskritization does not challenge or annihilate caste-hierarchies but only provides a way to claim an elevated status within the rank-

<sup>41</sup>Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Away from the Hindus*, vol. 5 (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 415.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 419.

<sup>43</sup>*Ambedkar* (n 28) 18.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>For instance, the lower caste Namashudras of Bengal began adopting higher caste practices such as enforced widowhood, disallowing widow remarriages, and disallowing women from working in order to seek a higher status in the caste hierarchy. See Uma Chakravarti, (2018). *Gendering caste: Through a feminist lens* (p. 122). Sage Publications.

<sup>47</sup>M.N. Srinivas (1952). *Religion & society among the Coorgs of South India*. (p. 30). Media Promoters & Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Bombay.

<sup>48</sup>*Jaynes* (n 17).

<sup>49</sup>Allyson Hobbs (2014). *A chosen exile: A history of passing in American Life*. (p. 4). Harvard University Press, United States of America.

based caste-system. Similarly, passing does not dissolve racial hierarchies but allows one to gain white privileges by pretence. Both strategies rest on the assumption that there is greater value at the top in terms of quality of dignity and availability of other resources and the bottom is consequently marked as undesirable.

Attempting to jump the jurisdiction of caste by way of passing or imitation can invite consequences. Dr. Ambedkar recounts an incident where Sonars, a low caste were wearing their dhotis like Saivadnya Brahmins and using the word ‘namaskar’ to greet others in the Bombay Presidency.<sup>50</sup> Offended by their attempt to ‘pass off’ as Brahmins, the Brahmins lobbied with the East India Company to get a prohibitory order issued against the Sonars.<sup>51</sup>

For Ambedkar it remained doubtful if such active form of caste passing could protect or provide immunity to untouchables from the jurisdiction of caste.<sup>52</sup> Despite the constitutional abolition of untouchability, contemporary practices of concealing caste through names continue to reveal anxiety regarding the social consequences one may have to bear upon exposure.

Studies have focused on the use of names that reveal the ‘micro processes of how caste can shape access to symbolic resources (dignity), political resources (access to public sphere), and material resources (conditions of livelihoods and bodily security against caste violence).’<sup>53</sup> Thorat and Attewell conducted a study in 2007 to demonstrate discrimination in the private job market on the basis of names that were suggestive of one’s caste or religion.<sup>54</sup> No markers other than names were divulged in the experiment. It was found that candidates with Dalit and Muslim sounding names had lesser chances of getting call-backs for interviews.<sup>55</sup> In educational institutions, students who are open about their untouchable caste identity report the most negative experiences in the classroom.<sup>56</sup> Students whose surnames gave away their caste adopted self-silencing as a coping mechanism.<sup>57</sup> Jodhka has reported in his research on

<sup>50</sup>Ambedkar (n 29) 53.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ambedkar (n 41) 420.

<sup>53</sup>Bhawani (n 37).

<sup>54</sup>See Sukhadeo Thorat and Paul Attewell (2007). The legacy of social exclusion: A correspondence study of job discrimination in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(41), 4141. A similar experiment was undertaken in the United States of America in the context of names that indicated race.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Kathryn Lum (2019). The Dalit closet: Managing Dalit identity in an elite university in India. *The Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 120, 144. See also Gaurav J. Pathania et al., (2023). Caste identities and structures of threats: Stigma, prejudice, and social representation in Indian universities. *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, 4(1), 3, 12.

<sup>57</sup>See Gaurav Pathania et al. (2023).

North-West India that patients preferred being examined by non-Dalit doctors and that customers were hesitant to undertake transactions with businesses owned by Dalits, causing Dalits to actively attempt to conceal their caste identities.<sup>58</sup> Parents have gone to the extent of not only changing the surnames of their children but also avoiding availing scholarship schemes meant for their children so that they are not bullied by school teachers.<sup>59</sup>

Copeman describes the strategy of discarding stigmatizing surnames adopted by Dalits as a ‘commitment to confusion’ in the hope that an excessive amount of confusion and chaos caused in the minds of caste Hindus in their attempts to figure out one’s caste would lead to the end of caste discrimination.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, it needs to be evaluated whether the fear of consequences of disclosure of caste identity through identifiable names shows that the lower castes are bearing a one-sided or disproportionate burden to escape stigma and discrimination. This is most starkly evident in the claims to change names that are being made by untouchables (and individuals belonging to religious minorities that face similar stigma) in Indian courts as is detailed in the next section of the article.

## The Right To Determine One’s Name

“What’s in a name”?

*Four centuries ago, when William Shakespeare wrote the classic “Romeo and Juliet,” he felt that name did not matter much. In the present times, if one is asked the same question “What’s in a name”?, the answer would be: “It’s everything.”<sup>61</sup>*

—The Kerala High Court in *Kashish Gupta vs. CBSE (2020)*

In this part of the article, I will be examining the jurisprudence that has evolved from the claims to change one’s name. These claims involve changing one’s name or surname or dropping a middle name or a surname. These claims have mainly arisen against the rules formulated by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), a national level board of the Government of India which governs matters related to school education. These statutory rules have been found by courts to interfere with the right to change one’s name, the latter being a facet of constitutional law to which statutory laws are subservient. The Indian courts have relied on the prior jurisprudence

<sup>58</sup>See Surinder S. Jodhka (2010). Dalits in business: Self-employed Scheduled Castes in North-West India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(11), 41.

<sup>59</sup>See Rajnikant Parmar (2020), Transacting caste in modern times: Changing social identity through surnames in urban Gujarat. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 12(2), 220.

<sup>60</sup>Jacob Copeman (2015), Secularism’s names: Commitment to confusion and the pedagogy of the name. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Journal*, 12 (pp. 81, 86).

<sup>61</sup>*Kashish Gupta vs. CBSE 2020 SCC OnLine Ker 1590.*

developed on matters of gender identity and sexuality and the right to privacy to interpret the right to change one's name.

An earlier High Court judgment on a claim related to altering one's name is the Kerala High Court's decision in the case of *Kashish Gupta vs. CBSE (2020)*, where the petitioner sought to change her first name from 'Dinky' Gupta to 'Kashish' Gupta for personal reasons.<sup>62</sup> A gazette notification and publication in newspapers were made to this effect in accordance with the relevant rules. However, CBSE refused to change her name on her school leaving certificates citing the CBSE Examination bye-laws that disallowed such a change after publication of exam results. The Court allowed the change of name and derived the right to change one's name from Article 19(1)(a) (right to free expression) and Article 21 (right to life) of the Constitution of India.<sup>63</sup> It held that bona fide claims to change one's name must be granted, the only exceptions being the regulation of fraudulent or other criminal activities.<sup>64</sup> The Court identified the name to be something deeply personal, an expression of one's individuality and uniqueness.<sup>65</sup>

In the case of *Jigyada Yadav vs. CBSE (2010)*,<sup>66</sup> the petitioner claimed that her parents' names were recorded wrongly in her school certificates<sup>67</sup> for which she sought correction. The petitioner contended the case by arguing that her higher education, career, and travel opportunities would be severely impacted, in turn impacting her essential fundamental rights under Articles 14, 19(1)(g), and 21 of the Constitution. The Court rejected her contention and stated that it was averse to take an 'idealistic view' of the matter and instead took a 'pragmatic' view of the matter by avoiding interfering with the set bye-laws because such interference with the bye-laws would have the effect of 'rendering the system unworkable in practice.'<sup>68</sup>

About eleven years later, the case was decided on appeal before the Supreme Court of India. In the case of *Jigyada Yadav vs. CBSE (2021)*,<sup>69</sup> the Supreme Court of India substantially laid down the norm regarding the right to change one's name as essentially being an incident of right to control one's identity. The Court, relying on *Navtej Singh Johar vs. Union of India (2018)*<sup>70</sup> held that 'inner self-identification' forms part of

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>*Jigyada Yadav vs. CBSE* 2010 SCC OnLine Del 4742.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid. Her father's name was recorded as 'Hari Singh Yadav' instead of 'Hari Singh' and her mother's name was recorded as 'Mamta Yadav' instead of 'Mamta.' 'Yadav' surname in India evidently signifies a backward (shudra) class, mainly from North India.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>*Jigyada Yadav vs. CBSE (2021)* 7 SCC 535.

<sup>70</sup>*Navtej Singh Johar vs. Union of India (2018)* 10 SCC 1.

one's core existence and this includes one's name which is an 'acquired identity.'<sup>71</sup> *Navtej* is primarily a case pertaining to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in India. *Navtej* recognized and accorded equal importance to one's 'natural identity' and 'acquired identity',<sup>72</sup> identity ultimately being 'an amalgam of various internal and external including acquired characteristics of an individual and name can be regarded as one of the foremost indicators of identity.'<sup>73</sup> In *Jigyā* (2021), the Court further held that one's aspiration to be recognized by a different name for a 'just cause' is a facet of right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution of India.<sup>74</sup>

The Supreme Court also stressed that the Delhi High Court in *Jigyā* (2010) had made an 'avoidable observation that in a country with caste-based reservations, changes in name cannot be permitted readily.'<sup>75</sup> The Supreme Court highlighted that this observation 'displays stereotype prejudice of the Court towards her cause.'<sup>76</sup> The Supreme Court ultimately read the right to correct or change one's given name or surname as part of fundamental rights, namely, Article 19(1)(a) and Article 21 of the Constitution. Any bye-laws that restrict the exercise of this right would thus be unreasonable restrictions on Article 19 and would therefore be impermissible.<sup>77</sup> The Court also stated that fundamental freedoms are 'preferred or chosen freedoms' and bye-laws cannot in the name of administrative efficiency override these fundamental freedoms.<sup>78</sup>

Closely related to the right to control one's identity through one's name is the 'right to be forgotten' or the 'right to erasure.' The European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) formally articulated this right in order to provide meaningful and substantial amount of control over one's personal data.<sup>79</sup> In *Jigyā* (2021), the Court explained that apart from the purpose of self-identification, one may want to change their name if for example they were a victim of sexual abuse and their identity was compromised.<sup>80</sup> Relying on *K.S. Puttaswamy vs. Union of India* (2018),<sup>81</sup> the Court observed that one may want to change their name 'to seek rehabilitation in the society in the exercise of her right to be forgotten.'<sup>82</sup>

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>*Jigyā* (n 69).

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>See Ben Wolford, 'Everything you need to know about the "Right to be forgotten"' (*GDPR. EU*) <<https://gdpr.eu/right-to-be-forgotten/>> accessed 30 December 2025.

<sup>80</sup>*Jigyā* (n 69).

<sup>81</sup>*K.S. Puttaswamy vs. Union of India* (2017) 10 SCC 1.

<sup>82</sup>*Jigyā* (n 69).

In *K.S. Puttaswamy*,<sup>83</sup> the Supreme Court explicitly upheld the right to privacy within Article 21 of the Constitution. In its judgment, the majority opinion reflected on the right to be forgotten. The Court observed that the right to be forgotten is an essential facet of the right to privacy in a digital age where the internet is designed in a way to hold information permanently.<sup>84</sup>

The cases of *Md. Sameer Rao vs. State of UP* (2023)<sup>85</sup> and *Shyam Kumar Harijan vs. State of Uttar Pradesh* (2023)<sup>86</sup> were heard together by the Allahabad High Court. Md. Sameer Rao sought a change of his name from ‘Shahnawaz’ to ‘Md Sameer Rao’ and Shyam Kumar Harijan sought to drop his surname ‘Harijan’<sup>87</sup> and retain the name ‘Shyam Kumar.’ The Allahabad High Court relied on the Supreme Court’s judgment in *Olga Tellis vs. Bombay Municipal Corporation* (1985)<sup>88</sup> to reiterate that right to life in Article 21 of the Constitution does not merely denote animal existence. It included, as demanded in this case, the right to change one’s name according to ‘personal preference.’<sup>89</sup> The Court invoked various human rights instruments<sup>90</sup> and foreign case laws<sup>91</sup> to justify its own stance on the matter. In *Sameer Rao* and *Shyam Kumar*, the main law under consideration was Regulation 40 of Chapter XII of the Uttar Pradesh Intermediate Education Act, 1921 which allows for consideration of name change ‘only if the name is gross or sounds offensive, or appears to be derogatory and the like situations.’<sup>92</sup> The Court inferred that ‘...a name which lowers a person’s self-esteem may be dropped. Alternatively, any name that enhances a person’s self-worth may be adopted.’<sup>93</sup>

<sup>83</sup>*Puttaswamy* (n 81).

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup>*Md. Sameer Rao vs. State of UP* (2023) SCC OnLine All 4207. The petitioner sought to change his name from ‘Shahnawaz’ to ‘Md Sameer Rao.’

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup>See *Shyam Kumar Harijan vs. State of Uttar Pradesh*, Writ - C No. - 14043 of 2023 available at <https://ecourtsindia.com/cnr/UPHC010826432023/order-3>. ‘Harijan’ meaning ‘children of God’ as coined by Gandhi denotes an untouchable caste, hence, potentially inviting revelation of one’s caste identity through this term.

<sup>88</sup>*Olga Tellis vs. Bombay Municipal Corporation* 1985 (3) SCC 545.

<sup>89</sup>*Md. Sameer Rao* (n 85).

<sup>90</sup>See Article 24(2) of International Covenant on Civil & Political Rights 1966, Article 8 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, Article 18(2) of the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006, Article 18 of the American Convention on Human Rights 1969, and Article 6(1) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child 1999 which provide for the right to a name/surname.

<sup>91</sup>See *Coriel and Aurik vs. The Netherlands* (Communication No. 453/1991), *Raihan vs. Latvia* (Communication No. 1621/2007), and *Standesamt Stadt Niebüll* (2006 EUEJ C-96/04A) which have all reiterated the right to determine one’s name as an essential human right.

<sup>92</sup>*Md. Sameer Rao* (n 85).

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*

In the case of *Rayaan Chawla vs. University of Delhi* (2020),<sup>94</sup> the petitioner sought to change his surname from Rayaan ‘Singh’ to Rayaan ‘Chawla’ to identify with his single mother. His parents had divorced and he had no sustaining relationship with his father whose surname ‘Singh’ was initially ascribed to him. The Delhi High Court, relying on *Kashish* and *Jigy*, allowed this change. Similarly, in the case of *Mohd. Hassan vs. Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir* (2025),<sup>95</sup> the petitioner was aggrieved by his friends poking fun at his original name ‘Raj Wali’ and thus sought to change it to ‘Mohd. Hassan’ instead. The High Court of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh relied on the precedents formulated in *Jigy*, *Navtej*, *Kashish*, and *Rayaan* to allow this change.

In the recent case of *Sadanand and Another vs. CBSE* (2023),<sup>96</sup> two brothers belonging to the Scheduled Caste went to the High Court of Delhi against CBSE’s refusal to change the surname of their father in their school leaving certificates for class 10 and class 12 issued by CBSE. The change was sought to be made from Lakshman ‘Mochi’ to Lakshman ‘Nayak’ due to ‘caste atrocities, social stigma, and disadvantages faced by them on a daily basis, based on surname.’<sup>97</sup> ‘Mochi’ is indicative of a caste-based occupation, that is, leatherwork, which entails stigma. CBSE oddly argued as it did in *Jigy* (2010) that change of surname would amount to a change of caste.<sup>98</sup> The Delhi High Court refuted this argument and allowed the brothers the change they requested for. It also noted that ‘the petitioners have every right to an identity which gives them an honourable and respectable identity in the society.’<sup>99</sup> The Court further articulated the right to identity as being an intrinsic part of the right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution of India.<sup>100</sup>

From the above cases, it is evident that broadly, Indian courts interpret claims to alter one’s name as a facet of the freedom of expression and right to life. Logically, upholding these claims seemingly results in recognition of the inherent dignity of individuals. However, it needs to be questioned whether this liberal articulation about claims to change names sufficiently recognizes the ongoing caste aggressions against Dalits because of which Dalits may be *compelled* to make claims to alter their names. It needs to be questioned whether granting the right to alter one’s name restores the inherent dignity of an untouchable or if it merely facilitates an individual to partially escape caste stigma without disrupting the structure of caste itself, thereby offering only the semblance of dignity.

<sup>94</sup>*Rayaan Chawla vs. University of Delhi* 2020 SCC OnLine Del 1413.

<sup>95</sup>*Mohd. Hassan vs. Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir* WP(C) No. 21/2025, decided on 11.09.2025.

<sup>96</sup>*Sadanand and Another vs. CBSE* 2023 SCC OnLine Del 3720.

<sup>97</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*

## What of Dignity?

*If I may say so, the servile classes do not care for social amelioration. The want and poverty which has been their lot is nothing to them as compared to the insult and dignity which they have to bear as a result of the vicious social order. Not bread but honour is what they want.*<sup>101</sup>

### Dr. Ambedkar in ‘What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables’

The origin of the concept of dignity lies in the Roman concept of ‘dignitas’ that implied one’s rank on the basis of which honour and therefore ‘dignity’ or worth were calculated.<sup>102</sup> It was only later that the idea of inherent and equal human dignity came to dominate.<sup>103</sup> This idea is encoded and exemplified in the contemporary human rights framework where ‘all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.’<sup>104</sup>

With the presence of caste in India which constitutes a hierarchical system of graded inequality according to which a person’s value depends on their rank, dignity is granted accordingly. Dr. Ambedkar has lamented about the indignities that the caste system has heaped upon the untouchables<sup>105</sup> which in turn has inflicted a sense of ‘inferiority complex’ in them which has resulted in their loss of dignity and self-respect.<sup>106</sup> Dr. Ambedkar carried out movements to urge untouchables to give up on self-denigrating practices such as carrion eating, drinking alcohol,<sup>107</sup> and prostitution<sup>108</sup> even though these practices are deeply enmeshed with the livelihood needs of the untouchables.

In this section of the article, I intend to evaluate the liberal interpretation of the right to change one’s name by courts from the paradigm of dignity, and particularly from the paradigm of dignity-based assertions led by untouchables. This analysis seeks

<sup>101</sup>Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi have Done to the Untouchables*, vol 9 (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 212-13.

<sup>102</sup>Aakash Singh Rathore, *Ambedkar’s Preamble: A Secret History of the Constitution of India* (Penguin Books, 2020) 173. See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ‘Dignity’ <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dignity/>> accessed 30 December 2025.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid.

<sup>104</sup>See Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948.

<sup>105</sup>Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *States & Minorities*, vol 1 (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 426.

<sup>106</sup>*Ambedkar* (n 101) 285. See *Rathore* (n 102) 185.

<sup>107</sup>Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Mahad Satyagraha: Not for water but to establish Human Rights*, vol 17(1) (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 5.

<sup>108</sup>Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *You Must Give up your Disgraceful Profession*, vol 17(3) (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 150.

to illuminate the shortcomings and limitations of the current approach taken by courts where it juxtaposes gender identity-based claims on to caste-based identity claims.

In *K.S. Puttaswamy*, the Court in considering the issue of balancing different fundamental rights reflected on instances involving questions of dignity and ‘autonomy of choice in planning survival.’<sup>109</sup> For example, the ‘Prohibition Of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 restricts the right to practice any profession, occupation, trade or business under Article 19(1)(g) ‘in order to enliven Article 21 and 17.’<sup>110</sup> The Court also drew a parallel with the prohibition of ‘begar’ or ‘forced labour’ in Article 23 of the Constitution.<sup>111</sup> Reference was made to the ban placed on ‘dwarf tossing’ in France despite the community of persons with dwarfism claiming a right to livelihood emanating from the activity.<sup>112</sup> The Human Rights Committee of the International Covenant on Civil & Political Rights held any such activity to be inherently degrading to human dignity that cannot be waived away voluntarily.<sup>113</sup>

In *K.S. Puttaswamy*, the Court explained that the framework of human rights propounds the inalienable and fundamental right to always ‘be and remain human.’<sup>114</sup> The Court referred to Baxi’s work on the debate on the conflict between bread and freedom where he explains that it may be dangerous to choose bread over freedom because freedoms may be postponed at the cost of bread and in the absence of freedom, ‘even the promised “bread” may not be realized by the masses; indeed, they even lose, in the process, their power to protest at the indignity of regime sponsored starvation.’<sup>115</sup> This view is similar to Ambedkar’s views on bread and freedom where the indignity and insults posed by the caste system must be countered first, even in the face of enduring material impoverishment.

<sup>109</sup>*Puttaswamy* (n 81).

<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.* Dwarf tossing is a game where people with dwarfism are thrown on to mattresses or Velcro-coated walls. Persons with dwarfism are paid for this activity by an audience that is entertained by it. Also considered as a sport, this activity has been banned in several countries. See Frédéric Mégret, “Dwarf Tossing”, Human Dignity and Individual Agency’ (*InterGentes: The McGill Journal of International Law & Legal Pluralism*, 25 February 2024) <<https://intergentes.com/dwarf-tossing-human-dignity-and-individual-agency/>> accessed 30 December 2025.

<sup>113</sup>Human Rights Committee, *Manuel Wackenheim vs. France*, Communication No 854/1999, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/75/D/854/1999 (2002).

<sup>114</sup>*Puttaswamy* (n 81).

<sup>115</sup>*Ibid.* See Upendra Baxi (1986). From human rights to the right to be human: Some heresies. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 13(3/4), 185, 190.

In contrast, consider the case of *P. Naveen Kumar vs. The District Collector and others* (2024)<sup>116</sup> where the petitioner claimed that he be allowed to partake in the ritual of ‘angapradakshinam’ which involves the rolling over in the leftover food and banana leaves of the devotees. This ritual was banned previously in 2015 by the Madras High Court on the basis of the right to a dignified life.<sup>117</sup> The 2015 order followed a stay order laid down by the Supreme Court in 2014 regarding the ban on a similar ritual called ‘made snana’ in the state of Karnataka where the Adivasis and untouchables were largely meant to perform the ritual of rolling over on the leftover food eaten by members of upper castes.<sup>118</sup> However, in *Naveen Kumar* (2024), the Madras High Court permitted the ritual by citing amongst others, the *Puttaswamy* judgment and holding that apart from protecting sexual and gender orientation, the right to privacy also protects one’s ‘spiritual orientation.’<sup>119</sup> The Court distinguished this request from the Supreme Court’s order in *Adivasi Budakattu* (2014)<sup>120</sup> and the Madras High Court’s order of 2015 because in the present case, members of all castes, particularly Dalits (the petitioner in *Naveen* also being a Dalit) were willing to perform the ritual out of their own volition.<sup>121</sup> The Court also observed that in matters of religion, it is usually not open to parties ‘to make preemptory declaration as to what is dignified and what is not.’<sup>122</sup> The Madras High Court later stayed the decision in *Naveen* (2024) in 2025 on the grounds of the standing stay order of the Supreme Court in *Adivasi Budakattu*, the Madras High Court’s order in *Dalit Pandiyan* and on the basis of human dignity and constitutional morality, thereby undoing the exemption granted to religious rituals.<sup>123</sup>

In *Naveen* (2024), the respondents had relied on *Bashesar Nath vs. The Commissioner of Income Tax* (1958)<sup>124</sup> where it was held that a voluntary waiver of fundamental rights is not constitutionally permissible. In Justice Subba Rao’s opinion in *Bashesar*, such a waiver would mean that ‘a citizen can agree to be discriminated’ and therefore, it becomes the court’s duty ‘to protect the fundamental rights of citizens against themselves.’<sup>125</sup> This contention was rejected by the Court in *Naveen* (2024).

<sup>116</sup>*P. Naveen Kumar vs. The District Collector and others* 2024 SCC OnLine Mad 1371.

<sup>117</sup>*V. Dalit Pandiyan vs. Chief Secretary of Tamil Nadu* W.P.(MD). No. 7068 of 2015 decided on 28.04.2015.

<sup>118</sup>*State of Karnataka vs. Adivasi Budakattu Hitarakshana Vedike Karnataka* Special Leave Petition (C) No. 33137 of 2014, decided on 12.12.2014.

<sup>119</sup>*Naveen* (n 116). The Court additionally stated that the performance of ‘angapradakshinam’ which involves the rolling of one’s body on the floor is an extension of the right to move under Article 19(1)(d) of the Constitution.

<sup>120</sup>*State of Karnataka* (n 118).

<sup>121</sup>*Naveen* (n 116).

<sup>122</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup>*District Collector & Others vs. P. Naveen Kumar* 2025 SCC OnLine Mad 1867.

<sup>124</sup>*Bashesar Nath vs. The Commissioner of Income Tax* AIR 1959 SC 149.

<sup>125</sup>*Ibid.*

*Naveen* (2025), it may be inferred, rejected the approach taken to the waiving of dignity in *Naveen* (2024).

Building on this discourse on dignity, the next sub-section will examine the interrelated dimension of identity and self-determination.

## Identity/Self-Determination

The Supreme Court of India in *NALSA vs. Union of India* (2014)<sup>126</sup> upheld the right to determine one's gender identity and sexual orientation within Article 21 of the Constitution. The Court interpreted this as one's bodily right of self-determination and as part of one's right to dignity and freedom.<sup>127</sup> The Supreme Court of India decriminalized penal provisions that criminalized same-sex relations in the case of *Navtej*.<sup>128</sup> The Court invoked the Shakespearean fable 'What's in a name' to imply the importance of self-determination of one's identity and individuality.<sup>129</sup> It asserted that 'sustenance of identity is the filament of one's life.'<sup>130</sup> Thus, the right to assert one's identity, publicly or privately is understood as the mainstay of gender identity and sexual orientation. The Court based its decision on the principle of 'constitutional morality' that acts as a counter to majoritarian social morality that for instance maintained the status quo on caste-based norms.<sup>131</sup>

As has been shown, broadly, the right to change one's name has been understood by Indian courts in almost the same sense as it understands the right to determine one's gender orientation or sexual identity. This understanding in my view needs to be critiqued because the case of changing one's name to mask one's caste or religious identity is not equivalent to self-determining one's gender or sexual identity. The latter entails coming out whereas the former involves closeting back in.<sup>132</sup> This act of closeting oneself is self-enforced by framing legal claims as an exercise of the right to identity. The act of coming out in the context of sexuality implies liberation and mobility whereas the act of coming out in the context of caste could have the opposite consequences.<sup>133</sup> One involves self-identification whereas the other entails self-*un-identification*.

<sup>126</sup>*NALSA vs. Union of India* 2014 5 SCC 438.

<sup>127</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup>*Navtej* (n 70).

<sup>129</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup>See Sumit Baudh (2024). The invisibilising of queer Dalits in Yashica Dutt's 2019 Memoir. *Frontline*, 12 January. <<https://frontline.thehindu.com/books/essay-sumit-baudh-invisibilising-of-queer-dalits-in-yashica-dutt-2019-memoir-coming-out-as-dalit-made-in-heaven-radhika-apte/article67733977.ece>> accessed 30 December 2025.

<sup>133</sup>*Ibid.*

As the cases of *Sadanand* or *Md. Sameer Rao* demonstrate, the petitioners sought a change in their names or surnames to shield their true (albeit ascribed) identities from potential discrimination that they may be subjected to in the outside world, and it also implies yielding to majoritarian and dominant pressures of a caste-coded society. This need for changing one's name then becomes a strategy of survival through concealment. Therefore, does the 'right' to change one's name in such cases amount to the assertion of one's agency, individuality, and autonomy or does it signify the loss of one's dignity? If it signifies the latter, then it is the ancient conception of 'dignitas' based on rank and distinction which predominates over the modern conception of dignity that values human dignity equally. In the context of international human rights framework and the right to name, it may also be noted that rules have been framed in order to protect people's names that are indicative of their unique identities (such as indigenous identities) so as to arrest their forced assimilation into the prevailing dominant cultures.<sup>134</sup> This is in stark contrast with the Indian courts' interpretation of claims to change names which may inadvertently contribute towards forced assimilation without meaningfully altering the existing caste hierarchies. Essentially, the Court treats a claim to change one's name for astrological reasons<sup>135</sup> on the same plane as a claim to change one's name for reasons related to potential discrimination.

In the remarkable judgment delivered by the Supreme Court of India in *Sukanya Shantha vs. Union of India* (2024),<sup>136</sup> the Court articulated the 'right to overcome caste prejudices under Article 21.'<sup>137</sup> The case concerned the reinforcement of caste-based work in prisons based on the caste of the prisoners. The Court observed that 'Article 21 envisages the growth of individual personality' and 'caste prejudices and discrimination hinder the growth of one's personality.'<sup>138</sup> The Court recognized the perpetuation of caste-based stereotypes and the stigma arising due to it as being facets of such deep-rooted discrimination.<sup>139</sup> The Court observed that one can truly embrace their identity 'whether on the basis of caste, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, only if they are given dignity.'<sup>140</sup>

<sup>134</sup>See Fernand de Varennes and Elżbieta Kuzborska (2015). Human rights and a person's name: Legal trends and challenges. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 37(4), 977. The Allahabad High Court referred to this article in *Md. Sameer Rao* but did not consider the dynamic of assimilation.

<sup>135</sup>See *CBSE vs. Minor Raana Cariappa Kalianada* 2020 SCC OnLine Mad 22905.

<sup>136</sup>*Sukanya Shantha vs. Union of India* (2024) 15 SCC 535.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid.

<sup>139</sup>See also Centre for Research and Planning, 'Report on Judicial Conceptions of Caste' (*Supreme Court of India*, November 2025) <<https://cdn.s3waas.gov.in/s3ec0490f1f4972d133619a60c30f3559e/uploads/2025/11/2025112146.pdf>> accessed 30 December 2025.

<sup>140</sup>Ibid.

The Supreme Court in *Sukanya* rightly considered dehumanization based on caste-based identity as being unlawful, unequal, and unjust. In my view, this understanding is at odds with *Sadanand* where school-going children had to seek a change in their surname in order to protect themselves from caste-based discrimination by hiding their identity. It is questionable if the blanket interpretation of the right to change one's name as a facet of freedom of expression (Article 19) and right to life (Article 21) furthers the right to overcome caste prejudice, the growth of one's personality, or the embrace of one's identity or does it merely facilitate an escape from potential caste prejudice at the hands of societal powers by concealing one's caste. This begs another question: is it only the duty of the lower caste groups and individuals to overcome caste prejudice? The *right* to overcome caste prejudice in a scenario like *Sadanand* essentially translates into a one-sided *duty* to overcome caste prejudice. This potentially reinforces as Deshpande notes, the hyper-visibility of the lower castes and the invisibility of the upper castes due to which the very definition of caste has been 'truncated and equated with the lower castes' alone.<sup>141</sup>

Such a one-sided attempt was made in the case of *H. Santosh vs. The District Collector* (2025)<sup>142</sup> where the petitioner wanted to raise his children in a 'casteless and religion free society' and claimed a 'no caste no religion' certificate to this effect.<sup>143</sup> The petitioner asserted that he had not availed any caste or religion-based benefits for himself or for his children and did not intend to do so in the future.<sup>144</sup> The Madras High Court upheld this claim as being a part of the guarantee of 'freedom of conscience' provided by Article 25 of the Constitution.<sup>145</sup> The Court elaborated that the right to profess religion in Article 25 also includes the right to not profess any religion or caste.<sup>146</sup> The Court observed that this was a 'laudable claim, which in the long run, would promote prohibition of caste-based discrimination and also would be an eye opener for like-minded citizens.'<sup>147</sup> In my view, a self-declared belief of not belonging to any caste or religion does not diminish the structural presence of caste or religion in any way. If such a declarant was born into an untouchable class, they would perhaps

<sup>141</sup>Satish Deshpande, 'Caste and Castelessness: Towards a Biography of the 'General Category'' (2013) 48(15) *Economic and Political Weekly* 32.

<sup>142</sup>*H. Santosh vs. The District Collector* W.A. No. 401 of 2025, decided on 10.06.2025.

<sup>143</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup>*Ibid.* Also see the increasing uptake of the 'No Caste' category. K. Shiva Shanker, '12 lakh people in Telangana opt for 'No Caste' in SEEPC Survey-2024' (*The Hindu*, 17 April 2026) <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/telangana/12-lakh-people-in-telangana-opt-for-no-caste-in-seeepc-survey-2024/article70869408.ece>> accessed 18 April 2026.

simply be perceived as upper caste by others and hence they would at best avert discrimination at an individual level.

In recognizing acts of changing one's surname as an act of self-determination of identity, courts remarkably ignore the fact that such self-expression is also a signifier of symbolic violence. Bordieu explained symbolic violence to mean violence that is inflicted by dominant social norms in complicity with the sufferer to the extent that these dominant social norms are 'understood as natural and self-evident.'<sup>148</sup> These dominant norms manifest through culture, education, language, and other habits.<sup>149</sup> The need to adopt upper-caste or other supposedly 'dignified' surnames is essentially consenting to the acceptance of dominant norms on naming, with some names considered as dignified and some others considered as undignified according to the caste system.<sup>150</sup> The presumption of honour that inheres in upper caste surnames may thus be stated as a 'problem of false universals'<sup>151</sup> where the upper-caste norms are subconsciously approved as the universal norms. As Parmar has noted, 'it is the affirmation of the importance of surname as symbolic capital that prompts many to change it.'<sup>152</sup> In my view, such an adoptive strategy does not even lead to assimilation into the dominant caste cultures but merely reinforces the status of the untouchable as being a 'part apart' as Dr. Ambedkar had once remarked.<sup>153</sup> It may be worth noting that during the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927, Ambedkar had proposed that a law should be passed to prohibit the use of all class words such as Brahmin and Kshatriya<sup>154</sup> which has the potential to reduce the one-sided burden of the untouchables to do so and takes away the privilege attached with any kinds of caste names.

## Concealment

Mariamamma is a goddess popularly worshipped in Karnataka. The myth of Mariamma entails Mariamma, an upper-caste woman who married a Dalit man with the latter having concealed his Dalit identity.<sup>155</sup> There are different stories around how the man's caste is suspect, for example, when he repairs his own torn footwear, has been hiding

<sup>148</sup>See Dale Southerton (2011). Symbolic violence. In Dale Southerton (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture Society*, vol. 3 (SAGE Publications) 1423.

<sup>149</sup>See Pierre Bordieu (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>150</sup>See Bhawani (n 37).

<sup>151</sup>*Deshpande* (n 141) 32.

<sup>152</sup>*Parmar* (n 59).

<sup>153</sup>Dr. Ambedkar had stated on his relationship with Hinduism: "I am not a part of the whole; I am a part apart." See Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *On Participation in the War*, vol 2 (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India 2014) 261.

<sup>154</sup>*Ambedkar* (n 107) 24.

<sup>155</sup>Rahamath Tarikere (2017). Inter-caste marriage and Shakya myths of Karnataka. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52(42/43), 58, 58-59.

a piece of leather, or when the children have secretly been fed non-vegetarian food by the husband.<sup>156</sup> Upon the revelation of his identity, Mariamma attempts to kill him but the man enters the body of a buffalo to hide.<sup>157</sup> Mariamma kills the buffalo and later undergoes purification by fire to become a goddess.<sup>158</sup>

As discussed previously in the article, revelation of one's caste can lead to a myriad of consequences. These consequences are not of modern-day making but as is evident from Mariamma's story, myths and counter-myths around caste passing are also telling. Mariamma's story involves the characterization of her Dalit husband's identity as deceitful and warranting punishment whereas it re-inforces the superiority of upper-caste identity, thereby reproducing caste. When Radhika Vemula's untouchable Mala caste was discovered by her husband who belongs to the dominant Vaddera caste, he became even more abusive towards her.<sup>159</sup> This discovery was characterized as an act of 'cheating' against the entire Vaddera community.<sup>160</sup>

In the pre-independence case of *Queen vs. Puddomonie Boistobee* (1866),<sup>161</sup> a person who induced a man to contract marriage with a woman whom he was made to believe was a brahmin was held liable for cheating under the criminal law provisions. In the case of *Queen vs. Dabee Singh* (1867),<sup>162</sup> the facts involved a person who married off two lower caste girls to two Rajput men by fraudulently claiming that the women belonged to a higher caste. The Calcutta High Court convicted this person for the offence of cheating. In the case of *Empress vs. Sheoram* (1882),<sup>163</sup> the Allahabad High Court held the passing off of a young woman for marriage by projecting her as belonging to a higher caste as cheating by impersonation.

In the case of *G. V. Rao vs. L.H.V. Prasad* (2000),<sup>164</sup> a scientist of molecular biology had sought a bride from the same community as his (a forward community) through matrimonial advertisements. He then married a woman who he later found out had misrepresented herself as she belonged to a Scheduled Tribe community considered as

<sup>156</sup>Ibid.

<sup>157</sup>Ibid.

<sup>158</sup>Ibid.

<sup>159</sup>Radhika Vemula herself discovered her untouchable Mala identity at the age of 12 or 13. Radhika Vemula is the mother of Rohith Vemula who took his own life due to persistent caste-based discrimination. See Sudipto Mondal, 'Rohit Vemula: An Unfinished Portrait' (*Hindustan Times*) <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/static/rohith-vemula-an-unfinished-portrait/#:~:text=An%20unfinished%20portrait&text=In%20every%20field%2C%20in%20studies%2C,Photos%3A%20Sudipto%20Mondal>> accessed 30 December 2025.

<sup>160</sup>Ibid.

<sup>161</sup>*Queen vs. Puddomonie Boistobee* ILR (1887) 2 Bombay 59.

<sup>162</sup>*Queen vs. Dabee Singh* (1867) Weekly Reporter (Cr.) 55.

<sup>163</sup>*Empress vs. Sheoram* (1882) 2 AWN 237.

<sup>164</sup>*G. V. Rao vs. L.H.V. Prasad* 2000 (3) SCC 693.

backward and lower in the caste hierarchy. The petitioner accused his wife of criminal charges of cheating which the Supreme Court rejected. Relying on the above three precedents, the Court agreed that technically such deception could be interpreted as ‘cheating’ under the post-independence Indian criminal laws but did not adjudge the case to be one of cheating as it did not want to encourage such frivolous matrimonial disputes.<sup>165</sup> In other cases where matrimonial fraud has been claimed on the basis of concealing a material fact (such as concealing a disease, or caste, or religion), the Court has restrained itself from considering it as legally fraudulent.<sup>166</sup> However, the reasoning and underlying logic in these cases appears to be the protection of the institution of marriage.

Ambedkar in describing the strategy of adopting seemingly honourable caste names (protective discolouration) also reflected on its ultimate futility because ‘in the course of relentless questionings’ one is ‘run down to earth and made to disclose that he is an Untouchable.’<sup>167</sup> As Joel Lee states, ‘to “pass” is not to “be.”’<sup>168</sup> ‘To pass is not to commit to a social ontology, but to pretend to.’<sup>169</sup> It amounts to ‘inviting seeing without recognizing’ by ‘cultivating misrecognition.’<sup>170</sup>

Article 17 of the Indian Constitution outlawed untouchability in 1949, the year in which the Constitution was adopted.<sup>171</sup> Other provisions such as Article 15<sup>172</sup> and Article 16<sup>173</sup> of the Constitution solidified the anti-discrimination framework by providing for the right to representation and other enabling measures in education and employment. Khaitan has explained that while formulating anti-discrimination laws based on protected characteristics, the factors of passing, hiding, or assimilating are taken into account.<sup>174</sup> The need to pass, hide, or assimilate to avoid being subjected to prejudice amount to indirect coercion and interference with one’s freedom.<sup>175</sup> Even the

<sup>165</sup>Ibid. However, in contrast, recently, a family court in Gujarat allowed a woman to claim divorce from her husband on the ground that he hid his sister’s inter-caste marriage from her. The Gujarat High Court has issued notice in this regard, and the case is still pending. See Saeed Khan, ‘Hiding Sister’s Inter-Caste Marriage is Cruelty: Court’ (*The Times of India*, January 2025) <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/hiding-sisters-inter-caste-marriage-is-cruelty-court/articleshow/117100514.cms>> accessed 18 April 2026.

<sup>166</sup>See *A. Premchand vs. P. Padmapriya* AIR 1997 MAAD 135.

<sup>167</sup>Ambedkar (n 41) 420.

<sup>168</sup>Joel Lee (2015). *Recognition and its shadows: Dalits and the politics of religion in India*. Columbia University, 293.

<sup>169</sup>Ibid.

<sup>170</sup>Joel Lee, (n 22) 261.

<sup>171</sup>See Article 17 of the Constitution of India, 1949.

<sup>172</sup>See Article 15 of the Constitution of India, 1949.

<sup>173</sup>See Article 16 of the Constitution of India, 1949.

<sup>174</sup>See Tarunabh Khaitan (2015). *A theory of discrimination law*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>175</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

likelihood of fear of such interference with asserting one's identity for instance would indicate a state of being un-free and thus forming justification for anti-discrimination laws.<sup>176</sup> Such interference with identity-based freedom may distort one's perception of the self and consequently affect one's self-respect and well-being.<sup>177</sup> The background justification behind anti-discrimination laws is to avert forced cultural assimilation, to avert the need to pass or conceal one's identity. However, in my view, the courts incoherently equate the need to hide caste through re-naming of the self with the right to self-determination/identity under Articles 19 and 21, thus ignoring the background justifications for broader anti-discrimination laws which also form part of the Constitutional framework of fundamental rights.

Losing one's name does not necessarily amount to losing one's caste. This can also be corroborated through court decisions on the possibility of regaining caste when Scheduled Caste persons reconvert back to Hinduism, Buddhism, or Sikhism from any other religion.<sup>178</sup> In *Mohammad Sadique vs. Darbara Singh Guru* (2016), the Supreme Court held that a person can change their religion but not their caste as caste is a birth-based status and as a corollary a person who has converted to another religion need not change their name in order to depict the change of religion.<sup>179</sup> Similarly, converting to another caste by marriage is also prohibited.<sup>180</sup>

Therefore, in my view, at best, the courts' interpretation of the right to change one's name in the context of caste merely amounts to the right to pass or conceal one's caste/identity. In my view, it does not signify the right to determine one's identity as is applicable in the context of gender identity and sexual orientation. One may rightfully exercise their autonomy to forget their caste, or to renounce their belief in caste, or commit to confusing people about their caste, but it is questionable if caste can forget them or accept their renunciation or yield to such disruption without the structural annihilation of caste. The changing of names is therefore of limited consequence as it does not annihilate or substantially change the entrenched caste structures.

## Conclusion

In the recent film *Homebound* (2025), in a very poignant scene, the character of Chandan describes how the concealment of his caste identity leads to him feeling distanced from himself whereas its revelation leads to him feeling distanced from the society at large. In one study, a Dalit interviewee who was masquerading as a brahmin by using a brahmin surname reported feeling guilty for 'philosophically cheating.'<sup>181</sup>

<sup>176</sup>Ibid., pp. 100-101.

<sup>177</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>178</sup>See for example *G. M. Arumugam vs. S. Rajgopal* 1976 AIR 939.

<sup>179</sup>See for example *Mohammad Sadique vs. Darbara Singh Guru* (2016) 11 SCC 617.

<sup>180</sup>See *Sunita Singh vs. State of Uttar Pradesh* Civil Appeal No. 487 of 2018.

<sup>181</sup>See *Lum* (n 56) 120, 144. See also *Pathania* (n 57).

Du Bois described this in the context of race as ‘double consciousness’ which is a ‘sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.’<sup>182</sup> Fanon has described the adoption of white cultures by a black person as ‘a constant effort to run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence’<sup>183</sup> that reinforces the inferiority of the black person and the superiority of the white person, thus thrusting the black person into a ‘neurotic situation.’<sup>184</sup> He advocates for ‘reciprocal recognitions’ even if it comes at the cost of conflict.<sup>185</sup> On the question of dignity, Fanon maintains that when in the emulation of white cultures by the blacks, the latter had essentially embraced ‘white dignity’ and consequently there was no need to achieve true dignity at all.<sup>186</sup> Fanon, like Ambedkar characterizes this as ‘fraud of the black world.’<sup>187</sup>

In 2016, a private member’s bill called ‘The Use of Surname (Prohibition) Bill, 2016’ was introduced in the Indian Parliament ‘in order to eradicate caste identities and the discriminations associated herewith.’<sup>188</sup> At the first self-respect conference held by E.V. Periyar in 1929, a resolution was passed to drop caste-titles, that is, surnames in order to prevent discrimination on the basis of names.<sup>189</sup> On the other hand, despite these continuing practices and anti-caste assertions, the State of Tamil Nadu has witnessed some of the worst caste-based atrocities and honor killings that parallelly continue till date.<sup>190</sup>

In 2014, a case was reported where a father filed a case against his son to prohibit him from using their family surname ‘Sharma’ as he had married a lower caste girl.<sup>191</sup> Additionally, the father demanded compensation in copyright fees if the son used the surname.<sup>192</sup> If caste names are property like Ambedkar interpreted, the adoption of an upper caste name by an untouchable may philosophically or socially amount to

<sup>182</sup>W.E.B. Du Bois (2007). *The souls of Black folk*. Oxford University Press, 8.

<sup>183</sup>Frantz Fanon (1986). *Black skin, white masks*. Pluto Press, 60.

<sup>184</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>185</sup>Ibid.

<sup>186</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>187</sup>Ibid., p. 229

<sup>188</sup>See The Use of Surname (Prohibition) Bill, 2016.

<sup>189</sup>Manuraj Shunmugasundaram (2018). All in your name: on caste titles and privilege. (*The Hindu*, 12 October) <<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/all-in-your-name/article22986770.ece>> accessed 29 December 2025.

<sup>190</sup>See K. Chandru (2025). Is there any Honour in Killing?. (*Frontline*, 6 April 2025) <<https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/honour-killings-tamil-nadu-intercaste-laws/article69902087.ece>> accessed 18 April 2026.

<sup>191</sup>See Mridula Chari (2014). Son marries outside caste, father files copyright case protecting use of family name. *The Scroll*, 24 January. <<https://scroll.in/article/654627/son-marries-outside-caste-father-files-copyright-case-protecting-use-of-family-name>> accessed 27 December 2025.

<sup>192</sup>*Parmar* (n 59) 220.

‘stealing’ of caste,<sup>193</sup> the discovery of which may amount to a social fraud or bring unfavourable social consequences.

Caste is a relational identity where a Dalit exists in relation to a brahmin and vice-versa. Despite the abolition of untouchability through the Indian Constitution and provision of affirmative action, enactment of special criminal laws, caste hierarchies have not withered away, rather, due to the pressures of modernity and laws of this nature, caste-rudeness has merely converted to ‘Hindu politeness.’<sup>194</sup> Caste concealment may provide a layer of protection from caste atrocities and protection from the ‘ordeal of being constantly marked’,<sup>195</sup> but it does not actually change one’s caste identity or ‘*pahchan.*’ For various social (ex. Marriage, burial, food cultures etc.) and legal purposes (ex. Census classification, contesting elections, availing reservations, accessing welfare schemes etc.), one’s pre-assigned caste continues to matter. Adopting concealment strategies may therefore distort one’s social reality more than transforming or reconstructing it more meaningfully. While the claims to change names may be viewed as an exercise of autonomy, the normativization of the same through laying down of the law on the matter signals that the enjoyment of basic fundamental freedoms in Indian society depends on concealment. Yoshino similarly problematizes the need to ‘cover’ one’s identitarian traits as having an under-recognized impact on access to basic civil rights.<sup>196</sup>

Changing one’s name is an individualistic and pragmatic strategy that simultaneously enables the reclamation of one’s human personality but also ‘implicitly legitimizes the hierarchical nature of caste inequality.’<sup>197</sup> The critique articulated in this article is not to place blame on the individual for seeking change, rather it is to underscore the limitations of this technique. Until caste structures are not disturbed substantially, there is a high probability that the politics of knowing will continue to impede the recognition of a human being beyond one’s caste identity.<sup>198</sup> In keeping with Dr. Ambedkar’s vision of annihilation of caste, the goal should be to transcend caste-identities entirely instead of obscuring or masking them. If anything demands annihilation, it is caste first and not the names that seek to escape it.

<sup>193</sup>See Joel Lee and K. Satyanarayana (2023). *Concealing caste: Narratives of passing and personhood in Dalit literature*. Oxford University Press, 4.

<sup>194</sup>See Suryakant Waghmore (2017). From hierarchy to Hindu politeness. In Surinder S. Jodhka and James Manor (Eds.), *Contested hierarchies, persisting influence: Caste and power in twenty-first century India*. The Orient Blackswan. See also *Bhawani* (n 37).

<sup>195</sup>*Lee and Satyanarayana* (n 193) 21.

<sup>196</sup>See Kenji Yoshino (2006). *Covering: The hidden assault on our civil rights*. Random House Trade.

<sup>197</sup>*Parmar* (n 59) 231.

<sup>198</sup>See Jadumani Mahanand (2024). When they know us: Do Dalit lives matter?. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 47(1), 1.

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## “*Daat Faadu Mahilaye*”: Dalit Women’s Laughter and Disruption of Casteist Structures, India

Shainal Verma<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2022 to 2024 in two urban villages in Delhi, I investigate how Dalit women’s laughter functions as a powerful site of anti-caste resistance and feminist praxis. Moving away from dominant frameworks that foreground grief and victimhood, I centre laughter as an everyday embodied tactic employed by Dalit women to navigate and subvert the structural violences of caste, gender, class, and religion. I analyse how laughter operates as a generative force—simultaneously affective and political—and thus unsettles the fixity of caste, gender, class, space and religion. Engaging with interdisciplinary debates in feminist anthropology, Dalit studies, and humour theory, I examine how Dalit women’s shared, rebellious, and often vulgar laughter forms a counter-public, subaltern speech act that challenges brahminical patriarchy. Laughter, conventionally perceived as an expression of joy, I argue, is a defense mechanism employed by Dalit women to navigate everyday caste violence in the cities, creating the societal perception of them as *Daat Faadu Mahilaye* (Women Who Show Teeth). This analysis is crucial, as caste significantly influences women’s access to laughter in India. I ask, who has the privilege to laugh? Whose right to laughter is jeopardized? Who are the women who laugh more frequently, and why? This paper offers insights into discussions of gender, and urban marginalization.

### Keywords

Dalit humour, Dalit feminist laughter, Feminist Anthropology, Ethnography, Laughter, Affect, Resistance, Urban marginalization

*The secret source of humour is not joy but sorrow. There is no humour in heaven.*

—Mark Twain

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<sup>1</sup>Senior Research Scholar, Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi (India)  
Email: shainal.verma08@gmail.com

## Introduction: Historical Backdrop of Research on Dalit Women

bell hooks (1984) statement, “Being oppressed means the absence of choices” strikes a chord as I enter my field every day. For as long as I can remember being in academia, there are specific keywords that I have found to be repeatedly used to study Dalit women’s<sup>1</sup> lives in India. Social exclusion, social discrimination, grief, and sexual violence have long been the dominant themes investigating the situated oppressions and resistances of Dalit women. A curious Dalit girl scholar who finds herself interested in studying Dalit women’s lives and acknowledges the historical and present harms inflicted on these women due to caste violence in India is introduced with two kinds of reading experiences of ‘gender and caste’ in India. The first experience is an introduction to Dalit women’s autobiographies that share intricate details of what constituted their everyday lives (Kamble 1929; Bama 1992; Pawar 2008; Gidla 2017; Dutt 2019). The second experience is an academic engagement with key debates on Dalit feminism amongst Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, Smita M. Patil, Uma Chakravarti, Nivedita Menon, and Mary E. John. The list of renowned academics raised prolific questions examining Dalit women’s lives, such as: Do Dalit women talk differently? What constitutes the nexus of gender caste in India? How can Indian feminism be made more inclusive? What does it mean to engage with the women’s movement in India? These debates analyzed some central questions from a feminist and anti-caste historiographical perspective. However, it was during my fieldwork from 2022 to 2024 in two urban villages in Delhi that I found myself embroiled as a traditional participant observer in the local life of a neighbourhoods identified as “urban villages”<sup>2</sup> and with a sizeable Dalit population that continues to reside in slums and ghettos.

Calls for a “new sociology” in India have emphasized the need to take lived experience seriously as a site of knowledge production (Bandyopadhyay & Hebbar 2016). My research critiques the anthropological tradition in India by focusing on caste-oppressed women,<sup>3</sup> whose mediations and negotiations serve as entry points to locate what form of feminist resistance and voice are formed when domestic

<sup>1</sup>Dalit women refer to the community of women belonging to the erstwhile “untouchables” in India. These women belong to the caste identified as ‘low’ in the brahminical caste hierarchy. They continue to remain socio-economically marginalised. To read more about Dalit women’s lives, one can refer to <https://idsn.org/key-issues/dalit-women/>.

<sup>2</sup>To engage with the historical backdrop of urban villages in Delhi and their emergence, please refer to: Meier, Richard L. “URBAN VILLAGES FOR INDIA.” *Ekistics* 23, no. 137 (1967): 236–37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4361450>

<sup>3</sup>I use the term “Dalit women” to refer to caste-oppressed women and employ these terms interchangeably. While “Dalit” signifies a political and self-assertive identity, state and administrative frameworks categorize these communities under Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribe, and Other Backward Castes (depending on a region’s socio-economic history and mobility patterns).

helps, educators, students, activists, and homemakers invoke constant self-reflection on their lives due to the status quo. Qualitative research is built on a paradigm of previous research, but when past research does not figure caste-oppressed women’s everyday mediations and negotiations, where does one begin to base them? Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) examines the destruction caused by slavery on a physical, mental, and spiritual level, the destruction that haunts the characters who were once enslaved people even in freedom. In India, caste shapes the vicissitudes of women’s worlds. Caste-oppressed women’s mediations and negotiations involving everyday theatrics challenge structures of caste, gender and class oppression, tagging these women as mad. Therefore, my ethnographic dwelling on laughter argues how laughter is a binding force and a survival mechanism for Dalit women to beat everyday casteism in the neighbourhoods.

## **Theoretical Grounding**

This article is theoretically grounded in lived experiential thought and belief of the participants in the ethnographic research. The Dalit women in Rangpuri and Mahiwapur often mobilize, learn, and spread Ambedkarite teachings through oral and written channels. Discussions on fraternity, equality, constitutional morality, and dignity are routinely held. Therefore, the mobilising pattern and intent of the women demanded that I theoretically situate this article in Phule’s ideas (Phule 1873) and in Ambedkarite thought and philosophy that critique brahminical patriarchy (Ambedkar 1936). I juxtapose this critique with affect theory, particularly drawing on the relational capacities that give rise to a body’s doing in a world marked by the belonging and un-belonging of other bodies. Baruch Spinoza argued, “No one has yet determined what the body can do” (Spinoza 1959, p. 87). Spinoza’s statement reveals that body or its functioning doesn’t work in isolation but rather acts and exists in a field of context filled with force-relations, and the striving to comprehend a body and its affect/affectedness (Gregg et al. 2010). I place Dalit women’s bodies in my analysis of laughter as it is through the site of the body that the generative and force of the laughter and its affect can be understood. Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque offers a productive frame to explore how laughter inverts hierarchies and enables momentary liberation. Unlike Bergson, who reads laughter as corrective and disciplinary (Bergson 1900), I follow scholars like Goldstein who read laughter as generative, especially in contexts of marginalization (Goldstein 2003).

## **Research Methodology**

The findings are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over 24 months in two urban villages in Delhi. The research involved participant observation and informal conversations with Dalit women who work as social activists, teachers, homemakers,

domestic workers, sanitation workers, and informal vendors. My status of migrating outside the urban village during teenage has given me a position of being an “outsider-within” on returning as a fieldwork participant researcher (Collins 1986). The ethnographic theorization of laughter would not have been possible without my access to the unfiltered laughter and its expressions of Dalit women during random moments of our socialization. This laughter and its affect are not the same privately and publicly as the ethnographic vignettes of the participants will reveal, nor is this laughter easier to be observed by an outsider, as some degree of lived experience of the epistemological pain and oppression is required to connect, socialize and engage with the manner in which this laughter is a force of encounter in itself (Gregg et al. 2010).

## **Entering the Field: Mahipalpur and Dalit Mahila Mandal (Women’s Collective)**

### *Challenging Religious and Categorical Boundaries*

Sitting between a group of Dalit women preparing to sing the hymns and ballads of Babasaheb Ambedkar, the main singer, Rekha,<sup>4</sup> adjusts her right thigh to place a two-headed hand drum (dholak) with a spoon in her hand, making tinkling sounds on the drum as she giggles with the Ambedkarite Mahila Mandal. These women, who identify themselves as “casteless”<sup>5</sup> gear up for an intense two-hour singing and dancing performance. Samta, a Dalit activist, remains an exception in the crowd, identifying as a Buddhist rather than a Hindu, and is seen guiding the women to sit in a proper circle, requesting that they make more space for women who may arrive later. Samta is ecstatic with joy, and so are other women wearing visible markers of being Hindu, a kalawa (a sacred thread on the hand), a bindi (a coloured mark on the forehead), or a long-stretched vermilion thread (an auspicious thread worn by married Hindu women).

A shared struggle and understanding of being Dalit and a woman brought them together under the same roof to share joy through performance. Rekha, whom I was anticipating would begin with a revolutionary anti-caste rhyme/song, starts the devotional performance singing, ‘Jai Ganesh, Jai Ganesh, Jai Ganesh Deva...’ (The music of a Hindu God). Some women laugh at this; some are fully devoted to the belief and emotion. The second song follows, ‘Baba Tu Hai Sabka Malik, Tu Hi Mera Saathi, Teri Hi Arti Hum Utare’ (an ode to Ambedkar as a remake of the traditional Durga Arti). Hearing this, a fierce Samta says, “Hey sister, you should’ve said Jai

<sup>4</sup>All names I use in this article have been anonymised to maintain confidentiality of the participants.

<sup>5</sup>A renowned anthropologist of South Asia, Gajendran Ayyathurai, who founded Critical Caste Studies advocates for using the term *casteless* for women fighting the brahminical caste status quo.

Bhim first. Have you forgotten who fought for your equality and dignity?” Samta looked at me and then broke into laughter, saying, “What to do with these women?”

Samta has spent her entire life creating more avenues and classrooms for underprivileged kids residing in the neighbourhood. I don’t say anything in response and laugh with her. This shared laughter with Samta has a contagious effect; it invited the entire Ambedkarite mahila mandal to break into more laughter, but what exactly was the object of their (or my) laughter? Is it easy to leave what one has preached since childhood, even when this preaching means being repeatedly told, ‘You are impure; you are an untouchable; don’t touch the gods or be near them’? The categorical difference between a Scheduled Caste woman, a Dalit woman, an Ambedkarite woman and a Buddhist woman is blurred in their collective laughter; negotiating the contours of religiosity, rites of passage, resistance, love, and generational pain. Waghmare traces that humour within Dalit political life is a critical practice that unsettles the normalized hierarchies of caste while opening up spaces for reflection and alternative moral worlds (Waghmare 2016). In this sense, the laughter that circulates in the Ambedkarite Mahila Mandal is not directed at belief alone, but at the contradictions of inhabiting multiple religious and political locations simultaneously—where devotion, dissent, and memory co-exist rather than resolve into a singular identity.



Photograph 1: Ambedkarite women celebrating Constitution Day 2025 at the field site<sup>6</sup>

### *Challenging the Language of the Colonial*

When I asked them if they had heard of intersectionality or प्रतिच्छेदन (in Hindi) and explained how it is a framework used to describe their lives in theory, they paused, often

<sup>6</sup>Identifying features in photographs have been altered to protect participants’ anonymity.

with the pupils of their eyes dilating, while trying their best to fake an interest in the conversation, controlling their laughter, and almost doing everything to not release the harsh blow of air carrying spit onto my face. This laughter died a silent death beneath their breath. This conveyed the gap between Dalit women's lives and academia. How was I to cover this gap in theory? I searched for a medium that was not essentialist in nature nor reflected conventional patterns of examining Dalit women's lives through frameworks of grief. I found that laughter is the medium that connects these two worlds: academia and Dalit women's lifeworlds. These women's critique of an inaccessible academic language was expressed, indirectly or directly, every time I used an academic term in front of them, in the form of their either choosing to be silent as a response or laughing (sometimes pretending to laugh, sometimes laughing for real).

### *Challenging the Male Gaze and Dominance*

Dalit women's life worlds and their opportunities are limited due to the presence of caste. Often, I found Bhagwati, a seventy-five-year-old Dalit woman, sitting outside her home. Bhagwati usually narrated stories of gruesome violence in the Dalitwada and her life. She narrated how two children's bodies, one five years old and the second two years old, were found a month apart at the garbage dumping ground in shantytowns located about a kilometre away from where she lives. She said, "*Maybe this is what is considered normal now. This apathy, this ignorance of the marginalized and their bodies*". She continued, "*I lost my husband to cancer. I lost my son to alcoholism...*" and then she paused. I sat observing the environment around and found three boys who seemed younger than me staring at us. I was not intimidated by them, but then Bhagwati shouted, "*Look at these heroes. Shahrukh, Salman and Aamir!*" and broke into laughter, making me laugh out loud. She continued, "*If you want prime footage of oppression, come in the evening, or just video call me. I will show you what men and boys do here while we women sit at home with hungry kids tied to our chests, waiting for the men to bring us money, food, milk or candy. Just video call me.*" She laughed again, but I couldn't laugh this time.

### *Challenging Penury and Temporality of Thinking*

I met Sahira and her friend Nisha walking down the road, with babies tied to their chests and buckets of water in their hands. Amidst the daily banter of our conversations, both laughed even when I engaged in serious conversations—almost like they don't take what I do seriously. They often spoke about the failure of the modern capitalistic brahminical patriarchal systems of dominance in making them feel heard and taken seriously. When I asked Sahira and Nisha why their children are not wearing slippers, Sahira laughed and said, "*I don't have the luxury of time to think about this.*" Nisha added, "*Once the slippers of our children break, we don't have money to get them*

*fixed*”. Amidst the deprivation, Sahira’s and Nisha’s laughter surrounds the lives of their children, and themselves and points towards grave realities that force one to reflect upon: Who has the right to laughter? How can we understand the laughter of Dalit women in neighbourhoods? What does this laughter often conceal or cover?

## **Analyzing the Embeddedness of Dalit Women’s Laughter in an Urban Space**

A critical reading of caste and gender meant noticing the multi-layered laughter. The kind of laughter Dalit women begin their narratives of oppression with and choose to end them with. In their speech, laughter becomes the grounding for marking a resistance that challenges the structures of caste, gender and class exploitation. When I began my fieldwork in 2022, like many first-generation scholars from social marginalized backgrounds in academia, I found its portrayal and engagement with Dalit women’s grief, exploitation and exclusion extraordinary until it stopped feeling that way when I actively looked to find stories of Dalit women’s success, celebration, laughter or joy in the textbooks I read but couldn’t find them in numbers. Despite the sizeable Dalit population in my field sites, everyday life in the bastis is marked by layered precarity structured through caste and class. Children frequently exit formal schooling to enter low-paid, informal labour as computer operators, sales workers, beauticians, sweepers, street vendors, carpenters, and domestic workers. These conditions are spatially produced: cramped housing, the absence of green cover, and the lack of spaces for rest or bodily well-being point to what Lefebvre (1991) would describe as the unequal production of space.

Mobility, both social and spatial, remains tightly circumscribed by the often invisible yet deeply entrenched boundaries of caste, shaping who can move, where, and with what consequences. While dominant-caste actors frequently invoke the language of sociality and harmony, such claims dissipate at the thresholds of Dalit settlements, revealing the limits of caste coexistence. Within these bounded spaces, the civility associated with such narratives rarely materializes. Instead, what emerges is a lived experience of exclusion that is at once spatial, social, and affective.

While I witnessed all these sensibilities of the oppressed as well as the oppressors and carried them with me in my research analysis, wherever I sat, the memories of Dalit women laughing followed me. These memories were added to the repository of what Bama (2005) refers to as *‘rebellious celebration,’* a response to the hardships faced by Dalit women.

*“My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Paraiyar women but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them but to swim vigorously*

*against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enable them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth, and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. I was eager that through them, everyone should know about us and our lives”* (Bama 2005).

As a budding socio-anthropologist who understands the implications of oppression that are far-sighted and debilitating, I explore the multifaceted meanings and transgressions embodying the laughter of Dalit women through an interrogation of their feminist praxis. Samta chooses laughter to engage with the complexity of Dalit women’s oppressions. Her life’s aesthetics are rooted in aggressively proclaiming laughter over grief. She says, “*We didn’t choose our caste location and this struggle—yet we will continue to fight with smiles and laughter in our bellies.*” This statement by Samta reflects the fate of being born Dalit in a country, a fate that is not one’s own to decide. It also speaks to the experience of struggling as a Dalit, not necessarily with pain and anger, but with laughter.

Rum Lola Rum,<sup>7</sup> a blog run by a Dalit professor states,

*“I would like to believe that all Dalit women are naturally equipped with a capacity to laugh menacingly. How? I don’t know, but they just do. Someone once said that a good, strong laugh is one that shrinks cocks down. It is true. Nothing shrivels a cock and Savarna pride more than the loud and ‘vulgar’ laugh of a Dalit woman.”*

This quotation by Singh uses the phrase ‘menacingly, loud and vulgar’ to explain the affect of Dalit women’s laughter. Therefore, it becomes crucial to place the agential forms of resistance of Dalit women at the forefront, arguing how Dalit women’s loud forms of laughter disrupt, subvert, and beat Brahminical patriarchy. I borrow from Goldstein’s (2003) analysis of laughter in the Brazilian favela. Goldstein observes a paradox: laughter as resistance—“residents spit and laugh in the face of the unfathomable misery, disease, anarchy, injustice, violence, and societal desertion as they battle to contain their rage and despair in ragtag shantytowns” (Goldstein 2003, p. 14). Laughter and the sociology of laughter open a discursive space that renders the silenced, unrecognised, and unheard perceptible, transforming it into a resource for challenging ethical loneliness. What Jill Stauffer terms ‘ethical loneliness’—the experience of abandonment by society—is reclaimed by Dalit women through practices of laughter (Stauffer 2015). My fieldwork findings revealed that humour is connected to the sensibilities of a particular social group; it is intimately tied to one’s position within the gender and caste structure.

<sup>7</sup>A blog run by a Dalit professor. I read her work to ground my thoughts and connect with how the global conversation sparked by Dalit women is not regionally significant but significant across national and global borders. <https://rumlolarum.wordpress.com/>

## Denial of Laughter Leading to Boundary Formation

In the field, Dalit women pass by dominant caste men silently. They are not seen laughing around them, but as soon as they are distant, these women joke about the sexual and intimidating gaze of these men, calling it *gidh ki nazre* (gaze of a vulture), while they smoke traditional hookah sitting outside their houses. Dalit women’s humour, I argue, plays an important role in boundary formation and the reinforcement of caste hierarchies and relations in a space. Through laughter—one’s own as well as that of others—one’s naturalized and proper “place” within the urban village social geography is outlined and reinforced, as well as contested. In humour, “*characteristic expressions of individual minds, class habits, and cultural styles*” are embedded. As Bergson put it, “*Laughter is always the laughter of a group*” (Bergson 2018). That said, it can also be used to upset those same group boundaries.

At the *chaupals*, or what are known as community halls, a Dalit man cracks the joke, ‘*God is a Jat; tell me how.*’ His best friend, a Jat man, replied, ‘How?’ The Dalit man said, ‘*Whoever cries for help, but who goes to fight?*’ Both men burst out laughing, producing a fleeting intimacy that would otherwise be foreclosed in explicit discussions of caste. What appears as casual banter is, in effect, a coded negotiation of caste stereotypes, where humour allows critique and appreciation to surface without triggering confrontation.

## Situating Dalit Laughter

The Dalit laughter I discovered in my field was a discourse created by Dalit women against the hardships of their lives. While it was once common to think that elite culture always moved downward toward the masses and that the masses merely mimicked the elite, there is now a greater interest in tracing the effects of elite and popular culture on one another. Bakhtin (1965-1984) traces the ways in which the folk would play with the body in its “low” form—fart, defecate, and pick their noses—in a manner that reinscribes the body as a source of comedy. Similarly, David B. Morris (1991), in his study of the history and culture of pain, positions the body as a fundamental source and object of human laughter. “*Comedy needs the body in the same way the sonnet needs fourteen lines and unrequited love. The life of the body—which most philosophers can afford to ignore or dismiss as trivial—is almost a formal requirement of comic practice*” (Morris 1991).

Within a Bakhtinian world, a world that celebrates the rituals of the folk, such as Carnival, it is worth noting that bad taste is embraced. Carnival is a time when popular culture is permitted to broadcast its commentary, mustering all its power through lowness or bad taste.

Forms of Dalit women's humour can be conceptualized within this framework. For example, Dalit women's humour is born within the material and ideological circumstances created by what Paik (2022) refers to as a *sex-gender-caste complex*. In India, what counts as humour and art remains deeply politically entrenched. Women are sometimes forced to laugh at their own misery. I argue that participating in laughter reflects the unwillingness to confront the 'brahminical other'; it becomes a form of submission in circumstances where Dalits remain powerless.

I now turn to analyze contemporary visual character portrayal of marginalized women in the Indian popular culture to support the analysis of laughter and its affect. The anti-caste woman's character portrayal of *Manju Mai* in the Netflix series, *Laapata Ladies*, clearly states what is 'pretentious feminist politics in India' practiced by pro-caste feminists. Her character is central to the film, as it conveys the problematic aspects of mainstream feminism in India, which is led by oppressor-caste women. The film explores the language and morality of anti-caste feminists through the character of Manju Mai. Manju Mai uses humour to convey her feminist ideas to the other character called Phool, a woman who internalises gendered shame. Phool, a newlywed, finds herself lost on the railway track and anxious about returning home without her husband. She says, "Good women do not return home without their husbands." To this, Manju Mai responds, "The biggest fraud in this country has been running for years; it is called 'a good woman' (*Iss desh mein ladki logon ke saath hazaaron saalon se ek fraud chal raha hai. Uska naam hai bhale ghar ki bahu beti.*)" In the conversations that follow, Phool shares with Manju Mai that she knows household chores such as



Photograph 2: Manju Mai's character from the film, *Laapata Ladies* (2023)

sewing, cooking, and praying. To this, Manju Mai responds with amusement, “*Do you know how to return home? (Ghar jana aata hai?)*”. Manju Mai’s statements showcasing her astute belief in anti-caste feminist ideals and politics show the audience how ‘shame’ and ‘morality’ are used as brahminical tools to silence women. Hence, her character chooses laughter and amusement to convey to Phool how to practice her agency. At the end of the film, when Phool, the female protagonist, realizes the value of exercising her agency, she delightfully chooses to seek out more opportunities to hear Manju Mai’s anti-caste feminist takes, laugh, and find meaning in that laughter. Manju Mai tells Phool “*My husband would get drunk and beat me up. And then would say, ‘someone who loves you has the right to hit you’. One day, I exercised my right as well.*” She pauses and says, “*Women can farm and cook. We can give birth to children and raise them. If you think about it, women don’t really need men at all. But if all women figured this out, men would be in trouble, wouldn’t they?*”

This examination of the visual character of Manju Mai on television and the ethnographic dwelling on Dalit women’s laughter revealed how laughter becomes a site of resistance and survival for them.

Dalit and Adivasi portrayals of life, such as those of Dalit women stalwarts Mayawati and Phoolan Devi, are often shown in a poor light in mainstream media. Comedy is used as a platform to deride these women and their achievements. Their names are often used as jokes in everyday vocabulary. A famous comedian, Poppydos, once said this about Mayawati in his comedy show,

*“I don’t hate Mayawati because she looks like a man. I don’t hate Mayawati because she looks like a penguin with an Uttar Pradesh accent. I hate Mayawati because somewhere I saw Mayawati with a garland of money, and that pissed me off.”*

When Poppydos made this comment, the entire audience laughed. Many anti-caste leaders and the public felt angered by this comment of a famous liberal comedian using casteist language for a Dalit woman on a stage, but the reality is often that the laughter of the oppressor-caste<sup>8</sup> folk has showcased a vilification of Dalit women in the collective civil aesthetics of daily life in India. The Indian Constitution bans the practice of untouchability in Article 17, listing verbal and physical acts that constitute discrimination towards a Dalit person. However, the site of laughter showcases how laughter is used by the oppressor-caste communities as a safe space to showcase their casteist sensibilities without making it look extreme. Dalit women’s laughter in my field is an answer to the larger global and national caste atrocities that outrage their bodily autonomy and dignity. Ruth Manorama, head of the National Federation for Dalit Women asserted,

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<sup>8</sup>The term “Oppressor-caste” to refer to caste groups that have historically exercised social, economic, and symbolic dominance within the caste structure. This usage shifts focus from static caste identities to relations of power and domination.

*“Dalit women are at the bottom in our community. Within the women’s movement, Dalit issues have not been taken seriously. Within the Dalit movement, women have been ignored. Caste, class, and gender need to be looked at together. Dalit women have contributed to this discourse. Women’s labour is already undervalued; when she is a Dalit, it is nil... The atrocities are also much more vulgar.”*

A Dalit author on Medium shares her lived experience of being teased as ‘Mayawati and Phoolan Devi’ as a joke during her schooling by a dominant caste boy. She always wondered, *“Why does he refer to only me like that?”* and then witnessed the entire classroom laugh at this joke projected against her. This article serves as an entry point to centre the lived experiences of Dalit girls and women who are forced to participate in their humiliation as jokes are directed against them.

Borrowing from Jogdand’s analysis of how leaders transform their humiliation into a creative force, I showcase how Dalit women’s laughter is a laughter back at the oppressors (Guru 2011, Yashpal 2020). It is a transformative force that fights everyday caste violence or the poverty that is born due to it. It is not confined to spaces of solitary secrecy or homosocial safety but rather transgresses the boundaries between public and private. Rude. Loud. Mad. Aggressive. That’s how their humour has been classified. Goffman (2021) states that *“back regions are typically out of bounds to members of the audience”* (Goffman 2021, p. 124). The laughter of the caste-oppressed erupts *backstage* to avoid the confrontation on the *frontstage*.

Here, the audience comprises pro-caste individuals who deny participating in this laughter when asked outright if they laughed at a caste-oppressed person. Although laughter has the potential to bring social reform and to form intimacy and friendship, Dalit women’s jokes on caste and their lives are never fully vocalized as a confession, a reflection born from guilt in front of these women. In most cases, Dalit women meet humiliation through no soft introduction or explanations of what explains this constant hateful comedy that comes their way. It usually erupts randomly in between a conversation, and any undignified comment is expected to be taken as a ‘joke’ by the caste-oppressed individuals. For Goffman, social interactions were largely “frontstage” and in public spaces; in working and school settings, the code of conduct by which we carry ourselves differs from that at home. Look around and observe: who is laughing with whom and at whom? And where?

Resuming active listening to Dalit women’s laughter and observing the social circumstances within which it emerges, my biggest limitation as an insider to the ethnography is my inability to move beyond looking at caste dictating variegated worlds around me. My experience foreshadows my ability to observe, and I often struggle to move away from this emphasis. However, the laughter of Dalit women navigating

between Ambedkarism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, as well as Samta’s reflexes in the everyday, provides the epistemological turn in ethnography, where Dalit women and their lived experiences become paramount to understanding the social world.

This approach aligns with Lila Abu-Lughod’s exhortation to “write against culture,” which encourages researchers to eschew monolithic representations of culture as a unified “whole way of life” and to focus on the specific, the fragmented, and the contextual (Lughod 1991). Instead of perceiving caste as a fixed cultural framework, acknowledging the laughter of Dalit women highlights the dynamic, contentious, and experiential aspects of caste as it is navigated in daily existence. Laughter serves as a methodological entrance point that opposes the reification of culture while simultaneously elucidating the mechanisms of power in personal and common encounters. And so it is in these ways that laughter and humour play a significant role in power relations. In the next section, I showcase how Dalit laughter is not limited to the backstage but extends to the frontstage. Recently, it has been institutionalized as Dalit stand-up comedy with the performances of Dalit comedians appearing on stage, a trend that had not been witnessed prior to 2017. In the next section, I explore the rise of Dalit stand-up comedy.

## **The Rise of Dalit Stand-Up Comedy**

Dalit stand-up comedians such as Manjeet Sarkar and platforms like The Blue Comedy mobilize humour to express and circulate the lived experience of injustice under caste oppression. Manjeet Sarkar, a Dalit comedian whose comedy is a sharp challenge to the brahminical status quo, often makes jokes such as, “*Take our jokes like you take our land.*” In his comedy, he is inviting the person who belongs to the caste-oppressor background watching his show as an audience to self-reflect on the historical and present harms inflicted due to caste violence. In each, Manjeet centres caste in comedy. In one of his special stand-up comedy sessions, Manjeet shares jokes from real incidents in his life. An important description of his stand-up comedy states that “*he had a decent time living them and an amazing time re-living it on stage*”. This distinction makes it clear that Manjeet was bringing his lived experiences as a Dalit in India to the stage for an audience. In an episode of a famous podcast, Manjeet shares that he is India’s funniest Dalit comedian but also its most dangerous. The cultural sphere of comedy in India also showcases Dalit marginalization (Ambade 2023). Sarkar has an upcoming documentary titled *Laughing Out Caste* and has also been at the receiving end of surveillance for speaking about the harsh realities of untouchability and discrimination.

Table 1: A List of Self-identified Dalit Comedians

Name	Gender	Comedy Type	Started Comedy
Manjeet Sarkar	Male	Laughing Out Caste	Performing since 2017
Manaal Patil	Male	Blue Comedy	Performing since 2023
Ankur Tangade	Queer	Blue Comedy	Performing since 2023

## Conclusion

While those with power act out a theatre of majesty, wealth, and domination, those with less power act out a “counter-theatre” of laughter, humour, and absurdity. This connection—between absurdity and laughter—is one that the people portrayed on these pages may not articulate spontaneously, but they would doubtless recognize it. Others, too, will understand this connection, much like the portrayal of the seated Phoolan Devi between gunmen, laughing with a gun in her hand. The visual portrayal of the gun shows Phoolan reclaiming her power and respect. It means a return to *‘controlling one’s narrative.’*

The laughter in my field, as I witnessed it firsthand, also reminds me of my coping mechanism to use humour and laughter every time the most traumatic topic of conversation on a “sibling” begins, as I lost mine during COVID-19. During the earliest stage of my grief, I often began laughing and saw my mother burst into a loop of laughter even when I witnessed tears fall from her eyes. My trauma response to pain was laughter and still is. It got so extreme that I often gave a disclaimer to individuals to not take my laughter at its face value. For only I know what this laughter contains—pain of separation and longing for my late elder brother. My laughter is not laughter. My laughter is a result of fighting back against my circumstances. It is choosing to live when it feels easier to die. In this context, laughter disrupts the custodian rules of how one should deal with their pain and trauma. Laughter is multi-dimensional and expansive. The laughter of battling caste violence has yet to be fully explored.

Dalit women do not come into the world as “Ambedkarite”; such political consciousness is cultivated over time rather than inherited at birth. This consciousness is a result of engaging with the historical backdrop where Dalit women are welcomed but experience denial of access to education, human dignity, and laughter. It is also an invitation to engage in practices of “active listening and checking-in,” which Sonkar et al. (2024) theorize as a form of feminist pedagogy. This laughter becomes resistance, a marker of happiness amid great odds in society. This laughter restores the destruction of the casteist world and acts as a minimizer of the harms, as well as a survival kit for Dalit women to beat everyday casteism and patriarchy in their lives. This laughter

reminds us of what cannot be traced through scientific, rational, and quantitative methods but can only be observed, felt, and witnessed in its capacities, in the form of a lived experience. If not for an ethnographic endeavour, I would never be able to establish what Dalit women’s laughter embodies and how it is feminist. From Samta’s everyday negotiations with the Ambedkarite Mahila Mandal, Bhagwati’s jokes on men in the neighbourhood, Sahira and Nisha’s laughter beating poverty, there was so much laughter that surrounded me, and this laughter of Dalit women must be analyzed more sincerely for all of us to understand the nuances and differences between *laughing at Dalit women and Dalit women’s laughter*. They both share an intrinsic relationship, as I argue through field encounters, that Dalit women being *Daat Phaadu Mahilaye* is a form of fighting back, a talking back to the degrading laughter projected at them through popular culture and everyday jokes by the caste oppressors. Dalit women’s laughter is a defence mechanism and a unique tailoring of their anti-caste language.

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## From the Pali Turn to *The Buddha and His Dhamma*: Reading Ambedkar as a Philologist

Ali Ahsan<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article reconstructs B.R. Ambedkar as a philologist by engaging with three different strands of his scholarship. First, it traces his work on language in general and his construction of Pali as a language emblematic of Buddhism. By following cues in Ambedkar's own writings and historicizing it, the article in its second section close reads the major historical stakes of his work. These two strands focus on how liturgical languages engage with caste hierarchy, and how ancient Indian history is perceived anew through Ambedkar's critique of Brahmanism alongside contemporary scholarship on history. This long historical thread culminates in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* along with the focus on religion within his writings, which forms the third section of the article. I propose that the three strands together complete the trajectory of Ambedkar's philological project for which he lays a critical foundation through an overarching history of India and its linguistic and religious past. In the article, the object of analysis is caste as a non-static category and how it functions from antiquity to the mid-twentieth century. Ultimately, I argue that Ambedkar reformulates the idea of what it means to be sacred from a Navayana Buddhist point of view, symbolized through a move away from Hinduism, which he announced at the Yeola conference in 1935, to the moment of his conversion to Buddhism in 1956.

### Keywords

Ambedkar, Language, Pali, History, Religion, Philology, Buddhism, Brahmanism, Navayana, Conversion, Caste, Religion, Sacred

### Introduction

The article reconstructs Ambedkar as a philologist following his own engagements with the history of language and literary texts. Ambedkar engages with philology as a way of reading old religion, so he develops philology not for the sake of philology

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<sup>1</sup>PhD in Comparative Literature & Intercultural Studies, University of Georgia, USA  
Email: aleeahsan16@gmail.com

(or the love of words) alone. Further, Ambedkar goes on to elaborate a ‘new’ religion based on the old one, hence, religion not for the sake of religion alone. The question remains: what is Ambedkar’s aim in initiating a practice of philology? Is it for the sake of ‘caste’ or ‘annihilation of caste,’ as the title of Ambedkar’s most famous text states? (Ambedkar 2021). Caste, one must note, is also historically developing and changing, and not static. Hence, the reconstruction begins through a critical reading of three different strands of Ambedkar’s scholarship—linguistic, historical, and religious—indicating the integral elements of his emancipatory doctrine. First, it traces his work on language in general and his construction of Pali as a language emblematic of Buddhism (*BAWS, Vol. 16*). By following cues in Ambedkar’s writings, it then close-reads part 3 of Volume 3 (Revolution and Counter-Revolution). These two threads within the article focus on how liturgical languages engage with caste hierarchy, and how ancient Indian history is perceived anew through Ambedkar’s critique of Brahmanism alongside evidence from historical scholarship (Omvedt 2003; Chakravarti 1987; Harvey 2012). The object of analysis here is *caste* and how it continues to function from antiquity to the mid-twentieth century. Further, I historicize Ambedkar’s engagement with language through Bronkhorst and read it with philological interpretations of early Buddhism, alongside other scholarship on Ambedkar (Bronkhorst 2019; Jondhale 2004; Rathore 2011). This long historical thread culminates in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (Volume 11) in what is the third thread of the article completing the trajectory Ambedkar sets for an overarching history of India and its linguistic and religious past.

A note on the method I implement in reading Ambedkar’s scholarship. In Eric Auerbach’s *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Thought* (1946), Said traces how firstly, Giambattista Vico interprets history, followed by how Eric Auerbach does it. Said states that Vico’s great discovery was the ‘primitive mentality’ in Homer, which he did by refuting generations of interpreters who had assumed that Homer was a wise sage (Said 2003, p. xiii.).

In order to be able to understand a humanistic text, one must try to do so as if one is the author of that text, living the author’s reality, undergoing the kind of life experiences intrinsic to his or her life, and so forth, all by that combination of erudition and sympathy that is the hallmark of philological hermeneutics. Thus the line between actual events and the modifications of one’s own reflective mind is blurred in Vico, as it is in the numerous authors who were influenced by him, like James Joyce. But this perhaps tragic shortcoming of human knowledge and history is one of the unresolved contradictions pertaining to humanism itself, in which the role of thought in reconstructing the past can neither be excluded nor squared with what is “real”. Hence the phrase, “the representation of reality” in the subtitle to *Mimesis* and the vacillations in the book between learning and personal insight (Said 2003, p. xiii.).

The passage above sums up and illuminates what it takes for a critic to read, understand, and interpret a text from Vico's philological point of view. The reader or critic in this case is not simply reading the text but living the author's reality. Said points to a combination of erudition and sympathy as significant to understanding a humanistic text. Importantly, he notes that the line between actual events or what is real, and the modifications of one's own reflective mind is blurred in Vico and others who followed him like Joyce and Auerbach. Here, Said makes an analogy between an actual event and history, and between knowledge and personal insight. Auerbach, according to Said, vacillates between learning and insight in *Mimesis*. Another interpretation of philology is introduced by Pollock, who by tracing the contrast between two types of readers of classical studies, suggests there was "a struggle between historicists and humanists, *Wissenschaft* and *Bildung*, scholarship and life, of a sort not unique to European modernity" (Pollock 2009, p. 931).<sup>1</sup> The reason I bring Said and Pollock together is because Pollock critiques Said's (and de Man's) definition of philology as being simplistic, and offers three domains of history—"textual meaning, contextual meaning, and philologist's meaning" where ultimately, he states philology is "the discipline of making sense of texts" (Pollock 2009, pp. 950, 934). In my reading of Ambedkar as a philologist, I employ strategies suggested by both Said and Pollock. Ambedkar's work is modern, in the sense that it was written in the twentieth century. However, much of his attention is directed towards history, which makes it both a historicist and humanist effort, as I see it. Based on Said's suggestion, I make it a point to read Ambedkar and learn with him, and further, add my insights alongside existing scholarship on topics in history and religion. In my attempt at philological hermeneutics as Pollock frames it, I try to "make sense of" Ambedkar's religio-political aims in his writing alongside other contemporary readers of Ambedkar.

As a philologically integrating project which attempts to cover a large timeline, there are limits to this preliminary research. It would be instructive to remember that the focus here is on historicizing Ambedkar's work on language and religion based on Ambedkar's own writings which were mostly in English. Due to this factor, and what some scholars refer to as the 'polemical' nature of Ambedkar's writing, it is beyond the scope of this article to fully engage with ancient Indian history or excerpts in the original Pali and Sanskrit. While subsequent scholars on Ambedkar have added the textual sources of Ambedkar's writings, these evidence in the form of secondary historical and religious scholarship, adds to the study in the manner of a survey of selected volumes by Ambedkar than a potentially deeper engagement with any of the three strands of scholarship mentioned above, which perhaps merits separate attention on its own. Thus, the pursuit of a more rounded philological inquiry would demand

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<sup>1</sup>Pollock traces Wilamovitz and Nietzsche's positions on how to pursue classical studies and argues that historicism and humanism are "far from being mutually exclusive" and that they are "complementary, even mutually constitutive."

sustained engagement with premodern Indian history in the long durée, which could be a possible follow-up to this scholarly conversation.

The chapter begins by tracing one of the scholarly trajectories of B.R. Ambedkar through Pali and its connection with the Buddhist religion. The specific attention Ambedkar invests on Pali is read critically alongside his engagement with Sanskrit where my specific focus is on how the two liturgical languages engage with caste hierarchy. A philological study of Ambedkar's work across languages with a focus on sacred texts reveals a remarkable conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism in ancient Indian history since around 600 BC. Among the seventeen volumes of Ambedkar's *Writings and Speeches*, volume 16 titled *Grammar and Dictionary of the Pali Language* stand apart from the rest of the writings. The volume sheds light on a linguistic aspect of Ambedkar's scholarship, that of lexicography. Vasant Moon points out that Ambedkar was past fifty years old when he began his work on Pali, and compares the task undertaken by Ambedkar with that of Samuel Johnson who attempted his dictionary of the English language in 1755 (Moon 2020). Moon explains the magnitude of the task Ambedkar had undertaken—a compilation of a dictionary of words and phrases of a language no longer spoken—as fraught with difficulties. Compared to the *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, Ambedkar's volume includes, in addition to the Pali - English dictionary as Book I, a section where words in Pali are translated into English, Ambedkar's native Marathi, neighboring state language Gujarati as well as Hindi, one of the big lingua francas of the by then newly formed nation of India (Davids and Stede 1925). The third book titled 'Pali Grammar' is further classified into orthography, rules of change, etymology, syntax, general conversation, etc., and is like introductory grammar texts by colonial-era grammarians. The assigned theme is Buddhism and monasteries which lead to the final book in the volume, a twelve-page article published in Marathi in 1956 and titled '*Bouddha Pooja Pāth*' (Lessons to Worship Buddha). Ambedkar explains and translates Buddhist rituals and prayers in Marathi and then presents the original Pali prayer alongside it, further emphasizing his target audience, people from the Mahar community alongside the broader Marathi speaking people. Ambedkar does not explain the gradual movement from a dictionary and grammar to religious education in the text. Pali is considered a liturgical language and is hence used in the same context. The structure of this dictionary and the Buddhist lessons reveal the early stages of Ambedkar's research on Buddhism.

Ambedkar's turn to Pali does not necessitate scrutiny of his writings and speeches. It is well documented in some of the early biographies and writings on Ambedkar. Moon's biography of Ambedkar titled *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* mentions the 'World Fellowship of Buddhists' conference held in Rangoon (or Yangon, in modern day Myanmar) in December 1954 where Ambedkar had remarked, "it is pathetic that the country where Lord Buddha was born had also witnessed the eradication of his religion" (Moon 2020, p. 206). Ambedkar in his speech informs the audience, "I introduced the

study of Pali, the lion-seal of Ashoka in front of the Rajbhavan and the Ashok wheel on the flag without any opposition. In two colleges in Mumbai and Aurangabad, there are faculties for the study and research of Buddhist religion” (Moon 2020, p. 206). Moon adds that it is around this period that Ambedkar started to edit the multilingual Pali dictionary. Ambedkar’s work on Pali had by then been established. His impending conversion to Buddhism and the ongoing work on *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is shaping up during the mid-1950s. It further emphasizes the interrelation between Ambedkar’s work on language and his work on religion. There is a developing sense of Ambedkar and his propagation of Pali studies and Buddhism at this point. Eleanor Zelliot, one of the foremost scholars of the Ambedkar movement, however, makes a distinction between Pali and Sanskrit.

The Pali scriptures, rather than the Sanskrit scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism, are used in the current movement. Dr. Ambedkar felt that the Pali tradition was purer and more rational; it is also more logical that rebels against Brahmanism would want Pali rather than Sanskrit as their religious language, and so in the Bible of the movement, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (Bombay: Siddharth Publications, 1957), stories from the Pali scriptures as well as interpretations of Buddhism from a rational, humanistic viewpoint dominate (Zelliot 2005, p. 250).

This distinction connects Ambedkar’s stake in the ancient historical understanding of caste with language. It also makes a binary between Pali as the sacred language of the Buddhist scriptures and Sanskrit as the language of Brahmanism and its sacred texts. Ambedkar’s placing of ancient Indian history gains prominence here—“The history of India is nothing but a history of a mortal conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism” (*BAWS Vol. 3*, p. 267). Ambedkar engages at length on early India especially in part III of Volume 3 ‘revolution and counter-revolution in Ancient India’ where the Buddhist tradition at its peak is referred to as the “revolution” whereas the return of Brahmanism is referred to as the counter-revolution. At this point of our reading, there is a bridge between Ambedkar’s later work on the Pali grammar, language, and the conversion to Buddhism, and Ambedkar’s early work on ancient history and philosophy.

Thinking from the perspective of language throws open multiple questions on language, religion, and caste. A close look at languages in ancient India and its philosophies show that there was prior concern about language among philosophers in India. Bronkhorst explains that most of the participants were either Brahmans or Buddhists, along with the Jainas who played a minor role (Bronkhorst 2019, p. 4). And both Brahmans and Buddhists approached the field of language with strong but different convictions. The status of the Brahmans depended on the fact that they knew part of the Vedas by heart. The *mantras* in this context affected the world without

the intermediary of other beings, whether human or nonhuman. Bronkhorst states how underlying the Brahmins' ritual activity is the conviction that Sanskrit can have a direct effect on the world, because Sanskrit and reality are related in ways other languages (considered "incorrect use of words") are not. Bronkhorst points to the centrality of Sanskrit in Brahmanical linguistic thought, and how languages other than Sanskrit were rarely, if ever, taken into consideration by Brahmanical thinkers. Buddhism, according to Bronkhorst, did not start out with any identifiable implicit or explicit convictions about language. The message of the Buddha was spread in local languages, being adjusted or translated where necessary (Bronkhorst 2019, p. 5). Overall, it must be noted how there exists a division between early Brahmanism and Buddhism, and how there is a fundamental difference in conceptions about language which then later led to interaction and borrowings, including the three *dharma*s that stood for linguistic units as well as the elevation of Pali as the one sacred language of Buddhism. The language ideology where one language is attributed as sacred has roots in Brahmanical linguistic thought. It is a tradition, from a linguistic ideological point of view, Ambedkar adopts from Sanskrit and carries forward in his propagation of Pali studies. The current existence of Pali as the language of clergy and rituals among Ambedkarite Buddhists in India is largely due to the identity of Pali as the language of Buddhism, even if *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, widely referred to as Ambedkar's magnum opus, is written in English.

Pali as a source language is foremost in Ambedkar's spiritual quest and study of Buddhism but Ambedkar's works are all in English. There is, however, a rather obvious disconnect between Ambedkar's specific interest in Pali and Buddhist sources and his writing *The Buddha and His Dhamma* in English with respect to its initial reception.<sup>2</sup> Most of the followers of Ambedkar during the time of his writing were only beginning to learn English, as it was then the language of the social elite. The other factor that would determine the reception of this book was that most of Ambedkar's then immediate and potential readers were Marathi (ex-Untouchable Mahars who converted to Buddhism with Ambedkar) which meant that *The Buddha and His Dhamma* as a text remained in the shadows for a long time. Additionally, the publication of Ambedkar's volumes take place in 1979, 23 years after his passing, suggesting how the reception of Ambedkar's writings take place in a largely unconventional manner.<sup>3</sup> There are unanswered questions regarding the intention behind Ambedkar's writing *BHD*. What kind of book was it? Is it a biography of the Buddha? If yes, where do we situate it among other works on the Buddha? Does Ambedkar succeed in the task of spreading the message of the Buddha? It would be useful to make a closer observation

<sup>2</sup>Henceforth cited parenthetically as *BHD*.

<sup>3</sup>The history of its translation to Marathi would be a useful reference here, something I am unable to research on as I do not read Marathi.

of Pali as a language and the intersection between ancient Pali and Sanskrit sources on Buddhism.

The role of language in *Navayana* (new method or spiritual practice) Buddhism initiated by Ambedkar is rooted in ancient Indian history. In order to understand and/or translate early texts in Pali or Sanskrit, Norman argues how it involves making use of all the resources of philological and literary criticism to establish the original form of the text along with a knowledge of the languages of North India and Ceylon at the time of the Buddha and the centuries immediately after his death (Norman 2006, p. 16). It “...necessitates expertise not only in the Middle Indo-Aryan languages, of which Pali is one and Ardhamāgadhī and Gāndhāri are the others, but also in Classical Sanskrit, Buddhist Sanskrit, and Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit,” since much of the language of early Buddhist texts is related to or taken over from Sanskrit, while parallel versions of many Pali canonical texts exist in Buddhist Sanskrit or Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit. Norman (2006) broadly tries to explain a philological approach to Buddhism as a classicist who studied classical philology. The addition of other dialects/languages blurs the distinction between Pali and Sanskrit as drawn by Zelliott earlier. It helps the reader make sense of how words and languages existed for its own sake and nothing more. Besides, a philological undertaking in the making of *A Critical Pali Dictionary* would involve, according to Norman, analysis of the usage of each word listed without, for the most part, a doctrinal importance of each word and the part it played in Buddhism (Norman 2006, p. 9). This decision by Norman suggests a lack of engagement with the social aspects of language. It leaves the question of ideological origin or belonging of words in Pali unanswered. From a literary point of view, integrating literary texts from the time with words in Pali could provide more direction on this regard.

The section moves its attention to the second thread, the historical strand in Ambedkar’s works with a focus on *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. It is compelling to note how Ambedkar unlearns many of the myths and legends that he had ingrained as a young boy. He writes in the preface to the critical edition of *BHD* that he was introduced to Buddhism at an early age (Rathore and Verma 2011). After narrating the story of how he was gifted a book on Buddha by Dada Keluskar, Ambedkar mentions how his father encouraging him to read the Mahabharata and Ramayana early in life meant that he could compare once he started to read on Buddha. For Ambedkar, the fact that it was not with an empty mind that he had first read Buddha is where lies the origin of his interest in Buddha and his message. Further, in the introduction to *BHD*, Ambedkar writes that anyone who is not a Buddhist finds it difficult to present the life and teachings of the Buddha in a manner which would make it a consistent whole. He continues:

Depending on the Nikayas, not only the presentation of a consistent story of the life of the Buddha becomes a difficult thing and the presentation of

some parts of his teachings becomes much more so. Indeed it would not be an exaggeration to say that of all the founders of religions in the world the presentation of the life and teachings of the founder of Buddhism presents a problem which is quite puzzling if not baffling. Is it not necessary that these problems should be solved and the path for the understanding of Buddhism be made clear? Is it not time that those who are Buddhists should take up these problems at least for general discussion and throw what light they can on these problems? (*BAWS II*, Introduction)

Ambedkar sets out four problems related to Buddhism – one on Buddha’s *Parivraja* and the social situation surrounding it, the second on whether the four “Aryan” truths are part of the original teachings of Buddha, the third problem relates to the doctrine of soul, of karma and rebirth, and the fourth problem relates to that of the role of the *Bhikku* in Buddhism. At the end of the introduction, Ambedkar hopes that his questions in this work will excite the readers enough to make them want to come out with their solutions. This suggests how Ambedkar, by compiling a book on Buddha and by acceding to the ‘one religion, one text’ religio-modernist formula that was in vogue among many major religions of the world, was now inviting his readers to participate in the making of the text. By stressing on the rational and humanistic nature of Buddhism, Ambedkar regards the Buddha’s dhamma to be the best. He says, “If a modern man who knows science must have a religion, the only religion he can have is the religion of the Buddha” (*BAWS II*, Introduction).

The posthumously published *BHD* (1957) brings early research on Buddhism, the historical intervention and culminates in a part biography, part sacred history of the Buddha as seen through Ambedkar’s interpretation. It elaborates how Ambedkar by introducing a ‘biographical’ text does not just revive the by now completely diminished influence of Buddhism in India but formulates a historical interpretation of ancient India’s religious traditions and social reality. The text is today read in its many translations in Indian languages Hindi, Punjabi, Marathi, Kannada, Tamil, etc., and is mainly available at Buddha Viharas around India, the Chaityabhoomi (shrine) at Mumbai, and Deekshabhoomi (site of conversion) at Nagpur of Ambedkar. The text may have been originally and especially intended for a large section of his followers, the Mahar community, and by extension the rest of the Dalit people in India who converted to Navayāna (New Vehicle) Buddhism. The message of the text, however, involves and reaches out to a larger audience who would be interested in Buddhist history and Dalit history. From my reading of the text, it engages with the idea of the sacred as well as the sacred as a means of emancipation through its narrative.

Based on the reading, I observe that the *BHD*. I observe that the *BHD* when read together with *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India* (both part of volume

3 of Ambedkar's writings and speeches, and suggested by him as books that give an overall perspective of Buddhism in India) reconstructs the idea of ancient India and in effect results in the making of both a spiritually and historically liberating text for a new imagination of the land. It must be added that this entire process of conceiving the text takes place during the nation-making formation of India. Ambedkar is also often trivialized or undervalued as (just) the leader of the Dalits or as the head of the committee drafting the Constitution of India. The range of his work, however, reveals a broad anti-caste vision and its influence goes beyond the Dalit question and to that of a free and equal world that is rid of the continually oppressive category of caste in South Asia.

A comparative reading of the different ways in which Buddha's story has been told over the ages show that Ambedkar's narrative of the story of the Buddha is a useful addition to the archive of retelling the Buddha's life and teachings. One of the earliest works is Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita* written in Sanskrit verse in the *kavya* (poetic) tradition. It is also one of the earliest extant *carita kavyas* in Sanskrit which form a part of biographical literature. The other older works include the *Mahavastu* where over half of the text is composed of Jātaka and Avadāna tales, accounts of the earlier lives of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas, and belongs to early Buddhism; and the *Lalitavistara*, from the Sanskrit Buddhist Mahayana sutra which tells the story of Gautama Buddha from the time of his descent from Tushita until his first sermon in the Deer Park at Sarnath near Varanasi. It must be noted that Ambedkar derives from *Buddhacarita* extensively in the *BHD* among other sources both historical and modern. Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita*, according to Olivelle, "is an 'apologia' for Buddhism against Brahmanical attacks and arguments, an apologia in the form of a finely crafted 'Life of the Buddha' from his conception to his Awakening, preaching and death" (Olivelle 2008).<sup>4</sup> The text is divided into 28 cantos out of which the first 14 are complete while the rest of it is missing in Sanskrit but is preserved in its Chinese and Tibetan translations. This text is another evidence that shows the early discord between brahmanism and Buddhism.

Among modern texts, there is *The Life of the Buddha* composed in the mid-eighteenth century by Tenzin Chögyel. It uses the twelve-act structure used by Tibetan writers who write the biography of the Buddha where the structure is simple and outlines the basic chronology of Buddha's life.<sup>5</sup> Bernard Faure's *The Thousand*

<sup>4</sup>According to Olivelle, Ashvaghosha lived in the first century CE according to scholarly consensus; The book *Buddhacarita* by Ashvaghosha was translated by Olivelle as *Life of the Buddha* (2008).

<sup>5</sup>Life in heaven (prebirth), descent to earth (conception and gestation), birth (age 1), education (ages 1 to 16), the pleasures of his royal harem (ages 16 to 29), renunciation of house (age 29), spiritual discipline (ages 29 to 35), journey to Bodhgaya (age 35), battle with demons (age 35), enlightenment (age 35), teaching (ages 35 to 80) and death (age 80) make up the twelve structures.

*and One Lives* (2022) abandons the search for the historical Buddha and the need to limit the narrative to early Indian stories. Faure is critical of prevalent historicism and examines the mythological elements in the life of the Buddha that are no longer constrained by an artificial biographical framework. This work of historiography on how Buddha and his life has been interpreted ‘biographically,’ a genre of writing that does not align well to sources that are 2500 years ago, is a significant contribution to studies on the Buddha as well as how Buddha is imagined in the world today especially outside India. Going by this reading, other modern works like Osamu Tezuka’s manga-style graphic novel adaptation of Buddha’s life, Herman Hesse’s fictitious imagination of a Brahmin youth’s aspiration for Buddhist ideals in *Siddhartha* (1922), and academic works like *Buddha* (2004) by Karen Armstrong are different forms of giving structure to or *narrating* the Buddha’s life and teachings. Ambedkar’s *BHD* in the larger spectrum of narrations of Buddha focuses on the broad classifying category of Indian Buddhism in a modern, first-of-its-kind caste-conscious retelling, one that fills a vacuum in terms of Indian contributions to this genre. Indian Buddhism from the context of contemporary Buddhist studies is classified as classical Buddhism and it is often associated with origin stories that are based in ancient India. While there are works on different traditions of Buddhism outside India, the reason(s) behind the decline of Buddhism in India is not engaged extensively as a topic of scholarship in the study of Buddhism in the world. It is, however, one of the topics Ambedkar focuses on in his *BHD*. He addresses this lacuna by historicizing Buddha’s life and teachings as well as compiling a narrative of the Buddha from the conclusions he draws from his research. This is part of a specific section on the decline and fall of Buddhism in part 3 of volume 3 of his writings, ‘Revolution and Counter-Revolution,’ and provides historical context to the study of *BHD*.

The question of the disappearance of Buddhism in India, Ambedkar addresses, by comparing how it continues to thrive in “China, Japan, Burma, Siam, Annam, Indo-China, Ceylon and parts of Malay-Archipelago” (*BAWS* 3, p. 229). He makes a distinction between the ‘fall’ of Buddhism and the ‘decline’ of Buddhism. Ambedkar specifies that the fall of Buddhism in India was due to the invasions of the *Musalmans* (Muslims) where Islam’s positioning against idol worship or as “the enemy of the ‘*But*’” is well-known. Further, he questions how if Islam attacked both Brahmanism and Buddhism, how should one survive and the other perish. Additionally, he states three circumstances which made it possible for Brahmanism and impossible for Buddhism to survive the onslaught of Islam (*BAWS* 3, p. 230):

1. Brahmanism at the time of the Muslim invasions had the support of the State. Buddhism had no such support. What is however more important is the fact

that this State support to Brahmanism lasted till Islam had become a quiet religion and the flames of its original fury as a mission against idolatry had died out.

2. The Buddhist priesthood perished by the sword of Islam and could not be resuscitated. On the other hand, it was not possible for Islam to annihilate the Brahmanic priesthood.
3. The Buddhist laity was persecuted by the Brahmanic rulers of India and to escape this tyranny the mass of the Buddhist population of India embraced Islam and renounced Buddhism.

This is a portrayal of eighth-century Indian subcontinent when the first Muslim invasion occurred in 711 CE led by Mohammad Bin Qasim, as historicized by Ambedkar. It is a period in which the decline of Buddhism in India is attested to in scholarship as well as popular rhetoric. However, Ambedkar uses the term ‘Brahmanism’ instead of either ‘Vedic religion’ or ‘Hinduism’ to describe the other prominent religion that coexisted with Buddhism before the arrival of Islam. Harvey points out that one of the primary reasons was the dilution of the distinctiveness of Buddhism relative to the rising power of ‘Hinduism’ (the apostrophe is my emphasis) even if Mahayana writers were critical of Hinduism (Harvey 2013, p. 195). Harvey notes that the surface similarities of Hindu and Mahayana devotional cults and Tantrism may have led the laity to perceive the two religions as quite similar. Moreover, Hinduism borrows elements of Buddhism—devotees of Vishnu practicing vegetarianism, followers of Shiva viewing caste distinctions as less relevant to religion, etc., eventually leading to a (mis)interpretation of Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu, while interestingly and contrastingly in Ceylon, Vishnu is seen as a Bodhisattva. It reveals that Buddhism was beginning to get coopted by brahmanism during this period, and alongside it, it portrays how the dominant religious viewpoint of a region influences how historical divine figures get represented in history. The second reason, according to Harvey, may be classified as the role played by Sankara (788 - 820) in developing monasticism paralleling that of the Sangha. Sankara described the Buddha as the enemy of the people and there is further observation of sporadic persecution directed at the Buddhists from the sixth century. This example shows newer ways in which Buddha’s message is countered by Brahmanical representatives like Sankara. According to Omvedt, Basham observes that:

persecution played only a minor role; rather the major factor was a reformed religion which we can now call ‘Hinduism’, which transformed worship of Shiva and Vishnu (the latter in various *avatars* which could absorb local deities... Though it (Buddhism) had theoretically, and for some time in practice as well, been a separate religion, challenging caste and denying the Vedas, it failed to base itself in the practical aspects of popular life; the life rituals of

even Buddhist families were handled by Brahmins. Thus the Buddha could be re-interpreted as the ninth *avatar* of Vishnu, while his teachings were ignored (Omvedt 2003, pp. 160-161).

The (re)formation of Brahmanism between the sixth and eighth centuries in India is crucial in tracing the decline of Buddhism. It divulges how brahmanical ideology counters against its religious and existential threat by either assimilating other religions into its fold. The example cited above where there is a transformation in the worship of Shiva and Vishnu captures this well. In this case, the radical aspects of the Buddhist religion gradually lose its hold as the authority that comes with caste supremacy trumps over its critics. Moving to the third reason, and the worst blow, according to Harvey and supported by Basham, are the Muslim invasions which dealt a final blow though by then Buddhism was restricted to monastic centers and Hinduism had woven itself into the fabric of society through the caste division. Bringing Harvey's point about Buddhism's confinement to monastic centers with Ambedkar's point 2 about Buddhist priesthood perishing by the swords of Islam and point 3 about Buddhist laity being persecuted by the Brahmanical rulers (or in other words, the caste division) points towards a persuasive argument as to the main reasons behind both the fall, on the one hand, and demise on the other, of Buddhism as distinctively drawn by Ambedkar.

Omvedt (2003), addressing the same question of the 'defeat of Buddhism', shows the complications involved in deriving a straightforward understanding of history at this point due to the lack of historical material or literature available in India. Omvedt relies on Chinese traveler Hsuan Tsang's visit to India in the seventh century, various local histories within India that address the issue of caste indirectly, and scholarship on ancient India to connect the dots of the social reality of the time. In conclusion, it must be noted that power remained with the elite few, the nature and ideology of which is referred to as Brahmanism. Despite the Vaishnava and Shaiva traditions taking root, followed by the Bhakti or devotional movements which were major religious expressions for oppressed caste men and women, the cultural and religious expressions were still interpreted by Brahmanism. Omvedt concludes her section by stating that the Dalit-Bahujan masses could not maintain institutions, or become intellectuals, and even those who became rulers had to accept Brahmanic intellectual and social hegemony. It is remarkable to think how a study of Buddhism, like the study of caste, eventually leads to deeper insights into Brahmanism, headed by the Brahmins who, according to Omvedt, "constitute the single most powerful and wealthy social group, knit together by a sophisticated ideology and wide institutional networks." (Omvedt 2003, p. 184). The nature and complexity of the historical problem which resulted in the disappearance of Buddhism in India, perhaps called for a historical and religious intervention by Ambedkar in the form of a New Vehicle (Navayana) to bring the Buddhist tradition back to the land of its birth.

A close reading of some of the standout features of *BHD* indicates the way Ambedkar interpreted Buddha's life and message. Ambedkar tends "towards the ethical and social, away from the mystical and metaphysical", according to Fiske and Emmrich (Fiske and Emmrich 2004, p. 98). The move towards the ethical and the rational is evident but to say that it also includes a move away from the mystical and metaphysical is to undervalue the idea of conversion and the spiritual element of Navayana. This is where I bring in the idea of the sacred as Ambedkar believed and practiced even if the 'rational' aspects were emphasized due to the concern and threat posed by Brahmanism and its tendency to absorb other religions as its own. The introduction to the text by Ambedkar is an important part of *BHD*. Without it, the vital aspect of his interpretive lens is lost to the audience.<sup>6</sup> Fiske and Emmrich point out how the answers to the four problems Ambedkar frames are implicitly suggested in the section itself. The first problem relates to the reader and believer's reinterpretation (by way of rational, historical research) of the traditional understanding of Buddha taking the *parivraja* (renunciation) because he saw a dead person, a sick person, and an old person. The second question relates to whether the 'four Aryan truths' form part of the original teachings of the Buddha. Ambedkar uses the term 'Aryan' instead of 'noble' referring to the possibility of an outsider's interpretation of the Buddha.<sup>7</sup> This is again a question of historical facticity that is rooted in the understanding of religion as well as the idea of India's sacred past. A factual reading of history and Buddhism would give a large segment of the people of India, the oppressed castes, a historical anchor in its reading of the ancient Indian tales. Ambedkar here questions, "If there is no escape from sorrow, then what can religion do, to relieve man from such sorrow which is ever there in birth itself? The four Aryan truths are a great stumbling block in the way of non-Buddhists accepting the gospel of Buddhism. For the four Aryan Truths deny hope to man. The four Aryan Truths make the gospel of the Buddha a gospel of pessimism. Do they form part of the original gospel, or are they a later accretion by the monks?" (*BAWS II*, pg. 6). The author is skeptical about the origins of the aspect of *dukkha* among the noble truths and observes that it would discourage non-Buddhists from converting to Buddhism. It is the irony of converting to more sorrow from the already sorrowful realities of the Dalit people that possibly leads the author towards seeking joy rather than sorrow in religion.

The third problem, according to Ambedkar is, "if there is no soul, how can there be karma? If there is no soul, how can there be rebirth? These are baffling questions.

<sup>6</sup>The quotations are due in part because this section (Ambedkar's introduction to *Buddha and his Dhamma*) has been removed from the latest edition of Ambedkar's volume of *BHD* either because of a serious publishing error or as an attempt by the State (since it is published by Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India) at sanitizing Ambedkar's radical interpretation of Buddhism.

<sup>7</sup>4 Noble truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering.

In what sense did the Buddha use the words karma and rebirth? Did he use them in a different sense than the sense in which they were used by the Brahmins of his day? If so, in which sense?... is there not a terrible contradiction between the denial of the soul and the affirmation of karma and rebirth? This contradiction needs to be resolved” (*BAWS II*, p. 6). Problems 2 and 3 relate to the long history of give and take between Brahmanism and Buddhism in ancient Indian history and Ambedkar’s hermeneutics of suspicion regards the idea of rebirth. It is especially unjust for a person to be born in caste oppression and then be told that it is because of the sins committed in a past life. Lastly, the fourth problem relates to the contradiction involved in a religion that is either too inward-looking or is open to engaging with the people. It is stated as “... what was the object of the Buddha in creating the Bhikkhu? Was the object to create a perfect man? Or was his object to create a social servant devoting his life to service of the people and being their friend, guide and philosopher? ...” (*BAWS II*, p. 6). It poses a question on the contradiction between asceticism as a means of spiritual enlightenment as opposed to service to people as a way of attaining good deeds. At this point, Ambedkar interestingly ends the introduction by inviting the reader to be part of the making of the narrative and contribute their solution in a postmodern engagement with the reader. The sentiment and emphasis on the pursuit of truth in history is unique in the Buddhist tradition even if Ambedkar had his critics among the Buddhist orthodoxy of the time. If there is one point that cuts across the four problems stated by Ambedkar, it is the conviction surrounding the logical and rational idea of the sacred that he builds from the foundational doctrines of Buddhism.

Moving our attention to the main content of the book, the last three sections of the first chapter ‘Siddharth Gautama–How a Bodhisatta Became the Buddha?’ gives historical context to the Buddha’s predecessors and contemporaries. On line 20, there is a mention of ten Vedic Rishis as the most ancient and authentic creators of the mantras. The very next line, however, points to how the Buddha did not see anything morally elevating in the mantras. Similarly, the Buddha, according to Ambedkar, does not find anything in the philosophy of the Vedic Rishis who were “groping for the truth but did not reach it” (*BAWS II*, p. 83). It leads towards a section titled, ‘Kapila–The Philosopher’, whose philosophy of Sankhya is elaborated in the next 37 lines where Buddha’s acceptance of Kapila’s teachings were three things: “1. He accepted that reality must rest on proof. Thinking must be based on rationalism. 2. He accepted that there was no logical or factual basis for the presumption that God exists or that he created the universe. 3. He accepted that there was *dukha* in the world” (*BAWS II*, pp. 84-87); while the rest of Kapila’s teachings, Ambedkar adds, Buddha just bypassed as being irrelevant for his purpose. The rational or logical reading of Buddha’s learning and teaching becomes crucial in the interpretation and denial of the authority of the Vedas during the time of the Buddha. This is the period that contemporary Hindutva

organizations refer to as the glorious Vedic Age, and this is the same glory that Ambedkar debunks through a reconstruction of Buddha's role during the time.

The next section titled 'Bramhanas' (i.e. Brahmins) explains 'Sruti,' the common name that described both the *Vedas* and the *Brahmanas* as sacred books. It details the four theses of Brahmanic philosophy, the theory of Chaturvarna and its four rules, and how Buddha rejected Brahmanism as being opposed to the true way of life. The historical pointers that were made in 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution' gets a follow-up by laying the texts, ideas, and philosophy of Brahmanism in direct contrast with the teachings of Buddha. The animal sacrifices made by Brahmins is condemned by Buddha as false sacrifice. This is an example of how Brahmanism/Hinduism borrowed from Buddhism as Brahmins in the twentieth century have turned into proxy flag bearers of vegetarianism and ahimsa as explicated by Ambedkar in his other work 'The Untouchables.' Ambedkar in lines 32-36 explains the fixed order of Chaturvarna and how society is structured on the status conferred upon an individual by the accident of his birth. It concisely mentions how inequality in Brahmanism is based on its official doctrine which Ambedkar calls 'graded inequality' as the occupations were fixed based on birth, and so were other choices like the right to knowledge, or the right to bear arms. Ambedkar specifies that the Shudras and the women were the two classes most oppressed by Brahmanism and had no power to rebel against the system. Ambedkar's voice and Buddha's voice seem to blend in the last two lines 45-46 of the section. "Could it (*caste*) be amended? Knowing that it was a divinely ordained social order, he knew it could not be. It could only be ended" (*BAWS II*, p. 92, italics my emphasis). The rhetorical question of whether caste can be amended followed by Buddha's awareness of the religiously codified nature of caste and ensuing rejection of Brahmanism stands as a metaphor for Ambedkar's own engagement and failure with Hindu revisionism and eventual conversion to Buddhism.

The conversation on conversion in the Navayana movement is, I suggest, a trifecta of events, and represents the third strand of this section. 1. Buddha's conversion of his followers in the 6th century BC; 2. the decline of Buddhism in the seventh century CE; and 3. the event of Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism with thousands of his followers and in turn a revival of the Buddhist religion in India. I propose that for a precise understanding of the sacrality of the Navayana movement, it is important to understand the holiness with which the Buddha is worshipped, and the movement away from Hinduism and caste division, which is unlike other religious conversions due to the intersectional cosmologies between Brahmanism and Buddhism. Along with the sacred qualities attached to the act of moving away and into a new religion, a significant aspect of the idea of conversion as regards to Buddhism in modern India is the Bodhisattva-like stature of Ambedkar, the initiator of the movement, within the Navayana imagination of the sacred.

The large section titled, 'Campaign of Conversion' in *BHD* focuses on Buddha's quest for the conversion of his subjects. The decision to preach or not to preach itself bears major Buddhist connotations. The one who decides to preach is an enlightened being choosing to be a bodhisattva by renouncing further pursuit of salvation. Their immediate goal is to help others attain enlightenment. Ambedkar lays out in the form of the narrative, the decision of the Buddha to preach his doctrine after an encounter where the Brahma Sahampati (the king of Gods) appears before the Buddha and says, "Thou art no longer Siddharth Gautama. Thou art Buddha. Thou art the Blessed One who is blessed with the fullest enlightenment. Thou art the Tathagatha. How canst thou refuse to enlighten the world? How canst thou refuse to save erring humanity?" (*BAWS II*, p. 112). The appearance of the Brahma points to how the whole of Ambedkar's retelling or narrative is not as rational or logical as the reading of Ambedkar's introduction to the text suggests. The potential of a good story to create an impression in the minds of his readers in the *carita* tradition is not lost on Ambedkar. Additionally, there are a few concise instances and descriptions of conversion in the *Buddhacarita* of Asvagosa in the sixteenth Canto of the translation by Olivelle. The canto or text available in the manuscript of the canto starts with the first converts, "The four other mendicants then became converted, and the Buddha shines in the midst of his first five disciples like the moon surrounded by five stars" (Olivelle 2008, p. 419). It includes miracles and other events that resulted in the conversion of important people from the time like Yashas, and Auruvila Kashyapa.

Arriving at Kashyapa's residence, the Buddha asks for a residence in the hermitage. He is given the fire stall with a fierce snake. The mighty snake hisses fiercely at the Buddha, and the fire of his wrath sets the fire stall alight. The fire, however, does not touch the Buddha's body. Seeing the Buddha in the middle of that conflagration, the snake pays homage to him. The Buddha then takes the snake in his begging bowl, shows it to Kashyapa, and performs many miraculous deeds. Auruvila Kashyapa and his five hundred disciples become converts. Then Auruvila's two brothers, Gaya and Nadi, arrive there and are also converted (Olivelle 2008, p. 420).

The acts of the Buddha are represented using the strength of Buddha's wrath, and the taming of the fierce snake who ends up paying homage to the Buddha. Ambedkar carries forward the biographical tradition of ancient India and then adds to it his own modern interpretation. The enlightenment of the Buddha is poetic for Ambedkar as the more he learns about Buddhism in India through a literary, historical, and social lens, the more enlightened Ambedkar gets in terms of the social history of the nation in formation as well as the reasons behind the disappearance of Buddhism. The rest of the chapter on conversion sees Ambedkar's narration of conversion among the high

and holy, the low and the lowly, conversion of women, as well as the conversion of the fallen and the criminals. It portrays a religion that is inclusive and belongs to everyone across the caste and class divide, and it also shows how significant and symbolic the act of conversion is in Ambedkar's imagination of Buddha's campaign of conversion, and importantly, foreshadowing Ambedkar's own conversion in 1956.

The conversion of Ambedkar has a historical timeline of its own, and its beginning can be traced to the moment he announced, "I will not die a Hindu" at the Depressed Classes Conference at Yeola, near Nasik, on 13 October 1935. Zelliott classifies it as the "religious conversion movement, 1935-1956" of the larger Dalit movement for emancipation (Zelliott 2004). The public announcement leads to speculations as to which religion the "depressed classes" or the "untouchables" would convert into. The options were open and there were possibilities the community would convert to either Sikhism or Islam or Christianity, though according to Zelliott, the religion Ambedkar most seriously considered merging was Sikhism as it had the advantage of being an India-founded religion and it involved no loss of patriotism (Zelliott 2004, p. 161). The choice of an Indic religion and the question of patriotism reveal how none of the questions Ambedkar engaged with happened outside the realm of nation-formation. However, the main reasons for the delay in conversion, according to Zelliott is, "...none of the available choices were intellectually and politically suitable to him, and, more importantly, that he had opportunities to work for constitutional change, a method more suited to his abilities than working for a change of heart among caste Hindus or building a religious movement among Untouchables" (Zelliott 2004, p. 165). It is only after 1950 that Ambedkar started to speak more about Buddhism. The first instance of Ambedkar hinting at a move to Buddhism was when Mahar people at Dehu Road invited Ambedkar to dedicate a temple to Cokhamela in 1954, a fourteenth-century Mahar poet-saint. Ambedkar responded that he would participate if they would build a Buddhist Vihar (Zelliott 2004, p. 168). Eventually, the actual conversion only takes place in 1956 and, according to sources, the crowd present on *diksha* (initiation) approached half a million people.

Ambedkar received conversion at the hands of the eighty-three-year-old *bhikku* from Burma, and then administered the three refuges (*tisarana*), the five vows (*panca sila*), and twenty-two oaths of his own devising to the assembled multitudes. The *tisarana* is a Pali chant known throughout the Theravada Buddhist countries: I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the Dhamma (law, faith, right morality), I take refuge in the Sangha (the body of monks). The *panca sila* is also part of classical Buddhism: I will attempt not to take life, not to steal, not to lie, not to drink, to avoid wrongful sex. The twenty-two oaths combine an affirmation of Buddhism and a negation of Hinduism, and were made in Marathi, not Pali (Zelliott 2004, p. 168).

There is symbolic importance to the act of conversion and its sacredness. The religious experience of the *bhikku* from Burma, a country that is traditionally steeped in Buddhism and the classical Theravada form of Buddhism, along with the question of the public perception of the person entrusted with the task of conversion become important factors when it is a public personality that is converting in a socially and politically charged atmosphere. The administration of the three refuges and the five vows according to tradition, and in Pali, shows the importance and attention to detail Ambedkar paid to matters of history, tradition, and purity. The idea of the sacred on the day of conversion goes according to conventional and classical Buddhist tradition until the twenty-two oaths come into the picture. This phase of the conversion as an act exemplifies the radicality of Ambedkar and the thousands of Mahar people's conversion from caste-centric Brahmanism (or Hinduism as it is referred to in modern times) to Buddhism. It combines aspects of the sacred from which the community is moving away from with aspects of the sacred that the community is moving into. Fittingly, the twenty-two vows are inscribed in a structure at the site of conversion reminiscent of the Ashokan inscriptions from history.

A close reading of the vows reveals key insights in terms of its affective nature and the special role it plays by bringing Ambedkar's own words into the act of conversion for the Mahar community and the larger Dalit world today. The twenty-two vows by paying attention to the Hindu Gods, and deities in the first five vows, and symbolically relinquishes the Hindu religion they were born into. Additionally, the vow 19 indirectly invites Hindus in general to reflect and perhaps act against the detrimental role modern Hinduism and the caste division embedded in it plays in the oppression of the oppressed caste people. Dahat notes how Ambedkar's embracing Buddhism was a revolutionary call for a *Prabuddha* Bharat (Buddhist India), "...22 vows is a perfect path to make a journey from Hindu religion to Buddha's *Dhamma*" (Dahat 2019, p. 9). He further adds that "the 22 vows do not intend to insult or defame any god or goddess, but it is a sincere attempt to liberate the masses from slavery and blind faith of the masses" (Dahat 2019, p. 9). The sacred in this instance includes the de-hinduizing or de-brahmanizing process in the first five vows. The fifth vow or oath as compiled in Zelliott, "I do not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this propaganda is mischievous and false," takes the reader back to the question of the decline of Buddhism during the seventh century after the appearance of Shankara and the origin of Vaishnava and Saivite movements (Zelliott 2004, p. 170). The vows, by emphasizing history and religion, emphasizes de-brahmanizing the mind and then emancipating it through Buddha's principles and teachings.

Ambedkar's ideological and spiritual influence is ever-present in the making and current existence of the Navayana school of Buddhism. It is hence conceptually right

to call Navayana as Ambedkarite Buddhism. However, the spiritual importance of the role Ambedkar plays in the emancipation of the modern-day Dalit people makes him more than an icon, a sacred figure, as many of the portraits, garlanded idols, and the celestial place alongside the Buddha at shrines and viharas in India indicates. The sacred in the reading of the *BHD* and the Navayana textual tradition is not a connection with a specific God as Buddha himself is not imagined as a god. The idea of the sacred is not a religious opposition to the secular because it is specifically a religious movement that has a long tradition in India. The sacred is rational too but it is difficult to extricate the mystical and the miraculous from the rational as India's biographical (*carita*) tradition is based on narratives and stories. Ambedkar's emphasis on rationalism and logic in his writings is, I suggest in the article, to remove superstition and blind faith among the oppressed castes and the downtrodden people. It adopts a sacred turn in both the intertextual reading of the *BHD* and the relevance of twenty-two vows as, firstly, an intervention, and for the people, a deeply religious experience. Hence, the Navayana vehicle of Buddhism cannot be either solely classified as rational or just mystical because ultimately, its goal is emancipation by following the eightfold path of the Buddha, and the ten *paramitas* of the *dhamma*. This article argues that Ambedkar reformulates the idea of what it means to be sacred through his reading of language, history, religion and thereby advancing a second coming of Buddhism in India.

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## Caste Away: Perspectives on Caste-Equality Struggles in Tamil Nadu

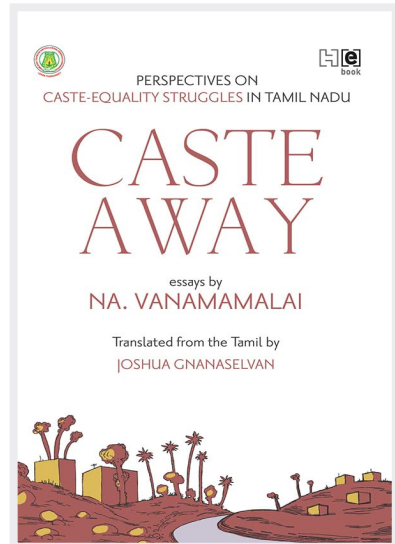
Essays by: Na.Vanamamalai

Translated by: Joshua Gnanaselvan

Publisher: Hachette India

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Reviewer: Thiyagaraj Gurunathan\*



An article published in *The Hindu* on June 20, 2024, came with the title “Caste Away”. It shed light on the gruesome “murderous assault on two Scheduled Caste (SC) siblings by their dominant community schoolmates in Nanguneri” (“Caste Away”, 2024, para. 1). The grave incident cannot be dismissed as a juvenile tussle or a one-off incident. The attack speaks volumes about the historical ostracisation of the lowered-castes<sup>1</sup> who were socially marginalised and violently subjugated on the basis of their caste identities. A plot that thickens for hundreds of years in the socio-political history of the Dravidian state, Tamil Nadu.

Amid these ongoing contexts of caste-violence and struggle for equality, Joshua Gnanaselvan’s book titled *Caste Away: Perspectives on Caste Equality Struggles in Tamil Nadu* was timely published in 2024. As a teacher-cum-translator, Joshua Gnanaselvan applies his expertise and ambition in the field of Dalit and postcolonial studies in this book translation. The book is a translation of collected essays produced

\*Faculty of English, School of Humanities and Management, National Institute of Technology Andhra Pradesh  
Email: g.thiyagaraj.gmt@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup>The article uses the term “lowered castes” instead of “lower castes” to signify the political undertones hidden in the semantics of our daily language, following the suggestion of S. Harikrishnan (2022).

by social activist Prof. Na. Vanamamalai (henceforth Na. Va), originally published in Tamil in 1980 under the title *Tamiḷ Nāṭṭil Cāti Camattuvap Pōrāṭṭak Karuttukkaḷ*.

Na. Vanamamalai was born in 1917 in Nanguneri, the same caste space where events like the discussed criminal assault against two students of lower-caste background continue to take place even in 2024. Prof. Na. Va established himself as an active member of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and among literary circles. He went on to establish the Nellai Literary Society in 1947. The author's critical thoughts on social equality are informed by his diverse interests in art, literature, culture, history, philosophy, anthropology and folklore. The source text, which was posthumously published by Makkal Veliyeedu (People's Publishing Company), informed the Tamil literary and research landscape of the writer's scholarly contribution. As contemporary writer Perumal Murugan rightly mentions, "caste is a universal issue" (Times News Network) and a translation of important works like Na. Va's has the potential to offer a remedy or even redeem the social fabric of a divided Indian society at large. As a popular figure among scholars of Tamil Studies, Na. Va's ideas on equality and social upliftment deserve a wider audience. Joshua Gnanaselvan's attempt to translate Na. Va's thought is prompt and much-needed in this regard.

In *Caste Away*, Gnanaselvan takes a hermeneutic approach for his translation that critically blends subjectivity, cultural understanding, and creative interpretation to bring out the source-text's archaic, cultural and linguistic layers into English. The translated text is a part of the initiative of the Tamil Nadu Textbook and Educational Services Corporation (TNTB & ESC) launched in 2021-22. This initiative, aptly named "*Thisaithorum Dravidam*" (meaning: Dravidam in all Directions), identifies nationalized social texts from Tamil and translates them into English, Kannada, Malayalam and Telugu. The translation is supported by Hachette India. The translation uplifts Na. Va's contribution and his critique of caste politics in South India as historically different from those in the North.

Structurally, the book begins with the translator's preface and acknowledgements. The translation retains the original format of the 1980 compilation by keeping the editorial notes of the first and second editions intact. The readers are gradually introduced to the translations of the two core essays by Na. Va titled "Perspectives on Caste and Equality Struggles in Tamil Nadu" and "Tamil Kings and Caste Divisions". The book ends with an extended glossary in the "Notes" section, which explains niche Tamil signifiers related to caste, and concludes with a valuable bibliography section. The text contextualises the history of caste-equality movements of Tamil Nadu in perspective, from the reign of the Chola era to the modern era and underscores the hypocrisies that carried along with the movement. Na. Va highlights how anti-caste movements were carried out by several dominant communities in Tamil Nadu solely

due to their antagonism towards Brahmanical superiority. These political movements were driven out of their agenda for social power rather than an ethical call for social equality per se.

## Textual Politics of Caste

The notion of caste derives its strength from the sacrosanct texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and Dharmashastras like *Manusmriti*. Countering this, the beginning of the twentieth century saw a rise in Tamil print culture that spoke volumes on caste equality. In his text, Na. Va denotes how the oppressed in Tamil Nadu subverted the Vedic prescriptions of the *varna* system by rewriting and manipulating the interpretations of these canonical texts. The conceptualization of the two-knowledge theory, which classifies the larger corpus of texts into ‘Arya Vedam’ and ‘Dravida Vedam’ further supports this line of argument. It fits the logic, as the Sanskrit word ‘*veda*’ literally signifies knowledge. While Arya Vedam included the aforementioned traditional and religious texts of North India, Dravida Vedam incorporated age-old texts from the *Cankam* era (approx. 200 BCE to 500 CE) like *Thirukkural* and *Shaiva Thirumuraigal* from Tamil literature.

To begin his literary criticism, Na. Va quotes from the book *Varuna Sinthamani* (1901) that marks this epistemological dichotomy. The book claims that “the Vedas contain neither support for the exaltation of the Anthanar (Brahmins) nor the debasement of the Shudras. The Vedas do not hinder all the varnas (castes) from intermingling, interdining and social-give-and-take amongst each other” (qtd. in Gnanaselvan 2024, p. 4). Denying Brahmanical superiority, *Varuna Sinthamani* hypocritically privileges the Vellalar community instead, who were followers of the Shaivite tradition, as opposed to Brahmins who followed principles of the Arya Vedas. Here, Na. Va cleverly highlights the textual politics given that the text was widely sponsored by wealthy folks from the Vellalar community.

Similarly, texts like *Paravar Puraanam* and *Kilaivalappa Maalai* received patronage from the Bharathavar and the Karkathar caste, respectively, to promote the presence (read: dominance) of their own community in Tamil society. These texts included fabricated narratives vis-à-vis made-up Puranic stories that supported their genealogical claim to divine ancestral ties and the royal lineages of the Tamil Kingdoms. More texts like *Kshatriyakula Vilakkam* (The Kshatriya Clan: An In-depth Overview) and *Nadar Kings and Nayaka Kings*, published by the Nadar community, not only asserted caste superiority but also appropriated themselves as *sandror* (learned).

Broadly, Na. Va argues that these textual fabrications had a twofold political agenda: i. to reject the superiority of Brahmins in the *varna* system, and ii. to establish themselves as dominant Vaishyas and those who laboured for them as inferior Shudras.

The author finds this perspective heavily problematic, critiquing this as self-defeating the goal of the caste-equality struggle in itself.

### **Left-Hand (*Idangai*) and Right-Hand (*Valangai*) Factions**

Going back in time in the section on “Tamil Kings and Caste Divisions”, Na. Va offers the broad canvas of the caste politics agenda in Tamil Nadu to historically situate these textual manipulations of history.

Historically, the caste communities in Tamil Nadu under the reign of the Chola Kingdom were categorized as *valangaiyar* (right-hand faction) and *idangaiyar* (left-hand faction). These groups carry the bodily metaphor of ‘hands’ to the sovereign head of the body politic—alluding to the Hobbesian and Manu’s political philosophy. The nomenclature signifies how they literally served as ‘hands’ that amassed wealth through land revenue and trade to the monarchs during Chola rule from the period of Raja Raja I. While land-owning castes like Vellalar headed the *valangaiyar* association, wealthy merchants like Chettis led the *idangaiyar* caste groups. The Vellalar caste had strong social and financial capital, and hence their faction was called the right-hand, and the groups that supported Chettis were called left-hand, as they were relatively weaker. Despite their power imbalance, the influential leaders of *valangaiyar* and *idangaiyar* shared a common trait in exploiting the labour of those peasant and artisan groups working under them, respectively.

More often, these differences and hierarchies were capitalized by the Chola rulers by levying tax burdens and curtailment of land rights. Na. Va brings evidence of how several riots broke out historically between the right-hand and left-hand groups against unjust differences in tax imposition, like in Rajamahendra Chaturvedi Mangalam, for which the temple inscriptions (Rajukumar 1974) speak volumes to date. What becomes a common factor here, as Na. Va puts, is that the collateral damage in these caste disputes, demonstrated under the façade of a struggle for caste-equality, is always borne by the lowered castes who remain marginalized vis-à-vis cast(e) away. Dominant *savarna* groups used caste-equality and feudal rights agitations as a leeway to gain power and exercise authority over the lowered communities.

### **Advocacy of Justice Against Caste Atrocities**

Na. Va’s contribution critically traverses the literary and historical politics of caste and also reads juridical controversies of the modern era. The author recalls the landmark judgement of the Chittoor District Adalat court in 1814 in a case between Marakasagayam Aasariyar (*idangaiyar*) vs Panchagam Gundaiyan (*valangaiyar*). The ruling came in favour of the *idangaiyar*, which condemned Brahmins to not prevent the Vishwa Brahma clan from solemnizing weddings quoting Vedic tradition. The

verdict came with an additional fine of Rs. 550 in 1818 for the damage incurred on the wedding event of the *idangaiyar* community by the upper castes. The court case comes as a reminder of how the weaker sections of society had to struggle for several basic rights, starting from the right to perform religious rites to even the right to die with dignity in the aftermath of caste homicides.

## Conclusion

Addressing the sensitive topic, Joshua Gnanaselvan's translation carefully reports on the original text, which makes generous references to Old Tamil lexicon owing to the historical data it (re)produces. The efforts undertaken by the translator contribute to the larger subaltern studies collective in bringing Na. Va's advocacy towards labour consciousness to the forefront. The book and its translation offers to rewrite caste history from below, i.e. geographies of the South that often suffer the risk of homogenization and essentialism in the discourse of critical caste studies in India. The text has 'labour consciousness' at its heart, owing to giving back the weightage it lost in the epistemological underpinnings of Brahminism. Particularly, the sincere efforts to transliterate, translate and explain the proverbial adage from *Thirukkural* are commendable, among other additional details taken with care. A matter of suggestion recommends caution with a few typographic errors, and the lack of diacritics in a rich Tamil translation could be affixed in newer editions.

Overall, the book should be of interest to scholars of caste in national and international contexts. It is not just a compendium of historical discussions but a rich resource to understand caste subalternity and resistance blending historical, religious, juridical and anthropological perspectives. Socially relevant, the text advocates against the caste pride that poisons the young minds of Tamil Nadu at present. Notwithstanding the perpetual caste violence following the Nanguneri incident (mentioned in the introduction), the one-man committee headed by Justice K Chandru recommended guidelines to appoint a Social Justice Monitoring Committee comprising academicians and activists to monitor social exclusion and bring inclusive forms of education ("Caste Away", 2024, para. 2). For many years now, every school textbook mandated by Tamil Nadu Uniform System of School Education (*Samacheer Kalvi*, meaning "Equitable Education") opens its cover page with three key aphorisms:

"Untouchability is a sin;  
Untouchability is a crime;  
Untouchability is inhuman".

A more critical discourse generated by texts like *Caste Away* can instill meaning into these stand-alone paper aphorisms, paving the way for quality education to all children that is rational, inclusive and empathetic.

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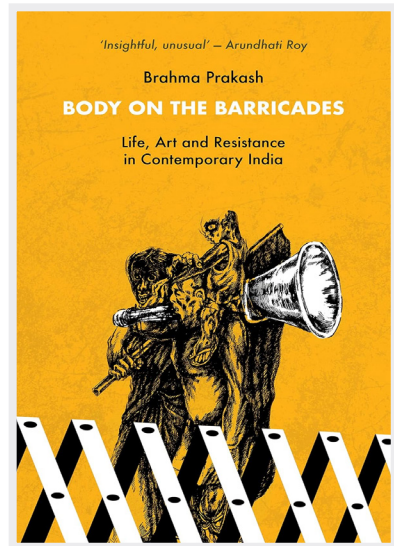
*Fairytales of Hope and Solidarity*  
**Body on the Barricades:**  
**Life, Art and Resistance**  
**in Contemporary India**

Author: Brahma Prakash

Publisher: LeftWord Books

Year: 2023

Reviewer: Subodh Kunwer<sup>1</sup>



Brahma Prakash's book *Body on the Barricades: Life, Art and Resistance in Contemporary India* has been widely discussed and reviewed, receiving significant appreciation and praise. Published in 2023, the book emerges at a critical juncture in Indian politics, following the protests against the *Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019* and the *National Register of Citizenship (CAA/NRC)* the farmer protest against the three farm acts in 2020-2021, the suffering of migrant labourers during the COVID-19 lockdown, and the decade-long criminalization and intensified targeting of dissent and protests. As Christophe Jaffrelot (2021, p. 1) argues, the adjectives used to describe the politics of India have changed over the years from “conservative democracy,” to one of “democratization of democracy,” and recently, towards what he characterizes as a turn to “ethnic democracy,” defined by systematic attacks on intellectuals, universities and anyone who dares to dissent (Jaffrelot 2021). Prakash makes an intervention addressing critical questions within left-liberal scholarship about building solidarity across diverse resistance movements, while attempting to theorize this possibility of solidarity and hope within the context of systematic curtailment. In Prakash's words, “curtailment

<sup>1</sup>Postdoctoral Fellow, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and Guest Faculty, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi  
Email: skunwer@aud.ac.in

can be of many things: body, words, rights, dissent, arts, expressions. Barricading can come in many forms: walls, ghettos, merits, aesthetics” (Prakash 2023, p. 17). Against these barricades and curtailments, the author argues for hopes of solidarity not from a sense of freedom, but from a sense of suffocation. The book brilliantly explores and urges for hope where one is pushed to the limits of breathlessness.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter, ‘When We Can’t Breathe: Living with Curtailment’ provides an analogy between breathing and freedom. Here, breathing not only carries the fundamental act of life but also symbolizes the essential measure of rights and life of the mind. To live a life of the mind, according to Arendt (1978), is being able to freely think, will and judge—“the ability to say this is wrong, this is beautiful...is not the same as the faculty of thinking...but the two are interrelated, as are consciousness and conscience” (Arendt 1978, p. 193). Whereas in the Indian context, Guru (2013) argues that dominant forces in the public sphere actively suppress the conditions necessary for a Dalit life of the mind—“the Dalit moral struggle... is to negate this social ecology and move away from it to join the public sphere where they can realise the life of the mind. Their struggle is to move away from the sensational to the intellectual sphere” (Guru 2013, p. 43). Breathlessness and curtailment are examined in relation to the state of suffering with COVID-19, and Prakash suggests that as we feel suffocated by the situation shaping Indian society, it is believed that collectivism is impossible; it is impossible to build solidarity. In his opinion, the simplest sense of ‘we’ can bring about collectivism; the shared space and feeling of breathlessness can offer “the possibility of common ground where all these differences might meet and engage each other” (Prakash 2023, p. 28). Drawing from bell hooks, Toni Morrison, and Ambedkar’s idea of ‘fraternity,’ Prakash sees the possibility of a ‘we feeling’. For hooks, this ‘we feeling’ arises through a shared emotional universe which transcends racial, sexual, class and gender difference to provide the grounds for solidarity: “To build solidarity in our struggle to end domination and oppression it seemed vital to draw attention to a shared humanity, and one location of that unity was present in our emotional universe” (hooks 2015, p. xii). Similarly, Morrison situates solidarity in terms of a shared moral occupancy of the world: “Of course there is cruelty. Cruelty is a mystery. But if we see the world as one long brutal game, then we bump into another mystery, the mystery of beauty, of light...there seems to be such a thing as grace, such a thing as beauty, such a thing as harmony...all wholly free and available to us” (Morrison 2019, p. 48). Ambedkar’s concept of *maitri* (fraternity), as interpreted by Prakash, similarly points toward a ‘we feeling’ that brings us together an ethical mode of collective belonging. He draws strength from this feeling, citing examples such as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, and highlights the state of breathlessness—‘I can’t breathe’—of Black lives within the White ideology of the

United States, as well as that of the Dalits and Muslims lynched by the Brahminical body politics of the Indian state. In this regard, Prakash notes that “the presence of bodies on the barricades indicates that they “are positioned in an extreme situation, teetering on the edge of hope and hopelessness” (Prakash 2023, p. 26).

It feels positive to see the passionate evocation of the ‘we feeling’ across all the sections with regard to suffering. This ‘we feeling,’ according to S. Reicher and Y. Jogdand (2017), is not the result of identities and emotions emerging from individual contemplation and appraisal; rather, it is actively constructed by mobilising agents. “We see them (the we feeling) as interlinked elements in a representational system which says who we are, where we stand in the world, and what we could or should do given this position” (Reicher and Jogdand 2017, p. 113). In this sense, this ‘we feeling’ emerges when individuals come to see themselves not as isolated individuals, but as members of a collective whose interests, experiences, and struggles are shared. I do wish to materialize that ‘we’ feeling, the hope, and solidarity on the ground. I do wish it to be true that “if the slogan captures George Floyd’s murder, it can also capture the shortness of breath that suffocates Indian sanitation workers to death” (Prakash 2023, p. 30). However, this idealized construction of the ‘we’ feeling, while compelling, raises questions about its historical grounding and practical applicability. When I delve into history, it suggests something else. The parallels drawn between Negro Slavery and Shudra Slavery, between racial and caste-based slavery, were first jotted down by Jotirao Phule when he dedicated his book *Slavery* to the emancipation of the Negroes and Shudras. Later, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his analysis of *Slavery and Untouchability* argued that untouchability in India was worse than slavery, studying and citing the Roman practices of slavery. However, the reality is far worse than the hopeful parallels drawn. In the words of Urvish Kothari (2020), “But the protests after George Floyd’s death, joined by a large number of White people in America and elsewhere, have shown hope for change in the US. However, these agitations are yet to inspire any movement for Dalits in India, except hashtags on Twitter.” A closer examination of the history suggests something else—while some Whites may stand strongly against slavery and with Black Lives Matter (BLM), the upper castes in India always find conditions to stand with the lower castes. There is no one from the upper castes who stood against casteism and Brahminism completely, without any conditionality.

This can be better understood by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s critique of caste society, where he observes why have the Brahmins not produced a Voltaire? According to him, “As is natural, every Brahmin is interested in the maintenance of Brahmanic supremacy be he orthodox or unorthodox, be he a priest or a grahastha, be he a scholar or not. A Voltaire among the Brahmins would be a positive danger to the maintenance of a civilization which is contrived to maintain Brahmanic supremacy... For, he fears

that it may affect the interests of his class and therefore his own” (Ambedkar 1990, vol. 7, p. 240). Prakash manages to capture this essential spirit of the two seemingly parallel yet markedly different moments or ‘practices’ of history.

In the second chapter ‘Words and Demagogues,’ Prakash beautifully explores the role of words, and how words function with examples, emotions, rationality, and historicity. Specifically, he delves into how demagogues or regimes of authoritarianism, and fascism operate through language, and how words can be manipulated to serve their agendas. Prakash emphasizes on how demagogues want to hear praise instead of criticism from art and literature. He argues that poets, writers and activists will have to play a crucial role in challenging the word’s meaning when their meanings are being twisted or erased. The chapter pays particular attention to the words being repeatedly uttered by the Prime Minister and the government leaders. Prakash highlights how the language of genocide can enter our discourse through these utterances, and how demagogues can appropriate historical figures like Kabir to further their ideology. In the case of Kabir, Prakash describes how Kabir’s words are used to attack Muslim religious practices while idealizing Hinduism.

While I agree with the analysis of this act of distortion and appropriation of subversive figures like Kabir, an examination of who has historically controlled the interpretation of Kabir’s words and teachings would have added to the analysis. Addressing these fundamental questions might provide insights into how such appropriation and distortion becomes possible and how it might be prevented. In this context, Milind Wakankar’s work (2010) becomes crucial, as he interrogates the relationship between subalternity and a religion, and how figures like Kabir cannot be viewed merely as a voice of resistance, which gets reinterpreted in the discourses of modernity, especially nationalism, which aims to fix Kabir into their cultural and ideological forms. In his words, “he has tried here to write a history of the traditions of Dalit (untouchable) sapience, which is to say the mystic traditions that are associated with the poetry of low-caste peoples. In instances such as the ‘Kabir’ corpus, which has grown over five centuries...” (Wakankar 2010, p. vii). According to Wakankar (2010, p. 75), “the name “Kabir” has today become synonymous with a typically postcolonial question in India...when Kabir arrived in Dwivedi’s *Kabir* as its eponymous hero, he seemed neither Dalit nor Muslim, and appeared unmarked by caste or religion; it was instead his uniquely Hindu and Indian way of being that was proclaimed by Dwivedi as the great event in Indian history, one that marked the birth of the modern Hindu subject.”

The third chapter, “Muslim Hating in the Bone of the Nation,” delves into the emergent hatred for Muslims—the Islamophobia prevalent in the country. Delving into his own family and his own experience around his village, Prakash in this chapter

conscientiously highlights the Islamophobia and contradictions around hate towards Muslims in a family. While reading the chapter, I felt that the narration of the author's family represents today's Hindu family. Prakash illustrates how hate gradually takes on a majoritarian character, affecting people's everyday negotiations with one another. With regards to that, the author does refer to how in the school in his childhood there was chanting of 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai,' and 'Vande Mataram' along with prayers to Hindu Gods and goddesses (Prakash 2023, p. 77). "One who eats beef can't be believed by Hindus"—this same thought was taught through pedagogy, in every school. While Prakash traces how this 'hatred in the bone' developed, he does not completely address the structural questions of why these attitudes became embedded in the educational system or examine who was instrumental in allowing such perspectives to become part of the school pedagogy. Without interrogating the ideological forces that allowed Islamophobia to enter the classroom, shape the curriculum, the critique of the hatred may remain superficial, limited to personal level, rather than addressing the fundamental systemic structures that produce hate.

In the second and third chapters, the author either misses or refrains from addressing the root of this issue, from where this hate or distortion derives its moral and ethical power? It is the underlying epistemological premise of the liberal-left, as explained by Gail Omvedt, "it is necessary to go beyond this debate which poses 'secularism' or a 'reformed Hinduism' as the alternative to Hindutva" (Omvedt 2011, p. x). Another important point I would like to make here is that, even while acknowledging the appropriation of Kabir and his conversion into a tool for spreading Hindutva has failed, nevertheless this failed attempt seems to place the moral responsibility on those who have safeguarded the real spirit of Kabir—those very communities, who have, in fact, preserved Kabir's legacy all along—given the fact that the followers of Kabir mostly belong to the so-called lower castes (Ranjan 2008). Conversely, the onus of perpetuating this authoritarian Hindutva should rightfully rest on those who have actively generated and nurtured this ideology from the very beginning.

The fourth chapter, 'Dance of the Migrant Laborers' captures the mass exodus of some of the most precarious laborers in the world when the Indian authorities suddenly announced a lockdown amidst COVID-19. It was a ghastly scene—"Crawling, crying, hiding, they were walking. The ill and the elderly were limping and walking. Small kids were crying and walking...pregnant women were pulling their bodies and walking, and so were the women on their periods" (Prakash 2023, p. 95). Prakash accurately brings to the fore the horrendous reality of migrant workers/labourers from the village and the cities against the conventional/stereotypical image of "the Indian village as an enduring space situated within an ideal past—the last refuge of sanity, order, and values in times of global disarray, a resilient idyll" (Prakash 2023, p. 100).

He poignantly argues that the migrant workers are neither part of the village nor the city. The Indian village has always made the lives of women, Dalits, disempowered castes, and other minority communities an unspeakable hell. Migration to the cities was a response to this deep-seated socio-cultural malady, but there also they remain outsiders. The city neither counts nor recognizes migrants as citizens. He rightfully states, “If Indian villages are dens, Indian cities are colonies, both in terms of thinking and in relation to spatiality” (Prakash 2023, p. 106).

The author advocates for workers to take a pause, to disrupt the mobility of capital for new possibilities, for a new movement, in a new time. Again, it must be addressed whether such a disruption has truly come to fruition. In my opinion, for this pause or disruption to be materialized, there must be a cultivation of values towards labor, life, and dignity. Without such values, any pause, whatever it may be, will be doomed to fail. Drawing from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s analysis of Indian caste society as a diseased society, one could argue that such a sick, infected society is incapable of responding to and upholding the basic principles of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. Unfortunately, the Indian collective conscience has yet to fully embrace these values. Moreover, in the context of caste and labor, Ambedkar argues that caste divides labourers, disassociates work from interest, disconnects intelligence from manual labor, and devalues individuals by denying them the right to cultivate vital interests. Caste prevents mobilization, resulting in a division of labor that is not based on choice or individual preference, but rather on the dogma of predestination (Ambedkar 1990, vol. 03, pp. 67-68). To argue that this new pause disrupting mobility—where immobility, alienation, and isolation already exist—will create new possibilities, merits critical examination, particularly given the existing structural constraints.

In the fifth chapter, ‘The Trial of Art,’ the author delves into the status of artists, writers and poets in the country. From Perumal Murugan’s declaration of his artistic death to the arrests of several activists (artists of Kabir Kala Manch, the Telugu poet Varavara Rao, and others) related to the Bhima Koregaon Conspiracy case, the author argues how the state’s problem with poets and artists is not about individual aberrations but in their fundamental social identities. Engaging with the whole saga of Bhima Koregaon Conspiracy case, the cacophony of the Urban Naxals, the condition of poets in prison, and so on, the author states that it is about the deteriorating health of democracy and the curtailment of breathing spaces (Prakash 2023, p. 129). He makes a point that “the poets and the state are in a ceaseless fight. They fight like a snake and a mongoose, with neck and noose, with words and bullets, with bodies and spectacles on penpoints and gun-points” (Prakash 2023, p. 130).

My contention here is how we perceive the character of the state in the Indian context. Speaking on the Village Panchayat Bill, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar mentions, “India is not Europe. England is not India. England does not know the caste system. We do”

(Ambedkar 1990, vol. 02, p. 114). Of course, today's state or the nature of the state in general, is oppressive. In the words of G. Aloysius (2010), it is the modernization and institutionalization of Brahminical societies as nation-states under the auspices of colonialism, where Brahminical ideology became the bedrock upon which multifaceted and modern institutional dynamics unfolded. However, considering the different manifestations of society and the state, I would like to say that in the context of a society in which the upper castes control the means, production and distribution of everything, this is the result of a society becoming more powerful than the state. In line with Ambedkar's discussion on the Village Panchayat Bill, "A population which is hidebound by caste, a population which is infected by ancient prejudices, a population which flouts equality of status and is dominated by notions of gradations in life, a population which thinks that some people are high and some are low—can it be expected to have the right notions even to discharge bare justice? Sir, I deny that proposition, and I submit that it is not proper to expect us to submit our life, our liberty, our property to the hands of these *panchas*" (Ambedkar 1990, vol. 02, p. 109). Unfortunately, the state has always been under the control of these *panchas*. The word *panchas* comes from the Hindi word *panch*, which literally means "five." *Panchas* traditionally, refer to five members of village councils (*panchayats*), who are usually from upper castes and act as decision-makers or arbiters in local disputes. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar argues that the upper caste Hindus largely controlled village councils; therefore, these local governing bodies reproduced caste oppression rather than delivering justice. For this reason, Ambedkar is deeply skeptical of the view of Indian village societies as democratic units. From this perspective, I argue that the modern Indian state has remained shaped by the same upper-caste *panchas* that historically controlled what we now consider 'society'.

The sixth chapter, 'March of the Mustard,' is centered around the farmers' protests in Delhi, drawing parallels with movements such as the Shaheen Bagh protest against CAA/NRC in 2019, the Dalit Protests in April 2018, the student protests following Rohit Vemula's death in 2016, and the Una protest in Gujarat after the flogging of Dalit youth. The author has huge hopes for these protests as they have shattered the image of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and forced the government/the authority to reconsider its stance. In the words of the author, "A protest does not end in immediacy. It travels unknown paths. It leaves its shadow" (Prakash 2023, p. 145). Prakash highlights the significance of the historical protests, such as the Mahad Satyagraha led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the farmers' protest led by Mahendra Singh Tikait. However, in my opinion, no matter how inspiringly the language is used, the question remains: who remembers Ambedkar's Mahad Satyagraha, and who remembers Tikait's farmers' protest? What are the reasons for suppressing one history, and attempting to erase and downplay another? Even before we ask these questions, we must contemplate:

can there be unity among these protests? Without grappling with these challenging questions, the optimism and poesy of utopian language may prove fleeting.

The seventh chapter, titled 'A Siege Against the Siege,' delves into the Una Strike in 2016 and the Bharat Bandh strike on 2 April 2018, essentially focusing on how Dalits have protested caste atrocities and the Hindu social order. In this chapter, Prakash foregrounds caste ideology and the Hindu moral framework most explicitly in his discussion of Dalit movements, while in earlier chapters, he engages extensively with demagoguery, Islamophobia, and the plight of the migrant labourers, treating the same structural forces more implicitly and indirectly. This treatment of engaging with various issues raises a broader question: if caste ideology and Hindu social norms shape the social order so profoundly, should they not also be considered as structuring forces across all chapters? Scholars such as Aloysius (2010) and Ambedkar (1990) have argued that Brahminical caste values permeate not only social life but the state, economy, and its institutions. If one takes this perspective as the analytical premise, one may ask whether the book would benefit from articulating these structural connections more consistently across all chapters, rather than highlighting them primarily in this Dalit-focused chapter, primarily in the discussion of Dalit movements. If this perspective is taken as an analytical premise, it raises the concern whether the book might benefit from drawing these structural connections more consistently across its chapters, rather than highlighting them primarily in the discussion of Dalit movements. Doing so would also strengthen the book's claim to offer a coherent account of how caste ideology shapes multiple crises and suffering in India.

The eighth chapter, 'A Show for the Dead,' is about the concerns that connect us to mourning and its curtailment by an authoritarian regime centering around the situation in Kashmir, and also regarding the Hathras gang rape case of 2020 in Uttar Pradesh. Mourning, unlike grieving, is a collective expression and has been subject to ban in many countries. Mourning was banned in Kashmir as well as in Hathras. According to Prakash, "When the last refuge of humanity—grieving—itself is perceived as a threat. The one who grieves is placed under surveillance" (Prakash 2023, p. 184). Here again, with the ban on mourning in Hathras, Prakash mentions how caste society functions, "In Indian caste society, this comes with a serious warning: mourning and vulnerability should not become permanent emotions" (Prakash 2023, p. 199).

Moreover, my contention with such writing or the liberal notion of suggesting that everyone suffering should come together is that the suffocation presented as universal is not genuinely universal. The suffocation experienced by the well-to-do class is not equivalent to that experienced by sanitation workers, for instance. T.M.

Krishna's struggle with darkness cannot be equated with the suffocation endured by sanitation workers. Of course, the author does not attempt to equate them; rather, he speaks about universality, aiming to create solidarity among them all. For example, he highlights that "farmers from Punjab were not asking for liberty and freedom. They were fighting to defend their life and sustenance. The question of *Jal Jangal Jameen* for the Adivasis is not one of love and freedom but a matter of survival" (Prakash 2023, p. 40). My point here is that without a clear understanding of who the real perpetrators of this darkness are, the hope and solidarity Prakash speaks of needs further detailed and critical examination. An anti-caste perspective might help us understand why certain opportunities for social transformation remain unrealized. This recalls Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's (1990 vol. 17, pp. 141-147) questions in "*What Way Emancipation*": "Is there any Sympathy for you in Hinduism? Is there Equality for you in Hinduism? Have you had any Freedom in the Hindu Religion? Is internal reform of the Caste System virtually impossible?" Perhaps we might ask, how many fairytales of hope and solidarity will we be presented with before realizing that there's such an erroneous understanding? Do we realize that something is clearly amiss and needs sincere intervention? Utopia is powerful, but it must claim some kind of reality, the reality of possibilities and of being possible, as demonstrated by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar through his conversion to Buddhism and Kanshiram by conceptualizing a "*Bahujan* society;" as the language of imagination was made possible by Gail Omvedt through her "*Seeking Begampura*." It may be argued that hope and acknowledgment have to go together.

In conclusion, Brahma Prakash's *Body on the Barricades* stands out as a significant intervention in today's Indian political and cultural debates, blending personal reflection, cultural analysis, and critique. Across its eight chapters, the book maps out recent movements—from the (CAA/NRC) protests and the farmers' movement to the COVID-19 migrant labourer's plight to the targeting of artists, activists, and the rise of state authoritarianism. The central argument revolves around the possibility of solidarity arising from shared experiences of "breathlessness" and curtailment, linking diverse struggles across caste, class, and religious lines. Beyond documenting key moments of resistance, the book also provides a sharp lens on state repression. General readers interested in understanding India's current political moment will find accessible entry points through Prakash's narrative style, while academic readers may want to engage with the work's theoretical claims more critically. Ultimately, the book makes an important contribution by sparking discussions around resistance, hope, and the possibility of transformative change in India today.

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