HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ANTI-CASTE UTOPIAS: A DALIT BAHUJAN DISCOURSE

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CASTE

A GLOBAL JOURNAL ON SOCIAL EXCLUSION

HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ANTI-CASTE UTOPIAS:
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VOLUME 4, NUMBER 2

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N. Sukumar[i], Kristina Garalytė[ii], Shailaja Menon[iii]

Introduction

The term 'Utopia' was coined by Thomas Moore in 1516, to christen the island mentioned in his book. It was rooted in the Renaissance, a historical phase during which the glories of ancient Greece and Rome were exemplars for the intellectual development of European society. Moore wrote his *Utopia* inspired by the letters in which Amerigo Vespucci, Christopher Columbus and Angelo Poliziano described the discovery of new worlds and new peoples; geographical expansion inevitably implied the discovery of the *Other*. And Moore used the emerging awareness of otherness to legitimize the invention of other spaces, with other people and different forms of organization.[1] Moore resorted to two Greek words—*ouk* (that means not and was reduced to *u*) and *topos* (place), to which he added the suffix *ia*, indicating a place. Etymologically, utopia is thus a place which is a non-place, simultaneously constituted by a movement of affirmation and denial.[2] For Karl Mannheim, utopia is something that 'is in incongruity with the state of reality within which it occurs'.[3]

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*'Prabuddha Bharat', or Enlightened India was a newspaper launched by B.R. Ambedkar on February 4, 1956 which continued till his death in 1956.

[1]For a detailed discussion refer, see Louis Marin, 'Frontiers of Utopia: Past and Present', *Critical Inquiry*, 19:3 1993, pp. 403–411, and Darko Suvin, 'Theses on Dystopia 2001', in Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 187–201.

[2]Fatima Vieira, The Concept of Utopia, p. 3, 88jNDbcMKtgYwBum3751sPEdukMaPsdfQ5unaT 2ZESWMHE5HwtMbKsCTNz9d1yNwRJBiBVqzddbufT4T9K9ThmD8DydUZK5

[3]Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1936, p. 216.

Thus, a utopia is an alternative means of organizing society; nurtured by the myth of the 'golden age' similar to many religious and mythical archetypes. Historically, the concept of utopia has been defined with regard to one of four characteristics: (1) the content of the imagined society (i.e. the identification of that society with the idea of 'good place', a notion that should be discarded since it is based on a subjective conception of what is or is not desirable, and envisages utopia as being essentially in opposition to the prevailing ideology); (2) the literary form into which the utopian imagination has been crystallized (which is a very limiting way of defining utopia, since it excludes a considerable number of texts that are clearly utopian in perspective but that do not rigorously comply with the narrative model established by Moore); (3) the function of utopia (i.e. the impact that it causes on its reader, urging him to take action; a definition that should be rejected as it takes into account political utopia only); (4) the desire for a better life, caused by a feeling of discontentment towards the society one lives in (utopia is then seen as a matter of attitude).[4]

One needs to keep in mind that utopias emerge out of human intervention, a result of concrete human action and not because of divine munificence. As argued by Karl Mannheim, the future came to be perceived as the time of fulfillment of ideas that was not to be faced as mere dreams or wishes, but as something that was to be achieved.[5] Thus, utopias are strategies which question the present realities and dream of future possibilities. It is a creative endeavour which influences multiple aspects of society and has implications on politics, economy, social relations and even pedagogies. At present, utopian imaginations are no longer confined to the literary or philosophical domains, but articulated in multiple genres; through pedagogies,[6] culinary traditions,[7] musical and cultural performances and individual forays towards emancipation. In many ways, it remains a work in progress, a gradual process of social transformation.

Thus, the aspiration for a utopia is not only universal but also perennial. The possibility of a new social vision has always enthralled humans from the biblical Garden of Eden to various philosophies and literary imaginations. Utopian visions have been largely analyzed through the Western philosophical traditions. What about similar ideas and expressions in societies, vastly different in social and cultural traditions, with diverse political and religious groups? In the Indian subcontinent, it is possible to find utopian lexis both in religious and secular terms. From the Buddhist idyll of 'Maitreyi' or fraternity to the Kingdom of Ram—'Ram Rajya' a mythical golden age to the more prosaic 'Begumpura', the City without Sorrow envisaged by Ravidas. Gail Omvedt observed that utopian imaginings are found at a lower level of society in her seminal work—'Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-Caste Intellectuals'.[8] Thomas Moore composed his work in Latin which is an exception. In the Indian context, utopian visions were seldom in Sanskrit but rather in the language

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[4]Fatima Vieira, op. cit., p. 4.
[5]Karl Mannheim, op. cit.
[6]N. Sukumar, Teaching Dalit Bahujan Utopias in the Classroom (in this volume)
[7]Kristina Garalytė, Imagining an Anti-caste Utopia Through Food (in this volume)
[8]Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-Caste Intellectuals*, Navayana, 2008, p. 7.

of the masses.[9] This also explains the lack of proper documentation as writing as a skill was not permissible to the common people in India. Many of these visions were in the form of poems, ballads and songs which were orally transmitted through generations. Often utopias were envisaged on religious lines, a heavenly city for the chosen few who remained faithful to all the sacraments. In the brahmanical vision of the 'golden age', humans need to pass through numerous cycles of birth and death to attain salvation. A Boddhisatta imagined 'Sukkavati', a land of joy in which all would find liberation. Likewise, Tukaram talked of Pandharpur and Kabir composed verses dreaming of Premnagar—a city of love or Amrapur where people will attain immortality. These musings transcended binaries of gender/language/geographies and social locations. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein imagined 'Ladyland' wherein women were well versed in science and technology, including armed conflict and their knowledge enabled them to control natural resources. Her evocative portrayal of a feminist utopia in 'Sultana's Dream' countered the fetters on women's access to public space during her lifetime. Similarly, Pandita Ramabai sought to create a community of women in her 'Mukti Sadan' or the abode of freedom wherein widows would farm the land, harvest crops, get educated and publish various writings. These autonomous spaces sought to re-imagine womanhood and their agentiality.[10]

The volume under review was originally proposed for a panel for the European Association of South Asian Studies Conference in Vienna in 2021. Some of the papers were presented as part of the conference and the rest were contributed through a special call by *J-Caste*. The contributions in this specific issue (**Historical and Contemporary Anti-caste Utopias: A Dalit Bahujan Discourse**) will touch upon the following questions: Did the idea of utopia vanish in the contemporary times? Are there any anti-caste imaginations in the experiences of various Dalit-Bahujan groups while they challenge the 'dominant' social order? What utopias are conceptualized through Dalit religious conversions? How can anti-caste utopias be part of the pedagogy? Is it possible to articulate utopias through everyday materiality of lived traditions? The contributors range from research scholars and faculty in various institutions. The articles are divided into following four themes.

Ideating Utopias

In the Indian context, many radical versions of utopia were conceived. The imagination of utopias located in the uncertain future carried within kernels of an alternative reality and a possibility of social transformation. Very often they inspired ordinary people to strive to create a better life for themselves. One such revolutionary thinker was Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy, revered as Periyar, who through his political ideas, writings and speeches, worked to create a discursive context which enabled women to be part of the public domain and express their politics in various forms. The article, *Periyar: Forging a Gendered Utopia* by Shailaja Menon reflects upon Periyar's

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[9] Omvedt, ibid., p. 15.
[10] Refer, S Menon, Periyar: Forging a Gendered Utopia, in this volume

articulations on sexuality, masculinity, and the need for a new aesthetics which would prove to be more liberative for women. K.S. Madhavan and Rajesh Komath, in *Dalits and Discourses of Anti-caste Movements in Kerala, India* strive to locate various historical discourses of anti-caste imaginaries and articulations that are imprinted in the historical past of Kerala society. As ideologies and its consequent effects upon society are political, the article substantially makes interventions and interprets the Dalit-Bahujan world grounded on the lived experiences of Dalits in Kerala. It brings forth discourses of social movements, production of Dalit icons, critical narratives on untouchability and communist positions about the caste. Akanksha Sanil attempts to weave together an intertextual analysis on the case of the caste subaltern, through three widely acknowledged texts—'Laws of Manu' (*Manavdharamshastra*), Jyotiba Phule's 'Slavery' (*Gulamgiri*), and B.R. Ambedkar's 'Annihilation of Caste', through focusing on ideals of society and governance. In her article, *Revisiting Inequality and Caste in State and Social Laws* she argues that these texts are significant as they present a historical legacy into the origins of social hierarchy, its influence on the nature of nineteenth century colonial India, and the responses through constitutional values.

Understanding Social Movements

Anti-caste utopian imaginaries can be tied to the larger imaginaries of the pan-Indian Dalit community, but they can also stem from a very specific caste group experience. Many Dalit communities took the opportunity offered by the changing socio-political and economic scenario to better their situation. A few converted to different religions historically over a period of time, the state also helped Dalit groups through affirmative action policies and struggles over land reflected the changing aspirations of the once oppressed communities. Such counter narratives were also expressed through cultural idioms wherein once stigmatized habits/spaces were sought to be reclaimed with a sense of pride. While examining the instances of Dalit conversions that have taken place in independent India, L. David Lal, delves into three significant aspects: first, comprehending the acquired religious identity of Dalits; second, exploring the aspirations of Dalit converts; and third, examining the construction of a utopia within the context of the adopted religion. Additionally his article, *In search of a Utopian Society: Situating 'Dalit' Conversions in Contemporary India*, argues that Dalit conversions should not be regarded as an endpoint but rather as a transformative journey into an envisioned utopia. Similarly, the first novel in Malayalam by a Dalit Christian, *Pulayathara* by Paul Chirakkarode is the focus of Bincy Maria's paper. She notes that with the publication of his work, Chirakkarode heralds a shift in the literary representation of Dalit Christians in Malayalam novels. Until then, Dalit Christians were either embedded under the category of Dalits or completely ignored in the literary imagination. Significantly, it makes a departure from such erasures and marked a significant moment in Dalit writing in Kerala. Moreover, it is a discourse of discontent and dissent against Brahmanical Christianity.

Anand Mehra's article *The Bir Sunarwala: An Uncharted Dalit Land Movement of Haryana, India,* puts the land question at the centre of the anti-caste struggle. It begins with a discussion on B.R. Ambedkar's ideas on the necessity of land possession for the empowerment of Dalits. Then it sheds light on the various land movements across India since the second half of the twentieth century. The article culminates with the analysis of the six-year-long Bir Sunarwala land movement (back then Punjab, currently Haryana) to reclaim the land given to and then taken away from the Dalit community by the government. Anand reconstructs the political events enacted by those in power and the initiatives and sacrifices by the land movement activists that finally led to the successful outcome. Maya Suzuki's paper *Socio-spatially Segregated Experience of Urban Dalits and their Anti-caste Imagination* discusses the material reality of Balmiki life and the politics of Balmiki worship and identity in Delhi. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Balmikis have been closely related to the Indian state's social policy. Their employment in the government's sanitation sector led to the creation of profession-related caste colonies that, on their own, began forming their residents' identities. Central to the Balmikis' identity are professional occupation, shared segregated living space, and religious practices.

Since the 1950s, affirmative action policies by the state have ensured that the marginalized communities get access to education. Gradually, the first generation of educated SC/ST students began to critique the entrenched socio-economic and cultural hierarchies. This led to the emergence of a vibrant cultural movement on many campuses which countered the 'mainstream' habitus. In her article *Imagining an Anti-caste Utopia Through Food: Dalit Student Politics in Hyderabad, India*, Kristina Garalytė showcases the significance of the beef symbolism within the Dalit student movement in Hyderabad. She presents a detailed analysis of the Beef Anthem by Sharath Naliganti, incorporating her first hand observations during fieldwork and interviews with Dalit activists on university campuses. Her analysis reveals the complex interpretations and tactics associated with the beef issue as an integral symbol of the anti-caste movement. Though strongly rooted in the Madiga caste group experience and culture, the beef issue within the Dalit movement in Hyderabad was employed for the broader anti-caste alliance-making, including Dalits and other religious minorities, against the backdrop of the growing influence of Hindu Right politics. The beef issue allowed Dalit students to communicate the anti-caste sentiment among the larger social groups not limited to Dalits.

Subaltern Counter Publics

Throughout various historical junctures, Dalit Bahujans have strived to de-brahmanize the established knowledge traditions and in the process emphasize the 'politics of difference'. The articles in this section attempt to de-centre grand narratives and create a subaltern public which exhibits its own agency to negotiate the world. Chandraiah Gopani's essay, *Democratizing Spiritual Sphere: Radical Bhakti Traditions in the Telugu-speaking Region in India* focuses on the radical bhakti traditions led by Yogi Vemana, Pothuluri Veerabrahmam and other thinkers in the Telugu region which

shaped new value systems, cultural practices, language and other art forms, etc. These subaltern saints created a new phase in the socio-cultural history of India. Their critique against Brahmanism, caste discrimination, social inequalities and the rejection of Vedic scriptures have created a foundation for the modern anti-caste consciousness of subaltern communities in the Telugu region. Similarly, K. Kalyani in *Repertoires of Anti-caste Sentiments in the Everyday Performance: Narratives of a Dalit Woman Singer* attempts to read Dalit women through their lifeworld and life-narratives. This enables one to understand the caste relations that they negotiate with in their everyday life. Resistance in the everyday life of Dalit women includes how they challenge the existing public spaces, cultural norms, and practices through the creation of a 'subaltern counter-publics' space. This space involves collective actions like popular writing, singing, theatrics, etc., to confront the 'normalised' caste relationship that prevails within Indian society. The cultural performance becomes the narrative of this counter-publics space in which they intend to reassert their lost identity and dignity.

Reclaiming Epistemic Agency

The production of knowledge in India operates within a rarefied domain enclosed within the structures of caste, class, ethnicity and gender. This has enabled the unabashed peddling of one-dimensional epistemology of glorifying the past, justifying the prevalent social hierarchies and manufacturing consent for the existing social order. Periodically, the status quo was interrogated and the resultant debates are secreted within the pages of history. Rarely if ever, these contestations become a part of the pedagogy thereby igniting a quest for a more emancipatory social apparatus. The articles in this section reflect on how the marginalized social groups contest entrenched knowledge production. N. Sukumar's *Teaching Dalit Bahujan Utopias: Notes from the Classroom* is based on discussions with various stakeholders—academic committees who decide on pedagogy, feedback from students and classroom engagements for more than five years. The pantheon of thinkers who advocated an Indian version of liberation theology was never engaged with at an ideological level. The everyday engagements with the students who joined the course/s and their interactions in the classroom provide a multi-layered understanding of negotiating Dalit-Bahujan utopias.

Smita Patil in *Raving with Equality? On Protean Forms of Caste and Gender in the Women's/Gender Studies Departments in India* continues the discussion. She points out that caste operates as a social and political category that regulates any form of change. It persists as a constant threat to the right to education of the oppressed castes in general and the women from the oppressed castes in particular. Her work explores the experiences of Dalit women who are working as academics in the Women's and Gender Studies departments in Indian educational institutions and reflects on the prevalent caste and gendered hegemony.

The Scheduled Caste identity is a legal entitlement and the reservation policy has further institutionalized this identity in academia and other spaces. Various surveys by government departments[11] reflect the gains made by SC girls to access education due to different provisions made by respective governments; scholarships, bicycle schemes, hostel facilities and implementation of reservations which created an enabling environment. Anusha Renukuntla and Ashok Kumar Mocherla in *The Caste of Campus Habitus: Caste and Gender Encounters of the First-generation Dalit Women Students in Indian Universities* attempt to unravel the lived experiences of the first-generation Dalit women students while navigating through the campus spaces. Here, caste acts as a strong cultural capital for certain individuals while marginalizing the other. Their educational trajectory present unique challenges as they confront the process of learning, the significant role of non-academic spaces in reinforcing inclusion and exclusion, survival strategies of negotiations, and social agencies in contesting the conventional glass ceilings through the acquired cultural capital are significant lines of inquiries which this article aims to cover.

The present volume would not have seen the light of day but for the generous support of *J-Caste's* Editorial Team, Prof. Laurence R. Simon, (Brandeis University, USA), and Prof. Sukhadeo Thorat (Emeritus, JNU, India). They were patient with our queries and helped to fine-tune the entire process from the concept note till the final publication. We are also grateful to Dr. Afia A. Adaboh (Associate Editor, Pre Production (Brandeis University, USA) and Dr. Vinod Kumar Mishra, Production Editor (Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi) who assisted with the timelines and coordinating with the contributors and reviewers. A word of thanks to all the anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments and academic support. This really helped many young scholars just commencing their academic journeys.

As mentioned earlier, the idea was originally proposed for a panel for the European Association of South Asian Studies Conference in Vienna in 2021. Many scholars had evinced interest in the panel and eventual publication of all the papers but some backed out due to various reasons related to the pandemic. Later, many other scholars contributed during a special call for papers and finally after two years, the final publication is coming out. We are extremely grateful to all the contributors who are part of this journey to reflect on utopias and their role in our lives.

In addition, four articles showcase the results of J-CASTE's Bluestone Rising Scholar Competition 2023. The competition recognizes individuals who show great promise to make outstanding scholarly contributions in their future careers to the study of caste. The 2023 prize have been awarded to two early career scholars.

Sephora Jose in her article, *When Fists Write (of) the Past: Conceptualising Dalit Historiography through the Cultural Productions of Dravida Varga Aikya*

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[11]All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) of 2011–12 and 2018–19, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India.

Munnani attempts to theorise Dalit historiography as a resistance epistemology by outlining its methodological and thematic aspects. Second winner, Sandhya Balasaheb Gawali in her article *Narratives from the Margin: Sexual Harassment and Strategies of Resistance* argues that mainstream discourse on sexual harassment does not acknowledge experiences of women from the bottom of the socio-economic margins and it is a caste-blind gender discourse.

Bluestone Rising Scholar Honorable mentions have been awarded to two outstanding scholars: Saroj Shinde's article, *"Our Poverty has No Shame; the Stomach has No Shame, so we Migrate Seasonally": Women Sugarcane Cutters from Maharashtra, India* and Jatin's *Utilizing Dalit Autobiographies in History.*

The issue also includes the review of the recently published book, *Scheduled Castes in the Indian Labour Market: Employment Discrimination and its Impact on Poverty.*

The Bir Sunarwala: An Uncharted Dalit Land Movement of Haryana, India

Anand Mehra[1]

Abstract

Dalits are the lowest social group in the Indian caste hierarchy, formerly known as 'untouchables'. They have been subjected to centuries of discrimination, violence and continue to face widespread social exclusion and economic deprivation. In rural areas, Dalits are often forced to live in segregated quarters and are denied access to common resources such as wells, temples, schools and land. They are often forced to do the most menial and degrading work, such as manual scavenging and cleaning toilets. This exclusion and humiliation are rooted in their lack of access to socio-economic capital, namely, land. As the world's primary source of wealth, land plays a significant role in the life of rural communities, transforming into a socio-economic reality. Dalits are historically landless; in this outbreak, they participated in various land movements to access land. Landless Dalits and other agricultural labourers fought alongside peasants for better wages, land ownership and to end the practice of forced labour. However, Dalit struggles always remain subordinate to peasant struggles. In this context, this study examines Haryana's rarely documented and majorly unknown Dalit land movement that took place in 1973 at Bir Sunarwala village of Jhajjar district of Haryana. Additionally, this study seeks to highlight the significance of the Bir Sunarwala land movement within the broader framework of the Dalit movements in India.

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Land and Its Importance

Land has been the most crucial source of power and authority for centuries. Dalits were historically deprived of landholdings. According to Ambedkar, "Religion, social status, and property are all sources of power and authority, which one man has to control the liberty of another" (Ambedkar 1979: 45). The caste system and the practice of endogamy restrict property to a particular caste and social group with traditional inheritance and restrictions. Due to these caste regulations, Dalits were subjected to bondage labour and experienced extreme poverty. They were unable to purchase land due to lack of resources. Ironically, even if they have money, they are prohibited from buying land in various parts of the country. For instance, the *Land Alienation Act* of Punjab of 1900. It stated that Dalits were not permitted to own land, even if they had the capacity, because they were not recognised as agriculturalists. They were forced to work as landless labourers (Ambedkar 1989: 23). Ambedkar called these caste-generated problems primarily economic in nature. In this context, stressing the importance of the economic empowerment of Dalits, he gave the reference of Yudhishthira from Mahabharat:

> When the army of Kauravas and Pandavas came face to face on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Yudhishthira saw Bhishma, Drona and other great persons on the Kaurava's side. He thought he should go and seek the blessing of those elders. Therefore, he kept his arms on the ground and went to them. They had to bless Yudhishthira. However, they realised their position, and before Yudhishthira could ask them why they were with Kauravas, knowing fully well that they were on the wrong side, they replied out of shame that man is a slave of money; money is nobody's slave. This being the truth, O King Yudhishthira! Kauravas have bonded us with money. The same situation is with untouchables (Jadhav 2015: 65).

Such is the power of money, and the same is true for land, particularly in rural areas. Land is an important asset that indicates the economic position and serves as a proxy for social and political strength (Sridevi 2020: 207). Since the so-called 'upper-caste' monopolised land and other resources, Ambedkar termed the Dalits as under "corporate bondage" (Kumar 2020: 40). In this vein, Ambedkar recommended the formation of a Settlement Commission to build distinct villages for Dalits (Kumar 2020: 49). He argued that the key to raising the social standing of the Dalits is possible through their economic independence. To improve their lives, the government must provide them land. He stated:

> Unless and until doors are open to them where they can find *gainful occupation*, their economic emancipation is not going to take place. They are going to remain slaves, if not slaves, serfs of the land-owning classes in the villages. There can be no doubt on that point at all. Now, Sir, out of these gainful occupations I personally feel no doubt that the most important thing on which

> government ought to concentrate is the giving of land to the Dalits. They must be settled on land so that they might obtain independent means of livelihood, cease to be afraid of anybody, walk with their heads erect and live fearlessly and courageously (Ibid.: 41).

It was anticipated that by implementing these remedies, cultivable wasteland, government land, forest land, and pasture would be redistributed to Dalits, resulting in two interconnected outcomes: landholding would provide a source of livelihood and a reasonable income for Dalits in village society, and land ownership would eventually lead to Dalit's economic independence from rural society (Ibid.: 51). Ambedkar wants state assistance in the execution of these reforms. He observed that:

> If the state refrains from intervention in private affairs, economic and social, the residue is liberty. But…to whom and for whom is this liberty. Obviously, this liberty is liberty to landlord to increase rents, for capitalists to increase hours of work and rescue the rate of wages…In other words, what is called liberty from the control of state is another name of dictatorship of private employers (Ambedkar 1979: 425).

Research Methodology

This research adopts a historical method to unwind the movement. To collect data from Parliament Library, Lok Sabha Debates and Haryana State Legislative Assembly Library, an archival method is applied. To ensure inclusivity and accuracy, snowball sampling is used to trace the participants who played pivotal roles in the movement. Additionally, the interview method is judiciously applied for the collection of insightful narratives from participants about the movement. Furthermore, thorough content and textual analysis were used to extract relevant information from newspapers and movement-related pamphlets.

Dalits and Land: An Envisioned Utopia

The implementation of the Indian Constitution in 1950 created a new political and social landscape in India. One of the most pressing issues facing the new government was the need to redistribute land in order to establish parity among different social classes. The Constitution itself enshrined the principle of land reform in both the Preamble and Part IV of the Constitution, which pertains to the Directive Principles of State Policy. Furthermore, land reform has been incorporated into the Ninth Schedule to expedite and facilitate the smooth implementation of diverse legislative measures (Mohanty 2001: 3857). However, the process of land reform proved to be long and arduous. Over the years, various committees and commissions were established to study the issue and recommend policies. Despite these efforts, land reform has not been fully implemented in India. This is due to several factors, including the resistance of large landowners, the lack of political will, and the issue's complexity.

It was observed that Dalits were not part of debates on land reform initiatives. They were kept aside, landless, in poverty and unemployed. The deeply entrenched intersectionality between land and unemployment in the life of Dalits has been shown through various studies. G. Nancharaiah's analysis of land records in the village of Kanchakoduru over the years 1930, 1948, 1965, and 1982 revealed that for the year 1930, the Brahmins controlled 77 per cent of the total land, non-brahmins about 21 per cent and Dalits only about 2 per cent of the whole land (Sridevi 2020: 176). Dalit households work primarily as casual labour in agriculture and non-agricultural chores, accounting for 52.6 per cent of total working households, compared to 21 per cent for non-SC/ST/OBC households (Ibid.: 170).

Similarly, in 2000, just 16 per cent of all Scheduled Caste (SC) households cultivated land as owner-cultivators, compared to 41 per cent of non-SC/ST households. Taking farm and non-farm activities into account, only 28 per cent of SC rural households have some access to capital assets, compared to 56 per cent of non-SC/ST households. Inadequate access to agricultural land and capital gives SC employees no choice but to turn to manual wage labour. As a result, there was an extraordinarily high level of (manual) wage labour among SC. In metropolitan areas, one-third of SC are casual labourers, compared to only 7 per cent of non-SC/STs.

NSSO 70th Round Report on Household Ownership and operational holdings—2013 shows that SC, who make up 20.06 per cent of total households, own just 9.2 per cent of total land, which is less than half of their proportion of total households, while non-SC/ST/OBCs, who make up 23.23 per cent of total households, own 32.03 per cent of total land (Ibid). These statistics show that caste is still perpetuated, increasing inequality and unemployment.

In such conditions, the idea of land reform captivated Dalits, but implementing the land distribution process failed. The working group on the development and welfare of Dalits during the eighth five-year plan (1990-1995), in their report (August 1990), observed that "agricultural ceiling laws have merely been a failure. As against the estimated availability of surplus land of about 30 million hectares, only a little over 7 million acres have been declared surplus and only 4.5 million acres of land were distributed to about 4 million beneficiaries" (Ibid). Consequently, the Dalits did not reap the benefits of land reform as the deeply ingrained caste system vehemently resisted any attempts of reform. The resistance from dominant castes hindered the fundamental underpinning of equitable land distribution, leaving the Dalits further marginalised and excluded from the transformative effects of land reforms.

The Case of Haryana

Haryana's case is no exception when it comes to the pursuit of land reform. This failure can be traced back to the overwhelming control exerted by the dominant caste of Haryana, i.e., 'Jats' over political power, further consolidating their economic and social dominance. As the primary owners of more than 80 per cent of the state's land, Jats have effectively monopolised the benefits stemming from both the Green

Revolution of the 1970s and the ongoing urbanisation and industrialisation processes (WSS 2014: 33). This exclusive access to resources has entrenched their position, making it increasingly difficult for Dalits to challenge their status and leading to a perpetuation of inequality and disparities in the region. Jats constitute the single largest caste group, with 24 per cent of the population of Haryana. Dalits are the next largest group at around 20 per cent. Nevertheless, 86 per cent of arable land in the state is under Jat ownership, and Dalits hold less than 2 per cent of land (Ibid.: 24). Land ownership and control of a large amount of land in the state provided Jat's social superiority and enabled them to control the labour of those lower in the caste hierarchy. Jats exercise authority over the *shamilat* (common) lands in the village, which, by law, should be accessible to all community members for various purposes such as cattle grazing, playground activities, and festivals. However, Jat-controlled panchayats often employ the strategy of fencing off the *shamilat* land, either as a form of social boycott or to force the entire Dalit community out of the village.

Landless Dalits work as '*Siri*' (bonded labourer) in the fields of Jat landlords. An oft-quoted saying at Jat Chaupals is: "A Jat who has not tasted his *siri's* wife and daughter is not a true Jat" (Ibid). Caste violence and sexual abuse against Dalit women have been the primary methods to suppress the Dalit community and firmly place them in their assigned position at the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy. This pattern of abuse serves as a tool of control, ensuring that the Dalit community remains oppressed and subjugated, unable to challenge the prevailing social order. A recent dreadful incident occurred in Bhagana village of Hissar district of Haryana, where Dalits demanded their right to access *shamilat* land for their livelihood to gain autonomy from the oppressive control of Jats. In a horrifying act of 'retaliation', perpetrated primarily by the powerful Jats in Haryana, four innocent Dalit girls from the Bhagana village were abducted and brutally raped. The incident is a tragic reminder of the systemic injustices and violence faced by Dalits striving for equality and justice (Chakravarti 2018: 170). For months, Dalits protested at Jantar Mantar, seeking land outside Bhagana village due to intimidation in their hometown. Such social silence is a routine play in the life of every Dalit. As rightly put by Ambedkar:

> Untouchable has found himself greatly handicapped in his struggle for free and honourable life. The Hindu has the Police and the Magistracy on his side. In a quarrel between the Untouchables and the Hindus, the Untouchables will never get protection from the Police or justice from the Magistrate. The Police and the Magistracy are Hindus, and they love their class more than their duty. But the chief weapon in the armoury of the Hindus is economic power which they possess over the poor Untouchables living in the village (Ambedkar 1991: 420).

Due to lack of socio-economic power, Dalits are victims of exploitation, subjugation and humiliation in all walks of life. Against this grim backdrop, Dalits waged a relentless struggle, pouring their very lifeblood into the fight for access to land as a means to attain a life of dignity and respect.

Dalit Land Movements Across India: Their Necessity and Significance

Dalit land movements are a series of social movements that Dalits have waged to secure land rights and abolish discrimination against them in the land market. One of the earliest and most crucial Dalit land movements was the Mahar Watan Movement, launched in Maharashtra in the early twentieth century. This movement was led by Ambedkar, who argued that Mahars, a Schedule Caste, had a historical right to the land they had been cultivating for generations. The movement eventually secured land rights for Mahars and served as a model for other Dalit land movements. Many Dalit land movements across India have happened decades since the Mahar Watan Movement. While they have achieved varying degrees of success, they have all played a role in raising awareness of the issue of landlessness among Dalits and demanding that the government must take action to address this issue. Through relentless struggle, Dalits were able to secure land rights in states such as Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and several others. These Dalit land struggles were fairly documented and recognised. Some of the most notable Dalit land movements include:

Bihar's well-known Bodhgaya Land Movement (BGLM). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the oppressed Dalits and other historically disadvantaged castes revolted against the Mahant (Priest). The Mahants of Bodhgaya Maths controlled a vast expanse of land, around 9,500 acres, blatantly violating Land Ceiling laws. At this time, the simultaneously surging tide of the JP movement acts as a catalyst. Through their struggle, the Bahujans of Bodhgaya secured the rights to more than 1,000 acres of fertile, well-irrigated land. Notably, among these lands, a remarkable 110 acres were specifically registered under women's names, highlighting their unwavering dedication and fortitude (Chowdhury 2020). This decade-long youth-led movement was the first in the history of social movements to have successfully secured land rights for women, mostly Dalits.

Similarly, Operation Bhumi Dakhal Dehani (giving possession) was a significant land reform initiative undertaken in the state of Bihar in 2007 under Jitan Ram Manjhi, the first Dalit chief minister of Bihar. Various camps were set up in villages, and police and tax authorities helped Dalits take possession of the land. It aimed to address historical injustices in land distribution. It sought to reclaim land illegally occupied by dominant caste landowners, that was allotted to Dalit communities. When the operation was completed in 2018, around 40,000 families, 25 per cent of those eligible—were still without land due to litigation (Gokhale 2019).

Operation Bhumi Dakhal Dehani sought to rectify disparities by identifying and reclaiming land wrongfully taken from Dalits. The initiative intended to provide land security and tenure rights to Dalit families, uplifting their socio-economic conditions and reducing their vulnerability to exploitation and oppression. However, it is essential to note that despite such rigorous efforts, challenges persisted in the implementation process. Political and socio-economic resistance from dominant caste landowners often obstructed the full realisation of land rights for Dalits. Additionally, bureaucratic

inefficiencies and corruption posed further hurdles in the successful execution of the operation.

Similarly, Dalits in Punjab's Sangrur district, where 90 per cent of Dalit farmers are agricultural labourers, occupied 6,475 hectares of unoccupied land in 2014 and demanded titles. Punjab has India's most significant Dalit population. They have accused the state of not enforcing regulations that reserve public land for Dalits to cultivate and housebuilding. The Zamin Prapti Sangharsh Samiti (movement to gain land) organisation started a protest and warned the state it would intensify its protest drives if the land is not legally granted to them (Moudgil 2019). Eventually, they reserved the promised panchayat land.

These movements of Dalits for their rights and emancipation extended well beyond the boundaries of North India, reaching into the realms of the South as well. Throughout the country, Dalits engaged in numerous remarkable movements, each carrying the weight of their collective aspirations.

The Dalit's in Andhra Pradesh mounted a struggle in Dosapadu Village between 1956 and 1995, where the government granted 105 acres of land to 45 households from landless Dalit communities in Andhra Pradesh's Dosapadu hamlet for their social upliftment. Unfortunately, wealthy landlords took over the property and converted it into aquaculture ponds. Against it, with the assistance of the Communist Party of India (CPI) worker wing, Agricultural Workers Union (AWU), the victims launched a land struggle in 2007 and ensured their rights (Cariappa 2022). Likewise, in Kerala, in 2007, Dalits and Adivasis occupied parts of a 25,000-hectares rubber plantation in Chengara, Pathanamthitta, where 93 per cent of Dalit farmers are farm labourers. They criticise the state for faulty land reforms. The reforms only included intermediaries like renters, who were an historically privileged caste, not farm labourers, who were Dalits or Adivasis. The reforms excluded plantations from giving up extra land. The landless could not receive large estates like Chengara (Sreerekha 2012).

All these movements have faced significant challenges, including lack of government support, opposition from historically privileged caste landowners, and caste violence. However, they have also achieved significant successes in securing land rights for thousands of Dalits. Undoubtedly the landscape of academia and mainstream literature in India extensively documented these remarkable movements and registered the profound nationwide impact of Dalit activism. However, amidst this comprehensive coverage, Haryana's Bir Sunarwala Dalit land struggle remains shrouded in obscurity, neglected by the mainstream narrative. Not only was this pivotal movement left out of the public discourse, but a conspicuous absence of any comprehensive study on its significance and the subsequent socio-economic upliftment of Dalit beneficiaries. The magnitude of this oversight becomes apparent when considering the monumental impact the movement had on the lives of Dalits in the region. The battle for land rights symbolised their resolve to break free from oppression and presented a beacon of hope for a dignified existence. Perhaps, the lack of scholarly attention and media coverage has hindered a broader understanding of the movement's nuances and significance in

empowering Dalits socially and economically. It is crucial for this historical chapter to be thoroughly explored, analysed, and brought to the forefront, not only to honour the struggles and sacrifices of those who fought for justice but also to shed light on the transformative outcomes it yielded for the Dalit community.

This article is an effort to rectify this historical oversight and undertake comprehensive research on the Bir Sunarwala Dalit land struggle, which is imperative. By doing so, we can illuminate a significant aspect of India's socio-political landscape, celebrating the resilience and tenacity of the marginalised while learning valuable lessons about pursuing social justice and equality for all.

Bir Sunarwala Land Movement of Haryana

In 1953, the Punjab Government, Member of the estimate committee Chaudhary Chand Ram, with the help of Chief Minister of Punjab Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon, passed an order to give *Nazul land* (i.e., government land utilised for non-agricultural purposes like construction, road, market, or any other public use, or issued on long-term lease) to landless Dalits. It was given on lease, and a co-operative society was formed to allocate land between 72 villages in united Punjab. In continuation of this process, in 1965, the Punjab Government allocated 2,596 acres of Nazul land to landless Dalits in Bir Sunarwala village of Jhajjar district (now in Haryana).

Astonishingly, in July 1973, it was dispossessed in the name of the establishment of 'Sainik School' and 'Seed Farm' under the Chief Ministership of Bansi Lal (Secretariat 1973: 244). There were around 151 Dalit families whose livelihoods were attached to that land. They worked on the land as tenants. Against this government order, the Republican Party of India (RPI) launched a satyagraha. However, when RPI felt it was not gaining momentum, they asked Chaudhary Chand Ram to lead this struggle. Chaudhary Chand Ram was a well known Dalit leader of Haryana. On the request of RPI and as a matter of pride of the community, he led this satyagraha with the pledge on August 1973 in the Ambedkar Bhawan, Delhi, "Either I will get the land of my people and go alive to Haryana, or my dead body will go to Haryana" (Ram 2007: 2). He formed the Harijan Sangharsh Samiti and started a satyagraha on 27 August 1973, along with 27,000 followers in Delhi. Satyagraha lasted for 113 days, in which more than 25,000 satyagrahi were arrested and put into the jails of Aligarh, Patiala and Tihar Jail in Delhi. Many people lost their lives in this land struggle (Ibid).

As observed in the statement of Member of Parliament Jyotirmoy Bosu on 22 December 1973;

> I want to make a submission. I had talked to Home Minister, and I had written 19 letters to Hon'ble Speaker that 25,000 Harijans of Haryana had been arrested, and three of them died in the jail, and five women gave birth to children in the jail, and they were not treated as patients but as prisoners and subjected to inhuman treatment and no blankets and no quilts were supplied to them, and no charpai were supplied to them. And yet this government claims to be a great friend of the Harijans (Secretariat 1973: 168).

Police atrocities also took place on the Dalits of Bir Sunarwala. As one of the participants of the movement, Ranbir Singh narrated:

> When the order was passed to take back the land of Bir Sunarwala, police started their intervention in the cultivated land of Bir Sunarwala. Then people used to plough their fields with camel and oxen. In that intervention with police brutality, one camel was killed in Bir Sunarwala. Against the government's order and police brutality agitation started on Delhi's Wellington Crescent Marg (Now Mother Teresa Crescent Road), where hundreds of people participated in this agitation. It was the time of monsoon, and we protesters continued the agitation on heavy rainy days; for subsistence, we ate jamun, and sometimes meals came from villages, but we continued our agitation in such harsh days.

Eventually, Government came on the table. Then Member of Parliament, Buddha Priya Maurya, came to the site of the protest and assured the protesters that you would get your land back, and he requested the protesters to stop the agitation…then one person raised a voice that we would not go anywhere. We have nothing left for livelihood; the government snatched our land, and the police even killed my camel. In such a tense agitation, Buddha Priya Maurya again reassured that kindly have faith in the government and that you would surely get your land. On that promise, the agitation ended.

> However, after some months, when the government took no action, then the full-fledged movement was started from Dr Ambedkar Bhawan, Panchkuiya Road, Delhi, under the leadership of Chaudhary Chand Ram on 27 August 1973. The entire movement was completely peaceful and based on the value of Ahimsa. However, due to the intensity of the agitation, protesters were put behind Bars. Three people died in Jail; they were entitled to *shaheed* (martyr), and a huge *morcha* (protest) was carried out with their dead bodies on the roads of Delhi. Meanwhile, Bansilal, then chief minister of Haryana, came to Haryana Bhawan Delhi. Subsequently, hundreds of protests from Harijan Sangharsh Samiti encircled Haryana Bhawan with the slogan "*Mangi Roti Mil Gai Jail, Ye Dekho Indira ke Khel*" (We asked for bread, got jail, watch this play of Indira). A huge backlash happened, and we (protesters) were arrested and put into jails. Various leaders supported us in jails, like Dr Abas Malik (RPI), Khadak Singh (Jan Sangh), and Swami Agnivesh (Ex. Education minister of Haryana). Dr Abas Malik gave a speech to us in jail and stated, "*Ghabraiye Mat Agitation Jaari Rahega*" (Do not worry, the agitation will continue)."

> It is exciting to note that Chaudhary Chand Ram's wife, Smt. Durga Devi was always there in this entire movement. Such was the devotion of our leader to the community. When the agitation was at its peak, police came to arrest Chaudhry Chand Ram at night, and we protesters burned the fire as it was the

time of winter. And we told the police, "*Hum Apne Neta Ko Leke Bahot Satark Hai"* (We are cautious about the security of our leader), and the police went back without arresting him.

Finally, this struggle ended with the intervention of Indira Gandhi and Central Minister Buta Singh on 22 December 1973, the land ownership of 2,596 acre land was assured to these Dalit Tenants. As stated by then Home Minister Shri Ram Niwas Mirdha in the Lok Sabha:

> I am glad to inform the house that according to the statement issued by Shri Chand Ram, the agitation has been withdrawn. This statement was issued after consultation with the Chief Minister, Haryana, who in his statement agreed to refer these demands to an ad hoc committee to be appointed by him. As regards Vir Sonarwala (Bir Sunarwala), the Chief Minister of Haryana has stated that all the 151 evicted Harijan families would continue to be allowed to cultivate the land in the village of Vir Sonarwala until it is possible to provide them with alternative cultivable land on the basis of permanent ownership rights (Ibid.: 169).

With his relentless struggle, Chaudhary Chand Ram provides land in Bir Sunarwala and various parts of Haryana, including Chandnagar and Faruknagar. Chaudhary Chand Ram was elected to the Punjab Legislative Assembly in 1952 and the Punjab Legislative Council in 1958. He became Minister of State for Harijan Welfare in 1962 and Welfare and Justice Minister. As a minister, Chaudhary Chand Ram displayed unwavering dedication toward Dalit empowerment within the Haryana State Assembly. Championing the rights of Dalits, he fearlessly raised his voice, calling for equitable land rights and opportunities for their progress. Recognising the serious need for socio-economic upliftment, he took significant steps in allocating panchayati land to Dalits across various districts in Haryana. In many ways, his vision and actions mirrored the spirit of Ambedkar, who also ardently advocated for the independence and self-reliance of Dalits. Chaudhary Chand Ram's efforts went beyond mere rhetoric; he worked tirelessly to ensure that Dalits could live with dignity and autonomy as a land-owning class.

Bir Sunarwala's struggle fulfilled the constitutional vision for land allocation to landless Dalits for their upliftment, but it did not get due space in the mainstream. Though there were various newspapers in Haryana during the phase of this movement, especially *The Tribune* and *Haryana Tilak* but none of them covered this historic land struggle of Dalits. Fortunately, Chaudhary Chand Ram, in his lifetime, started and edited various newspapers like *Naya Samaj, Kamau and Jagta Insaan (1954-2015)*, which documented this movement. These newspapers covered various issues of disadvantaged sections at that time when no major media talked about the plight of the Dalits.

The Bir Sunarwala land movement distinguishes itself from other Dalit movements in various noteworthy aspects. First, it witnessed a massive participation of protesters,

with over 25,000 individuals being arrested during the course of the movement. Second, the entire agitation unfolded in the nation's capital, further adding to its significance. Last, despite its historical importance, the Bir Sunarwala land struggle continues to remain relatively obscure in the broader context of Dalit movements.

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Socio-spatially Segregated Experience of Urban Dalits and their Anti-caste Imagination: A Study of the Balmiki Community in Delhi, India

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Abstract

Over the last three decades, India has experienced rapid economic development and social and cultural transformation. Questions arise as to how minorities secure their livelihood and what strategies are being devised for the same. And, what vision of the future do they have in mind? In this article, I will focus on the Dalit community in North India. Fieldwork conducted on one such disadvantaged group, the urban Balmikis (known as the sweeper caste)[1] in Delhi, is drawn upon to examine as a case study. Balmikis have a high rate of migration to urban areas, which is due to their historical background of being employed in the sanitation sector of municipalities and the Ministry of Railways since the colonial times. The name of the community, Balmiki, is derived from worshipping "Bhagwan Valmik," a legendary saint and composer of *Ramayana*. It began to take root as a name with positive connotations among the sweeper caste in North India around the 1920s and 1930s. Because of this historical development, it is often accused of discrediting Dalits who dissent from Hindu values and for hindering Dalit solidarity. However, if one listens to the claims of the Balmikis, they do not necessarily consider themselves "Hindus". For example, during my research, a frequent response to questions about religion was the statement, "We are forced to be Hindus". In contrast, the words that immediately follow, "We are Balmikis," are restated. By focusing on the beliefs and ambiguity of self-identity of the Balmikis, this article attempts to examine their anti-caste imagination. It then poses the question as to how that imagination is intertwined with everyday experiences and collective grassroots movements.

Keywords

Delhi, Balmiki, sweepers, segregation, urban Dalits, anti-caste

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[1] In this article, the terms "Balmiki" and "Valmiki" are used almost interchangeably as community names. The caste name "Balmiki" reflects the pronunciation of the prevailing vernacular language, Hindi, and Panjabi, and is in widespread usage among local Dalits.

Introduction

Over the last three decades, India has experienced rapid economic development and social and cultural transformation. This includes considerations of how minorities secure their livelihoods and strategies devised for the same. This article focuses on the Dalit community in North India. Fieldwork conducted on one such disadvantaged group, the urban Balmikis (known as the sweeper caste) in Delhi, is examined as a case study. This article is based on data collected from a survey conducted among 135 Balmiki households chosen from three districts (New Delhi, Northwest and South) of Delhi between 2006 and 2014 and recent interviews with Balmiki sweepers conducted in February 2020. To consider and protect privacy of informants, personal and regional names are pseudonymized in this article.

Balmikis have a high rate of migration to urban areas, which is due to their historical background of being employed in the sanitation sector of municipalities and the Ministry of Railways since colonial times. According to the 2011 Census, though the Balmiki caste (577,281/20.5 per cent) is the second-largest scheduled caste (SC) group after the Chamars (1075,569/38.2 per cent) in Delhi, yet the Balmikis do not have a significant presence in contemporary Dalit movements. While Ambedkar's ideology is supported by the community, they do not actively participate in the Buddhist conversion movement or BSP's [Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)] political activities.

The name of the community, Balmiki, is derived from worshipping "Bhagwan Valmik," a legendary saint and composer of the *Ramayana*. The name Balmiki began to take root as a name with positive connotations among the sweeper castes in North India in the 1920s and 1930s. Due to this historical development, it is often accused of discrediting the Dalits dissent against Hindu values and hindering Dalit solidarity. However, from the claims of the Balmikis, it emerges that they do not necessarily consider themselves Hindus. For example, during my research, a frequent response to questions about religion elicited a seeming hesitancy to be a Hindu. Alongside, words that often followed were, "We are Balmikis."

From a historical perspective, Prashad's (2000) study deals with the social history of the sanitation labor castes in Delhi. Prashad details the history of the caste before and after Independence, drawing on the pre-Independence census, geography, and rare government reports on the living and working conditions of the sweeper castes. His study explores the community history when a particular group had joined the municipal sanitation department. Lee (2015) historically illuminates a religious identity and naming of the Lal Begis in Lucknow. These studies reveal the history and identity formation of how multiple caste groups came to call themselves Balmikis.

By focusing on the beliefs and ambiguity of self-identity of the Balmikis, this article attempts to examine their anti-caste imagination. It then poses the question of how that imagination is intertwined with everyday experiences and collective grassroots movements. The research question raised here is about how spatially segregated experiences and stigma affects their sense of "us" and enhances solidarity among the communities.

Socio-spatial Segregation in Cities

It is not uncommon to see streets and localities named after communities, such as Harijan Basti, Balmiki Colony, and Chamar Mohalla. These are known as low-caste names and may cause stigmatized experiences and discriminatory sentiments against the residents of the locality. In addition, stereotypes of insecurity, gambling, drinking, and odor seem to be deeply rooted in these areas (Ganguly 2018a). Using ethnographic research in the cities of Lucknow and Benaras in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, Lee (2017) highlighted how the segregation of the sanitation labor caste is inscribed in space and sensoria. Therefore, local residents and activists have often demanded that governments change the caste-related names in the form of collective protests.[2]

Social and spatial segregation along caste lines is not just a past phenomenon, especially for Dalits. Recently, there has been a significant amount of scholarly literature on caste-based segregation and exclusion in major socio-economic areas, such as residential patterns, rental housing markets, labor markets, and higher education (Deshpande & Newman 2007; Dupont 2004; Ganguly 2018a, 2018b; Jodhka & Newman 2007; Kamble 2002; Madheswaran & Attewell 2007; Thorat & Attewell 2007; Thorat et al., 2015; Vithathil & Singh 2012). In previous studies, caste-based discrimination and exclusion were largely assumed to be the future of rural areas. However, recent studies have collected data from metropolitan cities, including the National Capital Region where it appears that caste favoritism and the social exclusion of Dalits and Muslims have entered private enterprises (Thorat & Attewell 2007: 4144).

The concept of segregation opposes that of cohabitation, but it is noteworthy that the common experience of segregation can serve to enhance the feeling of "us" or togetherness among disadvantaged communities such as Dalits who live together (cohabit) in the same colony. Place is important in the history of Dalit protests and movements. This is because a place can function not only as a home for living, eating, and conducting religious ceremonies (including marriages, births, and funerals) of community members but also as a source of collective action and protests.

In the case of the Balmikis, their place of residence has also been a source of (union) leaders and activists. Balmikis working in government (central/state/municipal corporation) sanitation departments are generally entitled to a flat in government colonies (known as "sweeper colony") to live in until their retirement. They share time and space, mostly within a homogeneous caste group. In this context, inhabitants construct their socio-spatial environment and sense of security and solidarity. In the

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[2]Apart from grassroots protests, the Maharashtra government announced in December 2020 that it would be abolishing caste-based names of localities across the state and replacing them with names of freedom fighters, social reformers, and ideologues. Social Justice Minister Dhananjay Munde explained that the aim of this decision was to solidify the notion of national integrity. The Maharashtra government has already dropped the usage of the word "Dalit" from official communication, papers, and certificates.https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/maharashtra-to-drop-caste-names-from-localities/article33234784.ece (accessed on 17 December 2020).

next section, I discuss the Dalit neighborhood in Delhi from a case study based on a relatively old municipal colony of Balmiki sweepers.

Residential Patterns of Balmikis in Delhi

Delhi is divided into nine districts: Northwest, North, Northeast, East, New Delhi, Central, West, Southwest, and South. Based on the 2011 census data and her field study, Ganguly (2018b) points out that when we compare Balmikis' presence in each district with the population of SCs in the district, New Delhi has the highest concentration (49.2 per cent), followed by the South (27.4 per cent) and South West (26.5 per cent). This pattern is in close agreement with Suzuki's (2015) findings. In the next section, I will describe a municipal colony located in the New Delhi district.

A Municipal Sweeper Colony

Colony A, located near the center of Delhi, close to the president's residence, combined government offices, and the Parliament, is surrounded by collective dwellings for central government employees, Delhi City, and New Delhi City. As the percentage of SCs among the residents (23.4 per cent) was higher than the average value throughout Delhi (16.7 per cent), many people of SC backgrounds are likely gathered in this colony as government employees. Two interesting characteristics of the SC composition in the New Delhi District are that it is the only district in which Balmikis outnumber Chamars to form the largest SC group, and many SC government employees are Balmikis.

Colony A was constructed as New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) employee housing in 1969 and 1970, and nineteen four-story buildings are located in the district. Each building comprises approximately 15 flats, for a total of 288 flats. The residential population is estimated to be at least 1,440 people based on the average household size in the colony.

Only NDMC employees qualify for residence; therefore, at least one member of each household must be an employee of the NDMC. About 20 per cent of the monthly wages of each household head are deducted as rent, and the family may live in it until the NDMC employee retires. In Colony A, opinions concerning homeownership differed between officials and residents, causing severe problems dating back to their construction. This reveals the relationship between the sweeper community and the Indian National Congress, the governing party, when they were constructed. Since this is considered a case of the appropriation of Gandhi's view of the sweeper caste, the author wishes to include historical episodes in Colony A based on interviews with residents.

The name of Colony A, *Bāpū Dhām*, means a "place where Gandhi stays or lives" in Hindi. This suggests that Gandhi was somehow linked to events leading to the establishment of the district. In 1969, the movement to celebrate Gandhi's 100th birthday grew among Gandhians. Colony A was established to improve the lives of poor lower-class government employees (sweepers in particular) as part of the SC support policies. On April 9, 1970, attendees of the celebration of the district's

completion included prominent Indian Congress Party parliamentarians, such as the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi (1917–1984) and President V.V. Giri (1894–1980).

There are two stone monuments: one is beside a small temple where the saint Valmiki is enshrined near the entrance to the colony, and the other is constructed on land deep within the colony. The quadrangular stone monument placed on the grounds of the Valmiki Temple is engraved with inscriptions and pictures, and the three sides display the words of Gandhi concerning anti-untouchability and the three-monkey design (see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil) is engraved.[3]

Gandhi viewed untouchability as the worst stain on the Hindu religion and launched a movement to abolish it (the Harijan movement) in the mid-1930s. From this stone monument, it is possible to discern the situation in 1969, when the Congress Party Government, which inherited Gandhi's Harijan movement, constructed Colony A as a project to commemorate Gandhi's centenary celebration. Another stone monument constructed inside the colony bore an engraved epithet (in English) with the following words (Figure 1):

"Keep your house clean.
Frontage of your house clean.
The whole city shall be clean."
– V. V. Giri

Figure 1. Stone monument was established in Colony A. (Photographed by the author)

The engraved text of the message from the then President Giri contains the word "clean" three times, perhaps indicating a message to the municipal sanitation workers. Was this message, addressed to municipal sweepers, inscribed merely to encourage them in their labor? Or can we say this call for cleanliness possibly reflects on the

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[3]The three-monkey design is seen around the world, but in India, it is said to have originated from the teachings of Gandhi, who always carried an image of the three monkeys and taught people to not see evil, hear evil, or speak evil; these tenets are extremely familiar to Indians as Gandhi's three monkeys. This stone monument is now in extremely poor condition and is severely damaged. Most of the engraved text and pictures is covered with sand and is illegible, but they can be seen if the monument is washed with water.

unclean status of Dalits? The author asked the residents about this interpretation, but did not get a clear answer.

The author's survey revealed that most residents of Colony A were employed as municipal sweepers. They reported that before the construction of Colony A, they lived several kilometers to the north in a slum that then existed around NDMC employee housing, known generally by the name Mandir Marg.[4] Residents of Mandir Marg were also municipal sweepers, and in this connection, this colony was well known as the place in which Gandhi stayed temporarily to publicize the Harijan movement in 1946.

As asserted by the residents of Colony A, during the 1960s and 1970s, the government forcefully implemented a slum clearance project, removing slums from Central Delhi. The government offered people employed as sweepers by the NDMC, Colony A as a relocation site situated close to their workplaces. The aspect that invited confusion was the speech by President Giri at the completion ceremony in 1970, in which he stated, "I dedicate this land to you who are poor," and the attitude of the authorities who urged the people to relocate. According to Chouhan, who had lived there since the beginning, almost everyone relocated; this was interpreted as meaning that they could obtain their own house. Chouhan retired from the position as the post-assistant sanitary inspector in the NDMC sanitary division and participated in negotiations as a representative of the organization conducting a movement to restore ownership to residents of Colony A, called the Harijan Society Improvement Committee (Harijan Samaj Sudhar Samiti) (formed in 1970).[5] The leadership of the resident movement for ownership was formed by union members, arising from the homogeneity of municipal Balmiki sweepers who shared the Balmikis' plight and a sense of neighborhood formed in Colony A.

Balmikis in Delhi, regardless of whether they undertake sanitation jobs, try to maintain their caste solidarity by celebrating several anniversaries, such as Safai Mazdoor Diwas (sweepers' day, on July 31) and Valmiki saint Jayanti (in October). They also hold meetings and organize collective protests when atrocities against the Balmikis occur. In 2020, serial rape-murder cases occurred in Uttar Pradesh (UP), followed by protests by Balmiki organizations. These incidents and anniversaries have become an opportunity for Balmikis to work together and shape a sentiment of "us" and neighborhood beyond the physical geographical locality.

The Plight of Balmiki Sweepers

Caste is a crucial contributing factor towards social inequality, as can be observed between non-Dalits and Dalits and amongst Dalit caste groups. In Delhi, Balmikis often experience the poorest circumstances in terms of education and employment opportunities (Suzuki 2017). According to the 2011 census, the population of Balmikis in Delhi is approximately 5.8 lakh, and they constitute 21 per cent of the SCs, being the second largest population after Chamars (approximately 1 million, 38 per cent of

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[4] Residents of the colony were interviewed by K.L. Meena, former assistant sanitary inspector in the NDMC sanitation division (October 1, 2005, Bāpū Dhām).
[5] Interview in Bāpū Dhām on October 1, 2005.

the SCs). Balmikis have a literacy rate of 67.4 per cent, the lowest among all SCs (78 per cent) in Delhi (Government of India 2011).

Additionally, economic mobility among the Balmikis has also stagnated. According to an article published in 2005, 99 per cent of Delhi's government sanitary workers were from the Balmiki community in 1995 (Labor File November–December, 2005, p. 11). During the author's fieldwork from 2003 onward, comparable information was collected from local Balmiki sweepers, residents, and sweeper union leaders at the Municipal Corporation of Delhi.

The privatization of the government sanitation department, in which sweepers are employed by municipal corporations and central/state governments, has accelerated since the 2010s, leading to the de-regularization of employment and weakening of trade unions. Many Balmikis who have been engaged in government sanitation departments are now facing insecurity and fear of unemployment in the near future.

At the time of the author's survey in 2019–2020, the monthly income of household heads was approximately 40,000 rupees (about 560 USD) for *pacca* (permanent) sweepers and ranged from 10,000 to 12,000 rupees (around 140 to 168 USD) for *kaccha* (temporary) sweepers and 4,000 to 5,000 rupees (about 56 to 70 USD) for contract-based sweepers.

A pacca sweeper is a regular or permanent sweeper who is paid as per the pay scale fixed by the government. Along with a salary, they are entitled to government facilities, such as housing, gratuity, promotion, pension, and medical care. Kaccha sweepers are those who work with the government or municipality or any agency of the state government. Kaccha sweepers are engaged temporarily but are supposed to be regularized in service after a certain period. Contract sweepers are those engaged by a contractor under a written agreement for a short period and are paid according to prevailing wage rates in the state. Private contractors, to whom work is outsourced by the government or local agencies, are called government contractors, which include many NGOs such as Sulabh International. The contract sweepers are paid according to the wage rate fixed by the government. However, contract sweepers with private contractors lack the scope to obtain regular/permanent employment in the future because they are not entitled to a permanent job by the government.

The author's interviews with the sweepers demonstrated that each category of sweepers faced difficulties. For example, because contract-based and kaccha sweepers need to pay a proportion of their wages to their contractors, they are not paid their full wages and receive half of their wages. While permanent sweepers are officially supposed to receive proper benefits (family allowances, medical care, and other necessary supplies), they claim they have not received them. Safety gear such as gloves, gumboots, and masks, along with the timely payment of salaries, cashless medical cards for treatments, and the clearing of pending arrears, have been the demands of sanitation workers.[6]

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[6]"Amid Covid-19 outbreak, Delhi's sanitation workers demand safety gear, masks," *Indian Express*. https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/coronavirus-lockdown-few-masks-no-gloves-or-sanitisers-complain-mcd-sanitation-workers-6336100/, accessed on April 4, 2020.

These difficulties seemed to worsen after the COVID-19 outbreak across the country. Joginder Bahot, president of Akhil Bharatiya Safai Mazdoor (ABSMS) and a sweeper of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), said, "After the outbreak of COVID-19, we are forced to clean (the whole) city, but how can we work safely without protective suits and masks? *Kuch nahin* (Nothing)!" Bahot continued to explain to the author, "We used to be provided uniforms, soaps, and oil by the MCD before; but now, nothing. We need to work with our own clothes, and they get easily dirty and unusable."[7] Although Bahot and other members of the ABSMS and the MCD sweeper union have raised the issue to the corporation and the Delhi government and have gone on several strikes, their demands have not yet been met. Meanwhile, there is an ongoing political battle and disagreement over matters of the sweepers' unpaid salaries and needful supplies between the AAP-led Delhi government and the BJP-led MCD.

Many ABSMS activists concur with the opinion that the plight of Delhi's municipal sweepers has worsened since the MCD was replaced by three new bodies in 2012: the North, South, and East Delhi Municipal Corporation.[8]

Considering these Balmiki sweepers' plight, when the costs of rent, food, electricity, water, and other life essentials were deducted from their salaries, they had almost no money left in hand. They set the balance aside for their daughters' dowries or religious rites, and there was almost none left to invest in the education of their children. In 2007, electric meters and yellow cables were installed throughout the city under the pretext of "preventing the theft of electricity" to run the electrical industry more efficiently. The people of the colony studied in the survey looked up at the cables reproachfully, saying, "Those have doubled electricity prices. I have to pay up to 3,000 rupees every alternate month. What can we do, who do not have steady jobs?"

Along with complaints about daily expenses, the author often heard people express uneasiness about their homes. Employees working as sweepers may live in housing for public employees in the center of Delhi to be close to their workplaces as they qualify for public housing if even one member of a household is an employee. The author's survey confirmed three residential patterns among the Balmiki people of Delhi. The first is the government (municipal) employees' housing pattern, namely, continued residence by generations of people who work as sweepers. The second pattern is ensuring housing by obtaining land in a resettlement colony after removal from a slum where people live. In the third pattern, when a government permanent employee from a sweeper household (which has been occupying government employees' housing) retires, the family purchases a public dwelling in the city with their savings, taking advantage of the housing support policy of allotting funds to SCs. Turning to links with the Balmiki movement discussed later, many movement leaders obtained assets using the third residential pattern.

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[7]Interviewed on March 7, 2020, Delhi. Here is another similar case in the COVID-19 pandemic: https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/north-corporation-sanitation-workers-not-paid-salaries-for-march-civic-body-says-govt-yet-to-release-funds/story-QDmKuNDcPZvTxVty8qVQ2I.html (accessed on December 16, 2020).

[8]The Delhi Municipal Corporation (Amendment) Act 2011(Delhi Act 12 of 2011).

During the 1970s and the 1980s, it was comparatively easy to obtain a home in the city using the second and third patterns; however, in recent years, heavy investment in land has rapidly increased land prices to levels beyond the reach of the Balmiki people in the low-income class. Life in Delhi is becoming increasingly harsh. At the same time, the first pattern, government employees' housing, is not homeownership but offers convenience—they are close to their workplaces and their children's schools—and motivates the Balmiki people to choose to work as sweepers in successive generations.

"We are Balmikis": As a Recognizable Self-identity

In this section, I will focus on the history of the worship of Sage Bhagwan Valmiki in the Balmiki community and examine how it has become critical in forming the community's identity. The name of the community, Balmiki, is derived from the worship of Bhagwan Valmik, a legendary saint and composer of Ramayana. It began to take root as a means of positive self-identification among the sweeper community in North India in the 1920s and the 1930s. Due to this historical development, it is often accused of discrediting the Dalits who dissent against Hindu values and hinder Dalit unity. However, during my fieldwork in Delhi, it is clear that they do not necessarily consider themselves Hindus. For example, a frequent response to questions about religion was the statement, "We are forced to be Hindus." In contrast, the words that immediately follow, "We are Balmikis," have been restated. Considering these responses, it is important to examine the ambiguity of self-identity in the historical context.

Demographical Transition

Table 1: Scheduled Caste Population by Religious Community in Delhi (2001 and 2011)

| | 2001 | | | 2011 | | |
	Hindu	Sikh	Buddhist	Hindu	Sikh	Buddhist
All SC	98.69%	0.90%	0.50%	98.88%	0.92%	0.20%
Chamar	98.57%	0.40%	1.10%	99.24%	0.33%	0.43%
Chuhra/Balmiki	99.89%	0.10%	0.00%	99.93%	0.05%	0.02%
Kathik	99.78%	0.20%	0.00%	99.86%	0.11%	0.03%
Koli	99.87%	0.10%	0.10%	99.84%	0.11%	0.05%
Dhobi	99.82%	0.10%	0.10%	99.89%	0.11%	0.01%
Balai	99.92%	0.10%	0.00%	99.95%	0.03%	0.02%

Source: Government of India, Census of India 2001 and 2011: Delhi: SC Series-14: Tables on Population by religious community

Table 1 illustrates the percentage of the majority groups of SCs in Delhi by religion. Of the total SC population in 2001 and 2011, Hindus (98.69 per cent in 2001 and 98.88 per cent in 2011) constitute the majority. Compared with other SCs, the relatively high percentage of Chamars in the Buddhist[9] population ratio (1.10 per cent in 2001 and 0.43 per cent in 2011) suggests that the community followed Ambedkar's ideas and his conversion movement. Ambedkar, the icon and leader of the Dalit movement,

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[9]Indian Buddhists are often referred to as "Neo-Buddhists," and some criticize that this terminology creates discrimination by distinguishing them from Buddhists outside of India.

renounced Hinduism and converted to Buddhism shortly before his death. Census data on Buddhist beliefs in Delhi demonstrate that believers are heavily skewed towards certain castes, suggesting regional and caste differences in the spread of the conversion movement.

Table 2 illustrates the population trends (1961–2001 census) of the various castes that are known for sweeper castes in Delhi. The figures demonstrate that the proportion of Chuhras (renamed Balmikis) tends to be overwhelmingly high among the five caste groups: 68.0 per cent in 1961, 79.57 per cent in 1971, 89.54 per cent in 1981, 94.81 per cent in 1991, 96.67 per cent in 2001, and 97.25 per cent in 2011. However, the number of Bhangis[10] declined significantly: 27.9 per cent in 1961, 18.27 per cent in 1971, 8.75 per cent in 1981, 3.94 per cent in 1991, 2.47 per cent in 2001, and 1.97 per cent in 2011. Although we have not been able to obtain data to determine the reasons for the decline in Bhangis, it is difficult to consider any likely reason to leave Delhi, where non-agricultural employment opportunities can be expected and migrate to other regions. Rather, what the author assumes is the possibility that the caste name of Bhangi, which has been condemned as a derogatory term, may have been changed to Balmiki by collective choice. Further research is required to clarify this issue.

Table 2: Population of Sweeper Castes in Delhi (1961-2011)

		1961		1971		1981		1991		2001		2011	
		Population	Ratio of population among five castes	Population	Ratio of population among five castes	Population	Ratio of population among five castes	Population	Ratio of population among five castes	Population	Ratio of population among five castes	Population	Ratio of population among five castes
1	Chuhra (Balmiki)	52743	68.0%	107680	79.57%	222638	89.54%	367303	94.81%	500221	96.67%	577281	97.25%
2	Bhangi	21637	27.9%	24720	18.27%	21752	8.75%	15277	3.94%	12773	2.47%	11665	1.97%
3	Chohra (Sweeper)	3088	4.0%	2551	1.89%	3272	1.32%	2854	0.74%	2567	0.50%	1638	0.28%
4	Mazhabi	107	0.1%	338	0.25%	858	0.35%	1802	0.47%	1814	0.35%	2829	0.48%
5	Lalbegi	28	0.0%	36	0.03%	134	0.05%	192	0.05%	85	0.02%	167	0.03%
Total		77603		135325		248654		387428		517460		593580	

Source: Government of India, *Census of India 1961; 1971; 1981; 1991; 2001; 2011*

From Chuhra to Balmiki

In choosing the name Balmiki as self-identification, rather than "Hindu" or "Dalit," we can also read an attempt to distinguish themselves from other Dalits. When and how did the self-designation "Balmiki" become widespread among the community? This dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and events in northern India and Punjab. Through British colonial policy, Indians were classified according to religion and quantified as a population group. This trend was accelerated by the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, which introduced a system of separate elections by religion. This marked the beginning of the religious affiliation of the people of the Indian subcontinent. As British rule spread throughout India and society entered a

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[10]The caste names are not used to derogate the feelings of any person or community.

period of social change, there was a growing movement among the Dalits to convert to other religions so as to escape discriminatory practices within the Hindu caste hierarchical society. Among Bhangis and Chuhras, some converted to Christianity and Sikhism.

Activists of Hindu reform groups, concerned about this, developed a movement to incorporate the Dalits into the Hindu community in north India. Among the most famous are the activities of Arya Samaj (AS). One of the AS activists was a Brahmin, Amichand Sharma. In 1936, he published a pamphlet entitled *Śrī Bālmīki Prakāś*, which he distributed among the Chuhra community, explaining that the ancestors of Chuhras originated from Bhagwan Valmik. Thereafter, the legend of the community's origins in Rishi Valmiki became widespread among the Chuhras (Leslie 2003; Prashad 2000).

The impact of AS's activity among the Chuhra community was reflected in the census data of the time: according to the 1881 census, Chuhras listed the names of Islamic saints, Lal Begh and Bala Shah as the gurus they followed. Gradually, however, the name Bala Shah was replaced by Bal Mik or Bal Miki, and by the 1930s, Chuhras were identified in the census as Bal Miki or Hindu, and such self-identification was formed (Hase 1994; Ibbetson 1916; Leslie 2003; Prashad 2000; Saberwal 1976).[11]

Establishing Faith

While Valmiki worship was spreading, especially among the Chuhras of Punjab, Balmikis as a caste group was consolidated through the census and other colonial schemes. Under these processes, Valmiki worship was developed through the following activities. First, Valmiki temples began to be erected in North India. Caste associations called Balmiki Sabha were formed under the influence of the Arya Samaj and organized in Jalandhar (Punjab) in 1910 and Delhi in 1926. Today, every year in late October, the Balmikis of North India celebrate the Maharishi Valmiki Jayanti,[12] occurring between the festivals of Dussehra and Diwali. Valmiki temples in Delhi attract devotees from all over India and abroad. As the time of the year approaches, cultural events and gatherings are held by Balmiki organizations, especially in North India.

In Delhi alone, there are as many as 500–700 Valmiki temples, both large and small. The main venue is a temple on Mandir Marg Road in the center of Delhi. On the occasion of Maharishi Valmiki Jayanti, religious leaders gather to perform rituals for the worship of Bhagwan Valmiki. A large number of Balmikis visit temples with their families and relatives, including small children to older adults (Figures 2, 3).

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[11]With regard to the Chuhras worship of the Valmiki saint, previous studies have suggested the possibility that it might have existed prior to the arrival of the Arya Samaj. In any case, there is a strong possibility that the worship of saints was enhanced by the activities of the Arya Samaj (Leslie 2003: 195).

[12]Some states recognize it as a legal holiday (such as Delhi). India is a multi-religious country and has established various sectarian holidays at the central and state levels. The establishment of statutory holidays is considered such an important issue that it can itself become a campaign goal for religious organizations.

Figure 2, Figure 3: The celebration of Valmiki Jayanti at Bhagwan Valmiki Mandir of Mandir Marg of Delhi. (Photographed by the author)

Valmiki Temple in Delhi with Gandhi and G.D. Birla

The main Valmiki Temple (Bhagwan Valmiki Mandir) in Delhi was built on Mandir Marg, central Delhi, around 1937.[13] An interesting episode concerning G.D. Birla (1894–1983), a famous Indian businessperson and supporter of M.K. Gandhi, must be noted, as it provides insight into the historical connection between Gandhi and Balmikis in Delhi.

G.D. Birla is known to have financially supported Gandhi's independence movement and the construction of the Valmiki Temple in Delhi. Considering that Gandhi made this temple the basis of his Harijan movement, as described below, it can be inferred that Birla's donation was made at Gandhi's request. At about the same time that the Valmiki Temple was built, Birla built the Lakshmi Narayan temple (popularly known as the Birla Temple) on the same street, only 500 meters away, in 1938. This temple is currently one of the most famous Hindu temples in Delhi, attracting numerous worshippers and tourists.

Thus, the two temples were built simultaneously on the same street. Why is this? Although both are Hindu temples, there are clear differences between the worshippers who gather there. While all Hindus, regardless of caste, visit Birla Temple, it seems almost exclusively the members of Balmikis who visit Valmiki Temple. This suggests that perhaps the reason that the two Hindu temples were built on the same street in 1937 and 1938 was to prevent the Dalits (Balmikis) and caste Hindu worshippers from being in the same space. Furthermore, this can also be understood in terms of indicating the limits of Gandhi's Harijan movement of temple entry for Dalits (Prashad 2000: 102–107) (Figure 4).

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[13]Regarding the history of the temple's establishment, some informants claim that the temple was already in the same location before 1937. According to the priest of the temple I interviewed in 2010, there is a history of 150 years.

Figure 4: Bhagwan Valmiki Mandir at Mandir Marg of Delhi. (Photographed by the author)

What is the relationship between the Valmiki Temple in Delhi and Gandhi? Gandhi chose Valmiki Temple in Delhi as a place where he could effectively promote his Harijan movement. The room in the temple where Gandhi stayed was preserved and kept open for visitors. The desk, pen, glasses, and charkha (a manual spinning wheel)[14] used by Gandhi were displayed. In addition, the surrounding walls were decorated with portrait photographs of Jawaharlal Nehru and other Congress leaders who had visited Gandhi, as well as Stafford Cripps (1889–1952), Louis Mountbatten (1900–1979), the governor-general of India, and other prominent figures. Photographs of Indian and British politicians and activists adorn the walls. Little is it known today that the temple was not only a place where caste Hindus could highlight their connection to the upliftment of Dalits through the Harijan movement but also an essential space that perhaps determined the political landscape[15] (Figures 5, 6, and 7).

Figures 5,6,7. Pictures from Valmiki Temple, New Delhi (Photographed by the author)

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[14]Aiming for the independence of India's rural economy, Gandhi appealed for production activities of handspun cotton yarn and hand-woven cotton cloth by charkha, which had been used in India since ancient times. The charkha is a symbol of Gandhi's anti-colonial movement.

[15]In addition to the Valmiki Temple in Mandir Marg, there were two other places that Gandhi chose to stay in Delhi before and after India's independence: Birla House, his private residence, where he lived from September 9, 1947 to January 30, 1948; from September 9, 1948 to January 30, 1948; and where he spent the last days of his life. It is also where he was assassinated. After that, Birla House was managed by the government and opened to the public in 1973 as the Gandhi Smriti (Gandhi Museum). The second site is Kingsway Camp in north Delhi (near Delhi University), where in 1932 Gandhi established the Harijan Sevak Sangh (HSS). Later, the name was changed to Valmiki Bhawan and it became one of the centers of the Harijan movement. Gandhi stayed there temporarily between 1934 and 1938.

Narratives on the History of Valmiki Temple in Delhi

The above discussion of Valmiki worship and its establishment is based on previous studies and the author's field research. In the course of my fieldwork in Delhi, I noticed a difference in opinion between previous studies and the Balmikis regarding the history of temple construction. According to previous literature, the temple was built around 1937 with contributions from Birla. However, Balmikis, whom I interviewed, told a slightly different story. For example, Saint Krishna Vidyarthi, the temple's superintendent and Sadhu representative in 2010, after giving the author a tour of the temple and Gandhi's room, described the temple's history as follows:

> The temple has a *history of 150 years*, including the period when it was a *kachcha* (unprepared, made of earth) and was *restored to its* present state in *1937*. When the temple was a *kachcha*, it *housed a small school opened by Balmikis for the community itself*. When Gandhi decided to stay here, there was a suggestion to close the school, but Gandhi proposed that he himself participate in education (especially sanitary education) as a teacher, and the *school remained for some time afterward*.[16] [Emphasis mine]

What characterizes Sadhu's narrative is the historicity of the temple's 150 years and the subjective role of the Balmiks. He recognizes 1937 as the year the temple was restored and emphasizes the 150 years of history by noting that the temple had existed before the restoration. This also indicates that it is older than Birla Temple on the same street. In addition, he speaks of the "school opened by the Balmikis" and focuses on the cohesiveness of the community. It also provides the community's view that Gandhi is perceived as an outside participant.

Based on the objective of capturing the agency of Balmikis, this study attempts to focus on what people consider "fact" at present and how they narrate the past. From Sadhu's narrative, we can see spontaneous self-recognition rather than one who worships Bhagwan Valmiki only under the influence of Gandhi and AS.

Inter-caste Conflict over Valmiki Worship

In the previous sections, I examined Bhagwan Valmiki worship in North India and Delhi from a historical context and its relationship with the AS, Gandhi, and Birla. It is necessary to understand that Valmiki worship within the community was formed in the context of such historical dynamics.

Finally, it is necessary to mention the conflict of opinion within the Balmikis over Bhagwan Valmiki worship, which was not accepted by all members of the Balmiki community. Even if one belongs to the Balmiki jati determined by birth, whether or not one follows Valmiki worship is a different matter. In particular, converts to Buddhism are negative about the name, saying that it is merely "a name that panders to Hinduism." For example, Bhagwan Das (1927–2013), a Buddhist convert and Ambedkarite, criticized Valmiki worship in his community as an influence of the

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[16]August 8, 2010, at Valmiki Temple in Delhi.

Hinduization of the Dalits by caste Hindus and opposed the name Valmiki (Das 2011: 54–56, 68–71). In addition to Das, other highly educated Balmikis have negative opinions on Valmiki worship.

However, both positions are recognized regardless of education, occupation, or region. It is also possible that for those who take the surname of Valmiki, this may be based on strategic motives. For example, regarding the adoption of the Valmiki surname by the author of *Joothan*, Ganguly (2009) analyzes the following:

His eventual adoption of the name "Valmiki" is *not* an endorsement of his community's assimilation under a majoritarian Hindu ethnos and ethos. It is, rather, a defiant and ironic gesture, daring the upper-caste citizen to take him on as a "recognizable" Dalits, one who is not shamed of his identity but intent on "shaming" the privileged citizen into recognizing it as a legitimate one. The adoption of "Valmiki" as his last name is also a mark of his protest at his own community's desire to hide behind an upper-caste bourgeois identity in its path to upward social and professional mobility (Ganguly 2009: 437, emphasis by the author, Ganguly)

In an interview with Omprakash Valmiki about his surname,[17] the author asked, "Do you worship Bhagwan Valmiki?" He pointed to the statues of Buddha and Ambedkar placed in the room and replied, "No, I only follow Dr. Ambedkar and Buddhism." It seemed to indicate that taking the Valmiki surname and adhering to a religion other than Hinduism do not conflict but "coexist" and are acceptable to him, despite the contradiction. More specifically, this situation of coexistence is observed not only among individuals but also in Balmiki organizations as they adopt a method of reconciling different ideologies. The following photograph illustrates the proposed method. (Figure 8)

Figure 8: The portraits of B.R. Ambedkar and Valmiki saint at a Balmiki community function. (Photographed by the author)

The figure illustrates the portraits of Ambedkar and Valmiki displayed next to the stage during a meeting of a Balmiki organization. Thus, the movement attempts to unite its members and develop its activities by incorporating the leading symbols that conflict with each other in terms of ideology within the caste.

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[17]August 30, 2011, at Omprakash Valmiki's home in Dehradun.

In light of the above, the Balmiki identity can be summarized as follows: In contemporary North India, the caste name Balmiki as a self-identification is more widely established than Bhangi and Chuhra, and there is disagreement within the caste over Valmiki worship. Nevertheless, no other name can replace Balmiki for them, and it is certainly the name for community cohesion and collective identity in the current context. In everyday life, it is a source of self-respect for the community. Leslie's study of Valmiki immigrants in Britain persuasively points out that "Bhagwan Valmik is the community's God and guru, its *Jagat guru* or 'World Teacher.' He also represents everything that they have lost: earthly power, religious authority, personal honor, and pride." (Leslie 2003: 76).

Considering these situations, the case of the Balmiki as Hinduized should not be easily declared.[18] Rather than worshipping or not worshipping Valmiki as a paramount factor, we need to focus on how they strategically utilize the name Valmiki (Balmiki), which has already been established as a form of self-identification for their community development. After all, Balmiki identity can be considered in building interrelationships with others, despite contradictions, conflicts, and ambiguities.

Conclusion

By focusing on the beliefs and ambiguity of self-identity of the Balmikis, this article attempts to examine their anti-caste imagination. For Balmikis with limited socio-economic capital, it is practically difficult to make a clear break with Hinduism or convert to another religion, such as Buddhism. Thus this community seems forced to obtain jobs in the sanitation department of the municipality as it is more secure. The case study of Balmikis in Delhi indicates the clear break-up may not be the only way to demonstrate the anti-caste imaginaries.

Discarding Hindu values (as Dr. Ambedkar and other Dalits follow) and strong anti-Hindu sentiment would be possible in a context of socio-economic ascent and the fostering of self-respect and solidarity within the community. The case of Balmiki in this study may show under what conditions it is possible to develop them.

※This paper is a revised version of the following report.

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[18]Prashad's study (2000) provides excellent insight, but I disagree with his overestimation of the influence of Hindu supremacist forces on the Balmikis and his depiction of the 1984 massacre of the Sikhs as a Balmiki-oriented mob. See Kolenda's (2003) counterargument to this.

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Repertoires of Anti-caste Sentiments in the Everyday Performance: Narratives of a Dalit Woman Singer

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Abstract

Understanding Dalit women through their lifeworld and life-narratives enables one to understand the caste relations that they negotiate with in their everyday life. Resistance in the everyday life of Dalit women includes how they challenge the existing public spaces, cultural norms, and practices through the creation of a 'subaltern counterpublics' space. This space involves collective actions like popular writing, singing, theatrics, etc., to confront the 'normalised' caste relationship that prevails within Indian society. The cultural performance becomes the narrative of this counterpublics space in which they intend to reassert their lost identity and dignity. The emergence of alternative public spaces is 'significant and a necessary condition for democracy'. For Dalit women cultural performers, the everyday resistance practices are deeply embedded in the creation of an alternative worldview, a counterpublics, that both represent their 'world of (caste) experience' as well as becomes a space to 'talk-back' about their exclusion and humiliation. This article through an ethnographic account, has engaged with a Dalit woman cultural performer and her lifeworld. The article aims to explore the meanings, practices, and challenges that she faces in her anti-caste resistance.

Keywords

Cultural performance, resistance, everydayness, lifeworld, Dalit woman, Birha

Introduction

I begin this article with an anecdotal reference of my respondent and popular Dalit *Birha* singer Malti Rao. One fine day, amidst the presence of other activists during a cultural program on Ambedkar Jayanti, Dalit Mission singer Malti Rao sang her famous *Birha* song:

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> *Na Rab ne diya hai, na paigambar ne diya hai,*
> *Jo Kuch bhi diya hai wo Ambedkar ne diya hai*
> *Babasaheb Bhimrao ka Issara tha,*
> *Kisi Garib ko Haq dilana agar Bagawat hai,*
> *To bagi naam hai mera, bagawat naam hai mera,*
> *Mita do julm ki hasti, yahi paigam hai mera.*

(I have not been bestowed upon by any God; whatever I have is because of Ambedkar's effort. He was the one who stood for us. He was the revolutionary who believed in helping the poor and needy. I stand in solidarity with his revolution, and I like and appreciate his spirit.)

The song was sung by Malti Rao in a piercing loud voice, with full use of body language and establishing eye contact with her listeners. The song reflected not just pure aesthetics but resistance as well; to deny the dominant caste-social order that has rendered Dalit women like her vulnerable. Songs were a way of her everyday expression that unfolded her desirability and anti-caste passion.

The lifeworld of many Dalit women is often narrated in their ethnographic narratives, autobiographies, translations, anecdotes, memories, musical performances, etc., to mention a few. The narratives told in such writings and performances reflect upon the real-life stories and their everyday struggles. It enables the readers/viewers to gradually unfold the struggle and challenges that many of these writers, artists, have undergone due to the caste location in which they are embedded. A study of their lifeworld through autobiographies, memories, ethnographic studies are methodologically significant ways in which Dalit women's struggle, resistance, and everydayness can be unfolded.

The performance of Dalit songs, poetry, and theatrical performances also reflects a critical take on the existing upper-caste cultural practices. For instance, many of the songs are written and performed in a manner that critically highlights the 'flaws' of the dominant culture. The performers engaged in such cultural productions are deeply embedded in the process of cultural production that has a sense of 'reflexivity', thereby allowing them to critically assess the dominant and hegemonic cultural practices. The 'everyday soundscape' has the potential to 'bring together shared experiences of displacement, racism and social exclusion' (Bennett 2005: 118). For Dalit women singers, their engagement with music and writings has been a source to 'talk-back' to the structures of caste and also to recast their identity.

The Dalit cultural performances also bring up a dialectical relationship with the dominant culture. The cultural performance has a counter-narrative to the existing dominant caste social order. This dominant upper-caste social order is questioned in terms of its myths, history, and traditional practices. The oeuvre of cultural performance is much more than the material aspect of culture. The emergence of new-popular spaces is intervening in the existing cultural forms and practices, thereby destabilizing its legitimacy and authority. In Adorno's term, this 'culture industry' in a true sense not only accommodates new forms and practices of a culture, but it also resists against those

mainstream, dominant culture that is already well integrated within the social system. It is interesting to see how in popular cultural spaces the emergence of reflexive writings and cultural performances have created a new worldview for Dalits, that is enabling them to reclaim dignity.

This article aims to explore a Dalit woman's lifeworld and worldview, and the meanings that they associate with their involvement in cultural programs. An ethnographic account of cultural performers reveals their motivation or trigger for them to be part of the anti-caste movement. Furthermore, an in-depth engagement with their lived experience unfolds to us the role of micro social structures like family, marriage, etc., in the anti-caste resistance. Melucci has discussed that the everyday practices assume a form of 'articulated system of decision-making, negotiation, and representation in which signifying practices developed in everyday life can be expressed and heard independently of the formal political institution' (Melucci 1993: 188). The ethnographic account of Dalit-women-cultural performers can also help explore the dynamic relationship between the everyday lived experiences of performers and the anti-caste movement.

Theoretical Framework

An engagement with lived experience allows one to understand the 'tacit practices' through which everyday reality unfolds itself. Many such everyday practices include talking, reading, moving about, singing, etc., to mention a few (Certeau 1984; Johansson & Vinthagen 2020). The act of resistance in such everyday practices might be small, scattered, or tacit but they are significant in questioning the power structures. Scott (1985) in his discussion about the 'ordinary class struggle' has talked about the significance of 'small events' in bringing long-term political changes. He has explored the potential of everyday confrontation that can be detrimental to hegemonic class structure. Scott's theoretical position is significant to understand how the 'weak' challenge the dominant structure.

The work by Johansson and Vinthagen is also a significant theoretical guide to understand a lesser engaged concept of 'everyday resistance'. Their theoretical approach is important to consider how structure and agency have worked in a different context to shape historical social change. The everyday resistance is thereby a dynamic concept that needs to be understood beyond the existing historical frameworks by looking into micro-social structures and processes. This article has engaged with narratives of Dalit women singers to study how their narratives and songs are imbued within the everyday resistance against caste structure.

The other theoretical framework which this article seeks to explore is the 'counterpublics' discourse that Dalit women have created through their narratives and singing. The term 'Subaltern counterpublics' was coined by Nancy Fraser where she has discussed the discursive arenas that develop parallel to the official public sphere. 'Subaltern counterpublics' support revisionist historiography. It generates 'counterdiscourses' that permit the formulation of oppositional interpretation of

subaltern identities, interests, and needs (Fraser 1990: 67). Interestingly, Fraser has discussed the emergence of counterdiscourses in the late twentieth century through the emergence of an 'array of journals, bookstores, festivals...' etc. (Ibid.: 67). The emergence of counterpublics is particularly significant in a multicultural society that is stratified through the structural relations of dominance and subordination. In the Indian context, the structures of dominance and subordination are largely determined through caste relationships (Ambedkar 2014; Guru 2002; Thorat 2009).

For Dalit women, the 'counterdiscourse' is the rejection of the hegemony of the dominant caste social order that has sanctified caste practices. Their songs have anti-caste themes and an alternative worldview of cultural practices. Through an ethnographic narrative, the article has tried to explore the music as one of the facets of 'counterpublics' that Dalit women exhibit as their everyday resistance against the caste structure. The act of singing for Dalit women is their effort to create an alternative worldview, revisionist historiography in which they can re-imagine an anti-caste worldview.

Methodology

Ethnography is an important methodological tool to understand a culture and its representations. It allows the researcher to engage with the field in a much more nuanced and engaging way. Clifford has argued that: "Ethnography is powerfully situated between powerful systems of meanings. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilisations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes processes of innovation and structuration, and itself part of these processes" (Clifford 1986: 2). For Dalit women performers, their narratives uniquely decode the cultural practices and the symbols of political resistances that are imbued in their everyday life. Their engagement with the cultural space re-structures their traditionally ascribed position as doubly-marginalized Dalit women, by giving them voice and agency to express their conventionally silenced voice.

Ethnography as a methodological approach becomes even more significant when the research involves engaging with the women's question (Lughod 2000; Stacey 1991; Visweswaran et. al. 1994). Stacey argues that women's ethnography has its strength as it gives research 'subjects' greater respect, thereby making them 'full collaborators' in feminist research (Stacey 1991: 112). An ethnographic study was significant to this article as it helped to understand the anti-caste resistance through an everyday engagement of artists and participants of anti-caste activists. Clifford (1986), in his methodological engagement with ethnography has discussed how ethnography can decode and recode the meanings that exist in a culture.

The engagement with a Dalit woman through ethnography helped this research to understand the subtle layers of caste practices that are prevalent in society, and how Dalit women have tried to cope with it in their creative ways. The access to the field

has allowed for a better understanding of cultural nuances by connecting with people who are the bearers of the culture. The cultural performances have given unique insights into the research to learn about cultural meanings and cultural significance.

Lughod (2000) has argued that ethnography allows one to engage with the social and cultural richness of the field. The 'thick and thin' description in ethnography allows the researcher to move from 'local, to personal, to national'. The ethnographic account of a Dalit woman singer in this article has allowed the understanding of a Dalit woman's positionality across the historical and socio-cultural spectrum. The ethnographic richness of a Dalit woman narrative has made the understanding of her lifeworld more accessible for this research. The study of lifeworld within sociology can be seen as a methodological shift in sociological inquiry as it intends to study the 'world of experience' (Erfahrungswelt). It is a subjective inquiry into one's life and his/her experience. Husserl, who is the pioneer of the concept of lifeworld understands it as a 'world of experience', something that is ignored, taken-for-granted and is considered as obvious. Husserl through his understanding of the 'lifeworld' has tried to contrast the lifeworld, which is determined by experience, to that of science. He argues that the world of science is premised as something concrete, objective and true but it is not so. According to Husserl, it is the lifeworld that is governed by experience; it is what is true, real, and concrete. The lifeworld is determined by subjective and intersubjective characteristics. For Husserl, the concept of lifeworld means 'a thickly experienced context of embodied human acting and knowing that is not completely surveyable, not fully objectifiable and which has an inescapably intertwined and intersubjective character' (Moran 2012: 181).

Exploring the narratives has special significance for the Dalit community. Dalit history has remained unaccounted, and their history and culture have been that of erasure. Narratives, autobiographical writings, ethnographic accounts, are thus some of the significant ways through which history telling can happen. Kumar (2010) has discussed the absence of Dalit autobiographical writings till the late twentieth century. Its emergence gradually through writings of Omprakash Valmiki (Joothan), Vasant Moon (Vasti), Laxman Mane (Upara), among others has been important to account for Dalit 'self'. For Dalit women the very act of discussing life narratives has been important to question the structures of caste and patriarchy, thereby discussing their double-marginalisation.

The field-based research involved long-drawn conversations with my respondent over a period of time. I visited my respondent during different cultural events. Initially, the conversation was formal but during the course of my interaction, I built a rapport with her that helped me conduct an in-depth conversation. Her caste experience was strongly intertwined with her everydayness. The selection of my respondent was through snowballing. During my frequent visit to sites of cultural events, I came to know about her popularity among the masses. She was also popular through social media networks and had her YouTube channel as well. Her songs are widely circulated through CDs, mobile music, and stage performances. The other reason that made me choose her as my respondent was because of her ability to connect with the

masses and their strong anti-caste determination. My respondent would connect with the audience even after their performance and she would ensure that her thoughts and ideas made sense to people in real-time. I established contact with her through connecting with her peer groups and organizers. My meetings with her initially were at the sites of cultural events but eventually she became more comfortable with me which enabled me to have a more personalized conversation with her. While there were several other popular singers that the research work might have as well looked into, but to ensure more focused and in-depth inquiry, I limited this research to one respondent.

Respondent

Malti Rao is from Ambedkar Nagar, Uttar Pradesh. She is a *Birha* singer and is well-known for her musical performances. She runs her YouTube Channel and has also published several CDs and VCDs. During my interaction, I found her narrative very powerful and embedded in her everyday lived experiences. She had her life narratives and her unique ways of resisting caste oppression. My interaction with her involved questions on their caste experiences, the role of family and peer-group in voicing resistance against caste, the challenges that they faced to access cultural spaces, and the meanings they derived from their performances.

The research involved narrative analysis to understand how they expressed their lifeworld. Narrative Analysis as Riessman (2003) has argued is about sharing the experience by constantly moving back and forth in understanding the totality of reality. It is more than just storytelling as it allows for the re-imagination of lived experience through a more personalised account. It is thus a critical engagement with one's own self in this process of narrativizing. The narrative analysis allows that the interviews conducted in the process of study are not just about the spoken part, but it involves microanalysis by looking into language, how the narrative is told, and other micro inquiries that can reflect more about the narrative beyond the obvious.

Analysis

Revisiting Childhood Memories

During interaction, I found that childhood experience of exclusion and discrimination was something that my respondent began with. She explained her childhood experiences in detail. Her discriminations were both in subtle and overt forms. The responses of my respondent discussing her childhood exclusion were part of the shared collective exclusion that the Dalit community has faced for centuries, particularly when they try to access the educational space. It is important to note that Dalit students are often marginalized in institutions like schools and are relegated as inferior. The question of 'Merit' is often hurled at them.

Malti was born in Ambedkar Nagar in a village, Pakri Rasoipur, Uttar Pradesh. She is educated and she had completed her Master's degree. Her childhood memories

of getting excluded from social and cultural events at school made her commitment to sing anti-caste songs stronger. She said that she has been active in the Ambedkar mission from an early age, from 2003 onwards. She expressed her desire to continually associate with the vision of the Mission to spread awareness among people to establish an anti-caste society. Her narrative reflected her engagement with the anti-caste struggle very early in her life due to the exclusionary caste structures that she was subjected to. Her association with 'Mission' was influenced by reading the works of Dr. Ambedkar and other anti-caste leaders.

History of Caste Exclusion

Caste violence is an experiential reality that Dalit women have to face in their everyday life. The forms of this caste violence are manifold, and it unfolds in tangible and subtle ways as well. The forms of violence that Dalit women are subjected to include, rape, untouchability, exclusion, molestation, domestic violence, etc. The experiences of violence have relegated the position of Dalit women to infirmity. The violence they face is not just at a personal level but at the 'collective' level as well. The 'collective violence' often manifests itself in the State's apathy to account for such violence. The episode of collective violence is discussed in the works of Teltumbde (2008), where he has talked about the episode of Khairlanji violence of Maharashtra. The gruesome brutality that Dalit women were subjected to was due to the caste apathy that had prevailed in the region. The Khairlanji episode involved the rape of Dalit women and burning of Dalit ghettos.

The experience of such violence is often unfolded through the narratives of women. Their experience of violence is a consequence of social reality emanating out of a Dalit women's positionality within a caste society. Malti would often start her conversations by narrating her journey since childhood and the sense of exclusion and violence she faced due to her caste identity everywhere. The songs sung by Malti were not per se about the violence faced by Dalit women, but the songs were an important aspect to raise anti-caste consciousness among Dalit women for the kinds of atrocities that they are subjected to. It gave them a sense of belongingness and consciousness about social justice.

Resistance has been a significant means for Dalit women to come out of their experiences of violence. Malti said that her association with the cultural movement led by Babasaheb (Ambedkar) has allowed her to step out of her inhibitions about their caste identity. She has openly distanced herself from the ascribed caste identity and has taken up Buddhism as the mode of emancipation. Dalit music has been an important medium in which this re-working of identities has been meaningfully realized (Kalyani 2020). Merrian (1964) has argued that the study of music is a way to study human behavior itself. Its production is culturally located and hence a study of music can tell us the complex activities, ideas, and object that are embedded within the culture. The narrative that has unfolded through Malti's music thus provides some significant insight into the Dalit woman experiences of emerging from violent social structures.

Invocation of Socio-cultural Icons

The narratives of Dalit women carry a special admiration for social icons. These revered icons included Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Babasaheb Ambedkar, Manywar Kanshiram, Sant Gadgeji Maharaj, Sant Ravidas, Sahuji Maharaj, to mention a few. The emancipation that Dalit women faced were echoed in the way they felt closely associated with these icons. Social icons and their personalities have been important in the construction of a cultural milieu, which is inclusive and discusses the emancipation of Dalit women. Malti emphasizes her *songs-of-resistance* were a way to find herself and her identity, it was a space for an alternative anti-caste worldview, where she will have a dignified and humane position.

Malti discussed in detail the icons and socio-cultural movements that motivated her to move ahead. The women icons are a sobriquet with terms of sisterhood like Bahen (sister) or Mata (Mother). This reflects the sense of solidarity and empathy that goes along with the cultural resistance for social change. The icons that she discussed during her conversation are celebrated during cultural programs and are part of collective social imagination. These icons are revered, and they have their unique historical trajectories of the anti-caste struggle. The icons are also a cultural artifact that is used in graphic art like in calendar art, wall painting, T-shirts, etc. Famous one-liners from the icons are also written on these cultural artifacts. The cultural production surrounding the icons in the form of booklets, artworks, etc., are also important aspects worth mentioning.

The reverence shown towards socio-cultural icons was more than just political gratification for Malti Rao as she said,

> Our cultural programs are very different from political programs. Our programs are intended to unite our society and to make them understand our Mission of Buddhism and Ambedkarism. I feel deeply associated with Babasaheb, Mata Savitri Bai Phule, Narayana Guru, Shahuji Maharaj. They are an integral part of my songs and I consider them my ideal. They have stood for the cause and not 33 crores (Hindu) God and Goddesses. I don't consider them.

It was interesting to see how despite being embedded in party politics, Malti demarcated political icons and socio-cultural icons. She strongly felt that while politics has been an enabling experience and it has spread the reach of socio-cultural icons, it couldn't be the end goal per se. The ultimate goal for her was to experience an anti-caste worldview in which she can reclaim her dignity.

The socio-cultural icons from history have given a different alternative view to understanding history. For instance, works of Jyotiba Phule have also reimagined the existing myths and questioned the authority of the upper caste by discussing how in the mythical narrative there is a deliberate attempt to silence and demean the voice of the lower caste. Similarly, Ambedkar in his writings has discussed the history by taking

into consideration the oppressive caste structure that persisted. In his work *Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, he has discussed how in ancient society the Brahminical rituals and practices were aimed to bring a social order that was devoid of the principle of social justice. The Manusmriti has given sanctity to the Varna hierarchy in a way that it has positioned human beings with Shudras and Ati-Shudras at the bottom of the hierarchy (BAWS, 1987: 25). Social icons like E.V.R. Periyar are also well-entrenched in people's memory for his anti-caste Self-Respect movement.

During my conversation with Malti Rao, she talked about rationality and debunking irrationality explicitly. In her discussion, she mentioned that she has done away with all Hindu idols. Even in wall art like calendars and wall paintings she only uses images of socio-cultural icons, whom she reveres. She said that using icons of reverence is a small homage that she can give to her *Nayak* (hero). She also shared her experience through her songs that were deeply embedded in the reverence of social icons. She recalled, 'Since my childhood, I was inclined towards the songs of Babasaheb Ambedkar. That was the starting point. Later, I have sung songs on Mata Savitribai, Kanshi Ram *Saheb* as well'.

The experience of recalling anti-caste icons is rooted in resistance to annihilate caste and reclaim social dignity. Narayan (2006) has argued that the construction of icons and symbols has given Dalits a sense of pride and glory. It is an important step to break the upper caste-dominated cultural autonomy by dissenting to accept a subservient position. The celebration of these icons has eventually become part of the 'collective memory' that is embedded with liberating and emancipatory messages, and it has been significant in transforming Dalit lives (Narayan 2006: 27).

Resistance and 'Recognition'

Popular music is an enabling experience for Dalit women as it has created a new space in which they can break off from the conventional caste and gender norms that they are subjected to as Dalit women. Resistance in everyday life has been a significant aspect for Dalit women that has enabled them to come out of their experiences of everyday violence and humiliation. Malti affirms that her association with the cultural movement led by Ambedkar and others has enabled her to step out of her inhibitions about her caste identity. She has openly rejected caste identity and has taken up alternative cultural practices like Buddhism, as the mode of emancipation. Dalit music, in particular, has been an important aspect in which this re-working of identities has become meaningfully realized.

Malti's narrative has explained how she has tried to shake off her caste experience in everyday life by constantly contesting the caste structures in multiple ways. A Dalit woman's music challenges the Brahmanical structures by creating 'new popular music' by contesting the existing form and content of the music. While the content of music is reworked in terms of alternative history, oral narratives, and myth, the changes in the form of music include a reworking of the spatial and material aspects of the music.

The 'new popular forms' of Dalit women's music have become more publicly visible, louder and dynamic in terms of political content.

One can theoretically understand Malti's loudness, upright position, and firmness in songs through Guru's concept of 'Humiliation'. Guru (2009) has argued that the act of humiliation is political. The resistance to humiliation thus also needs to be a political act. One needs to openly claim for such resistance rather than hide it. When Malti talked with a degree of comfort and confidence about the acts of humiliation that she was subjected to, and her ability to stand against such humiliating experience, she made a political claim. Her humiliation was not just internal to her but her act of claiming that she has been humiliated gave her a sense of agency to deny a subservient position, any further. Guru also argues that 'resistance is internal to humiliation. Since humiliation does not get defined unless it is claimed, it naturally involves the capacity to protest' (Guru 2009: 18). Malti's response through her cultural practices was her claim to a public space that was historically denied to Dalit women like her.

For Malti, the act of claiming the public sphere through her song was a shift from 'Reductionism to Recognition'. Guru argues that the desire for 'recognition' corresponds to the 'reduction, rejection, cancellation and annihilation' that the Dalits are subjected to. By 'Reduction', Guru refers to the act of reducing someone to the level of an animal. They are devoid of 'cultural life' (ibid.: 211). Within the upper-caste framework of 'Reductionism', Dalits are subjected to cultural and political reductionism. Guru cites the example of a cow to explain how 'the four-legged animal is privileged over the human beings' (ibid.: 212). The reduction of a Dalit is about reducing their value to be lesser than an animal or the natural order. In this regard, Malti recalled her school experience where her headmaster would often beat her up like an animal. She said, 'Humare Masterji meri Choti kich ke marte the jaise maveshi ko marte the' (My teacher would beat me up, holding my braid like a cattle). She further said, 'I still remember in school when we used to go our teacher would have stricter punishment for us compared to other students. This was very painful'.

Her imagery of humiliation and getting belittled was close to that of an animal being tamed. The 'reduction' of her identity to cattle was a reflection of how Dalit women were treated when they tried to access institutional spaces like schools.

However, with the rise of anti-caste consciousness to some degree the existing/ mainstream cultural space has become contested. The very act of 'Rejection of Rejection' has allowed for an alternative imagination of the public sphere. The emergence of an alternative cultural space has allowed Dalits to transgress from the state of 'Reduction' to the state of 'recognition'. Popular culture is an important site of 'recognition' and reclaiming of identity. It has infused newer meanings into the lives of Dalit women in particular. For Malti, singing was both passion and resistance. For her, the very act of singing was reclaiming a space that was historically denied to her. During one of her conversations, she said,

> I often use platforms like Facebook and YouTube to share widely my songs. I do programs for free to ensure that people know more about them. I only take convenience charge. I do Bollywood (songs) for money and I do get money from there. But for Mission songs, I take no charge, because it is my 'payback' for society. I don't want to make a business out of my Mission dedication.

Malti's engagement with singing anti-caste songs was more than just earning money. It is about her struggle to get 'Recognition'. This act of recognition involves rejecting the Brahminical social structure and reclaiming spaces of dignity.

Socialization and Peer-group

Socialization and peer-group played important roles in Malti's life. Her narrative has explicitly discussed the significance of micro-social structures like family in supporting women to come out of a domestic space and occupy the public sphere. Families have further been an important space for socialization and learning about the social movement. Malti too emphasized the significance of family support. For her familial association particularly, post-marriage has been a watershed moment to associate oneself with cultural events. Family support and socialization thus has been a critical space of learning as well as re-learning about questions of identity and self-assertion.

Understanding Malti's association with family and their support in the choices she made was important to unravel their lifeworld. It explained the role of socialisation in resistance. I enquired with Malti about how supportive was her family in making the choices that she did? For her the role of family was important as she had adopted Buddhism only after her marriage. Her husband's dedication to Buddhism also encouraged her to take up Buddhism. However, during my conversation, she insisted that she had taken the decision voluntarily and not under family pressure. She added that her adoption of Buddhism also encouraged her father to take up Buddhism. She said, "When my father came to know about it, he accepted it too. He agreed that the Hindu religion had a lot of superstition and irrationality". She further added that she along with her family now are convinced that the Hindu religion is not going to give her a sense of achievement as she felt with Buddhism.

The inclination towards Buddhism by Dalit women has emerged out of a 'collective experience' of exclusion that they have felt within the dominant religion social order. The social structure of the family has been an important space through which anti-caste consciousness is promoted. The conversion to Buddhism is an alternative worldview, a counterpublics, that is taken up by Dalit communities. Fraser in her discussion on 'subaltern counterpublics' has considered it as 'parallel discursive arenas where the members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser 1990: 67). My respondents' vehement rejection of dominant religion and acceptance of Buddhism was a 'counterdiscourse'

through which she imagined an anti-caste society. This gave her a sense of liberation and pride in their identity.

Malti Rao, during her discussion on the family as a space of unlearning and re-learning said that her commitment to the Bahujan Mission has led to a redefinition of the family itself. For her, it is no longer confined to merely conjugal relationships, but it extends to everyone who has a shared consciousness with her, including her audience. While familial socialization was enabling for her, she was not limited by it. The family gave her conducive space to have interactions and associate herself with cultural spaces like programs and meetings. This had opened up new possibilities and avenues for her. Malti said that she would have never got the freedom to access her Mission if her family would not have supported her. The assertive voice in which she told me her perspective somewhere reflected her equal and collaborative understanding with her husband, instead of being in a submissive relationship. A sense of comradeship with her partner was a significant aspect of the Dalit movement which brought her to the active front in the movement.

To understand the collective consciousness that facilitated the idea of Mission, it is significant to look into social networks like family, peer groups as well as social media networks (digitally connected spaces), that play an important role in boosting their morale. Castell (1996) in his discussion on Network society has discussed economic organizations and other entrepreneurial ventures that transgress pure economic logic. He defines network-society as, "a society where key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information and use electronic-based technologies". Castell, while discussing forms of economic organization argues that these organizations do not develop in a social vacuum and their rootedness to cultural and social institutions cannot be ignored. The network-society for my respondent was significant in keeping up with liked-minded people connected on social media sites and in creating a 'family-like space'. Such social networks were also significant in the production of culture-economy around songs-of-resistance like *Bhimgeet*. Malti's songs are also widely circulated in social media networks dedicated to the anti-caste mission. Malti discussed her performance saying,

> Wherever [an] important program used to happen like *Baudh Dharma Samelan, Ambedkar Jayanti, Ravidas Jayanti, Phule Sahuji ki Jayanti,* I am the regular visitor to these programs. I feel a sense of connection with the people. They willfully listen to me and also buy my CDs and download my songs.

The connection and comradeship with the cultural space explains the significance of network society and peer group in Dalit women-led performances.

The other significant aspect of the family as the space for re-learning is that it has allowed women to resist caste-based exclusion through their everyday practice. For instance, if a woman has actively occupied the public sphere it is because she has received constant encouragement and freedom to choose her way to express her dissent to the caste structure. In a closed, orthodox Indian family this would not have

been possible. Leela Dube (1988, 2000) has reflected on the gender dimension of the family by studying the role of the family in the process of socialization and the social constraints a woman faces within the family. Thus, the role of the family becomes important to understand the everyday lived experience of Dalit women. Beteille has further discussed the role of the family in 'socialisation of children, particularly in the early years. The family acts in conjunction with others- kin, neighbors and so on- in the socialization of child' (1993: 438). The creation of Dalit counterpublics has created a conducive space for family and peer-group to transgress caste identities.

The association of women in cultural events is part of the larger socialisation process that they underwent in different phases of their lives. Their association with *Bhimgeet* and other cultural associations emanated from their voluntary will to do so, and their family supported such decisions. The experience of the family might have been different for different women; however, it is important to mention that to understand the everydayness of resistance of Dalit women, the family is an important institution one needs to engage with. The narrative analysis of Malti establishes a positive relationship between family and women who occupied the public sphere through cultural performances.

Dalit Woman (Actor)	Social Processes	Social Action
Malti Rao	1. Childhood Experiences	Self-Reflexivity
	2. Historical and Epistemological Re-thinking	Cultural Assertion
	3. Emergence of Socio-Cultural icons	Reclaiming Dignity
	4. Family Socialization	Social Networking
	5. Recognition	Challenging Humiliation
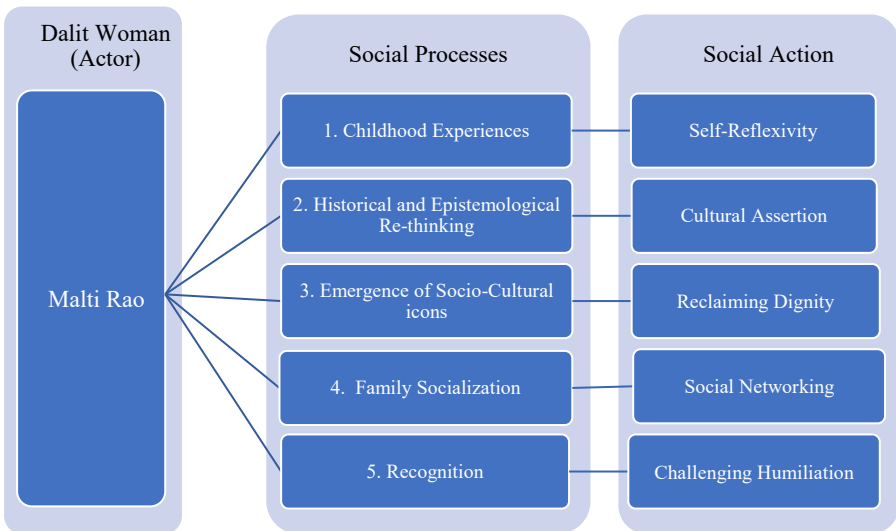
Table. 1: Conceptual framing of ethnographic narratives

Table 1 draws out the relationship between different social processes that a Dalit woman faces in resisting the caste structure. Weber in his discussion on understanding 'social action' and the human agency, has discussed the relationship between social structures and processes and the active engagement of human rationality, that leads to a particular kind of social action (Albrow 1990). The social processes that Dalit women have been subjected to have enabled them to rationalise their caste experience. Social action is a consequence of the anti-caste sentiments that are produced.

According to the ethnographic research, the first social processes that a Dalit woman was subjected to are the harsh childhood experiences in institutions like schools or peer groups. This caste-based discrimination has enabled Malti to think critically through the structures of caste and how she can stand against the structures of caste as active agents of debunking caste. Second, the emergence of anti-caste consciousness has created new ways to read history and production of new knowledge that have been missed out from mainstream discursive practices. For instance, Guru has pointed towards, 'cultural hierarchies that operate through certain academic institutional structures' and this makes marginalized identity intellectually deprived (Guru 2002: 5003). But it is worth mentioning that despite the institutional exclusion of history and narratives of the margins, much of this history and culture is produced and circulated through popular culture.[2] For my respondent, the re-thinking of history from the vantage point of the margins has given her a sense of pride, and her act of singing involved cultural assertion. The historical and epistemological rethinking takes place through a critical re-reading of history, the reworking of socio-cultural icons in everyday practices, the celebration of festivals, etc., to mention a few. The production of songs-of-resistance like *Bhimgeet* involves a perspective from the margins. The third social process is the emergence of socio-cultural icons. It has allowed Dalit women in particular to reclaim dignity. For instance, my respondent considered the icons as a 'source of inspiration'. She idealized the icons and wanted to practice their ideology in her everydayness. The other significant social process was family socialization through which she has connected with her community and expressed her solidarity. Lastly, the very process of 'Recognition' of her Dalit identity has allowed her to challenge oppressive structures of caste. The challenge to 'humiliation' has happened through claiming their identity beyond the structures of caste and by dissociating with the existing social order that has rendered Dalit women as untouchable.

Conclusion

An in-depth discussion with my respondent has enabled this article to understand the worldview of Dalit women in a more nuanced way. Engaging with ethnography as a methodology, allowed the research to open up terrains that were relatively unexplored and unknown. It gave the research better access to Dalit woman's lifeworld that was otherwise not possible. This research interacted with a Dalit woman singer to know and learn about the meanings embedded in her cultural practices. These interactions, taken up at multiple sites, helped the research explore the everydayness through her personal narrative and through the association she had with cultural events.

Life narrative is an important aspect of the performative culture that is witnessed among Dalit women. An engagement with life narratives re-centers the question of Dalit women and their everyday experience of resisting caste structures. An

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[2]K. Kalyani. (2021). Ashok Vijaydashmi to Dhola: National Archives, Central Libraries failed Dalit-Bahujan history. *The Print*. 10 July. Available at:. https://theprint.in/opinion/ashoka-to-vijayadashami-national-archives-central-libraries-failed-dalit-bahujan-history/693310/

engagement with life narratives also gives authenticity to the claims of humiliation that Dalit women have been historically subjected to (Shankar & Gupta 2017: 4). The exploration of experience unravels the everyday lifeworld of Dalit women and explains what their act of resistance is largely against. Mohan (1999) in his discussion on the emergence of the 'New Dalit Self' has argued that claiming agency through Dalit movements has given them an alternative ideological orientation. Despite some of these accounts that have discussed the significance of engaging with Dalit women's self and their narrative, an ethnographic engagement per se is largely missing from the discursive practices. The focus on unraveling Dalit women's lives is largely done through statistics of violence that they are subjected to, instead of centering the focus on the everyday resistance that they are part of.

This article is an ethnographic engagement with the life of a resisting Dalit woman who has transgressed the boundaries of pain and has made claims to 'recognize' her identity and dignity. Within the cultural sphere such claims for dignity are made by oppressed-caste women through narratives like songs, writings, speeches, autobiographies, etc., that are worth engaging with. The cultural reimagination of the anti-caste social order that these women strive for is a significant way to understand their everyday lived experience. This article has specifically focused on a Dalit woman singer and her act of singing as the creation of 'subaltern counterpublics'. The process of singing and narrativizing experience is a culturally significant phenomenon that has contested with the existing caste structure and has certainly disturbed the hierarchy of dominant and subordinate to some degree.

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Imagining an Anti-caste Utopia Through Food: Dalit Student Politics in Hyderabad, India

Kristina Garalytė[*]

Abstract

This article explores the connection between food and utopia within the Dalit student movement. Research data was gathered during the multi-stage ethnographic fieldwork in the university campuses in New Delhi (Jawaharlal Nehru University, University of Delhi) and Hyderabad (Osmania University, the English and Foreign Languages University) during 2013 and 2014 (total seven months). Seeking to demonstrate the centrality of the beef symbolism in the local Dalit student movement in Hyderabad, this article provides a content analysis of "Beef Anthem", written and performed by Dalit student activist NS Chamar,[1] contextualizing it with fieldwork observations and interviews with the Dalit activists. This article uncovers multilayered meanings and strategies surrounding beef issue allowing one to understand how through the symbol of beef, the Dalit activists in Hyderabad reimagined themselves and strategized their movement in the context of the strengthening right-wing politics.

Keywords

Dalit movement, caste, beef, utopia, student politics

Introduction

In 2009-2015, the beef issue rocked universities' campus life in Hyderabad and New Delhi. It began in 2009, when Madiga[2] student organization, the Dalit Students' Union, at the University of Hyderabad set a beef stall during campus' *Sukoon*

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[1]Even though the author of "Beef Anthem" gave a permission to use his original name in the article, due to the research ethics requirements and personal security reasons, his name, as all other names of interlocutors, are coded. NS Chamar is the pseudonym that the author of "Beef Anthem" chose himself.

[2]Madigas are one of the largest Scheduled Caste groups in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states.

festival. In the following years, through the students' network the idea spread to other Indian universities. In 2011, beef was consumed publicly in the English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad. In 2012, a beef festival was organized in the neighboring Osmania University. In both places, public beef eating on campuses led to confrontation between the festival participants and their opponents, mostly right-wing student groups. In 2012, there were also attempts by certain leftist "lower" caste student groups to organize beef and pork festival in Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. However, the initiative remained on the level of public debates without an actual realization due to the legal obstacles.[3] While in the University of Hyderabad beef stall has been maintained during *Sukoon* festivals, in the following years, it failed to remerge on other campuses. The beef issue again came to prominence among Dalit and progressive students in 2015, when beef bans were implemented by the Maharashtra state government. However, in most of the discussed campuses public beef consumption remained a utopia, a matter of debate and online activism, rather than an actual practice.[4]

Why did beef become a bone of contention on university campuses? Dalit and other marginalized students in Hyderabad and New Delhi were dissatisfied with the food being served at university canteens. The arguments they used were not only about the absence of beef in the menu, the food certain groups prefer, but more broadly, about the imposition of upper caste vegetarian food habits upon culturally diverse students' groups and the non-representation of the marginalized groups' culture on campus public space and their subsequent stigmatization. There are studies that show how certain food practices (e.g. vegetarianism and beef taboo) serve as a means to maintain cultural "purity" and social superiority of the dominant groups and resultant stigmatization of those who have different food habits, be it "lower" castes, religious minorities or indigenous communities (Chigateri 2008; Kikon 2022). Therefore, it is quite natural that food, specifically beef, was taken by Dalit students as a symbol to challenge discriminatory social norms and taboos, and express their utopian dream of the inclusive future.

Keeping in mind the value of holy cow in Hindu culture, the beef festivals, whether actually enacted or at the level of public debates, ignited passionate discussions and physical confrontations. Public beef eating on campuses was not a simple act of marginalized food consumption, but rather a social and political protest, accompanied by public discussion and the spread of certain socio-political discourse. Besides Dalits

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[3]Delhi Agricultural Cattle Preservation Act, 1994 prohibits slaughter, sale and transportation of agricultural cattle, and also the possession of its flesh. In 2012, relying on this Act, the administration of JNU temporarily barred a student from campus activities and sent notices to three additional students. This action was taken due to their involvement in organizing a festival centered around beef and pork consumption, which was seen as a potential source of disturbance on the campus (Upadhyay 2016).

[4]For more about beef festivals on campuses, see Gundimeda 2009, Pathania 2016, Sébastia 2017.

and other marginalized students, the beef festivals managed to attract a handful of various liberal and progressive students who found beef as a powerful symbol to critique prevalent social structures (caste), food hegemony (vegetarian normality) and right-wing politics, espousing these norms and values. Even though temporary and episodic, the beef issue allowed the educated marginalized youth to articulate their utopian visions of Indian society.

Seeking to demonstrate the centrality of beef symbolism in the local Dalit student movement in Hyderabad, in this article, I provide a content analysis of "Beef Anthem", written and performed by NS Chamar,[5] Dalit activist at Osmania University, contextualizing it with my observations and interviews with the Dalit activists. This article relies on the ethnographic data gathered for my PhD research on Dalit student activism in New Delhi and Hyderabad. I conducted the first stage of research in Jawaharlal Nehru University and the University of Delhi from March to June 2013 and the second stage of research in Osmania University (OU) and the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) in Hyderabad from January to March 2014. My understanding of Dalit student politics on these university campuses relies on 64 semi-structured and unstructured in-depth interviews with student activists and faculty members primarily from the Dalit background but not limited to them. The Dalits, whom I interviewed, were from diverse caste, regional, religious and political backgrounds. In this article, I mostly rely on the material from my fieldwork in Hyderabad, because beef issue as a political strategy among students emerged there and had much stronger visibility than in New Delhi. In Hyderabad, interviews were conducted in English mostly with males as they were referred to me by other students or faculty. When away from the field, I kept following Dalit students online, mainly on Facebook, which allowed me to be updated with the happenings on campuses while not being there physically. I must admit that this research paper lacks women's perspective because during my fieldwork I did not get a chance to communicate directly with female Dalit student activists in Hyderabad, though I had a few conversations with Dalit student activists in New Delhi.[6] When necessary for the analysis, the material from New Delhi will be involved in this article as well. The analysis of "Beef Anthem" and interview material with students will uncover multilayered meanings and strategies surrounding the beef issue allowing one to understand how through the symbol of beef, Dalit activists in Hyderabad reimagined themselves and strategized their movement in the context of the strengthening right-wing politics.

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[5]I got the permission and even encouragement from the author to use his original name and the lyrics of "Beef Anthem". However, due to the research ethics requirements and personal security reasons, I code his name in this article. NS Chamar is the pseudonym that the author of "Beef Anthem" chose himself.

[6]The visibility of female Dalit activists was rather limited on Osmania campus, as the central place in public happenings was usually taken by men. However, Dalit student activists were aware about this injustice existing within their own community and the movement, and they made attempts to provide some space and visibility for the female perspective.

Beef, Caste and Politics

Even those hardly familiar with Indian culture know that the cow in India has a holy status. The popular understanding of the Indian holy cow can be read in the words of S.M. Batra:

> The cow is held in great reverence by the Hindus. She occupies a place closer to the divine and there is hardly any temple where the cow does not figure prominently. The concept of sacredness of the cow is deeply ingrained in the thoughts, feelings, and aspirations of Hindus so much so that her protection and care is considered as a religious duty. There is a strong abhorrence for killing and eating the flesh of a cow. They have become so inviolable that in big cities they wander unmolested through the busiest traffic. Even a bull that gores a man to death may not be touched. The mere slaughter of a cow has led to many communal riots during pre as well as post-Independence period leading to a loss of several human lives and valuable property in India. (1986: 163)

How has the cow been gradually turned into such all-encompassing symbol of Hindu culture as Batra describes? Historical research seems to suggest that in Vedic and post-Vedic times, cow was sacrificed in rituals and was a preferred food for Brahmins. As a number of scholars argue, the change in practice happened after a series of encounters with cultural "others", Buddhists, Muslims and British colonizers, which made Hindus gradually change their culinary habits to delineate community boundaries and maintain their cultural difference from other religious and social groups (Jha 2010; Lodrik 2005).

Even though often seen as a uniting cultural symbol, the cow in India for centuries has been a divisive "political animal" (Desquesnes 2016). In the beginning of the twentieth century, the cow issue gained unprecedented significance in the context of the Indian independence movement, when the construction, consolidation and polarization of Hindu and Muslim identities was at its peak.[7] Hindu reformist organization Arya Samaj and its proponent Dayananda Saraswati travelled throughout India establishing cow protection societies (Heimsath 2015: 294). Sandria B. Freitag has examined the development of the Cow Protection society (*Gaurakshini Sabha*) in Uttar Pradesh. According to her, all the reformist nationalist organizations, though conflicting at times "worked to achieve together that important and new goal: consciousness among Hindus that they constituted members of an identifiable community" (1980: 605). The cow was invoked as a uniting Hindu symbol of both urban and rural population as, "[o]nly the sacred cow could have easily bridged the gap between Great and Little

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[7]Freitag noted that before the Indian independence movement, there were no homogenous Hindu and Muslim communities and identities. What mattered for people at that time were their caste, kin and village as identifying principles. Freitag saw the crystallization of Hindu and Muslim identities as an internalized colonial project: "at first members of the groups merely used the labels against the British for their own purposes, but in time the labels took on a reality they had not had" (1980: 598).

Traditions, between urban searches for community identity and rural values" (p. 614). Organizations preoccupied with cow protection started targeting not exclusively Muslims but also other communities (such as Banjaras and Chamars) that had cow-related occupations, lifestyles and habits (p. 607).

Cow-oriented motives also emerged in the landmark political opposition between the two leaders of Indian independence movement—M.K. Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar. Gandhi in the broader context of his non-violence ideology (*ahimsa*), stated:

> And it was some such argument that decided the *rishis* of old in regarding the cow as sacred, especially when they found that the cow was the greatest economic asset in national life. And I see nothing wrong, immoral or sinful in offering worship to an animal so serviceable as the cow…cow slaughter is indefensible on moral grounds. (as cited in Chigateri 2008: 19)

For Gandhi the cow had the meaning of spiritual and economic assets and had a special importance in the development of the new nation state. Meanwhile, Ambedkar, the ideological opponent of Gandhi and the leader of the untouchables, took a rather materialistic and much more down to earth approach ranking Hindu communities by their eating habits distinguishing *shakaharis* (vegetarians), from *mansaharis* (meat eaters), and separately pointing out beef-eating *mansaharis* (Chigateri 2008). In Ambedkar's perspective this three-fold division corresponded to the caste hierarchy. Beef consumption of dead animals for him was the main reason behind the practice of untouchability and meant a major source of caste stigmatization for the untouchables. Hence, one can see that already since the times of the Indian independence movement there emerged a split in the meaning of cow in terms of spirituality (Gandhi's vision) and materiality (Ambedkar's vision).

The independent Indian state had to search for an equilibrium regarding the holy cow, finding a consensus between conflicting communities and ideologies. A compromise was reached in Article 48 of the Constitution of India. It foresaw that the Indian state should be "prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle" (Government of India 2007: 23). However, this principle was implemented differently in various Indian states in the post-Independence period, some of the states continuing with beef consumption and others passing legislations banning cow slaughter. The spread of the criminalization of cow slaughter and beef consumption has been continuing and strengthening in the last decades ("The States Where Cow," 2015; Sayeed 2021).

In the post-independence period, cow and beef issues entered the sphere of electoral politics consolidating the Hindu vote bank and heightening communal tensions. Christophe Jaffrelot demonstrated how in the 1960s right-wing groups used cow slaughter banning initiatives, alongside other religious and cultural issues as political propaganda at the time of elections. The cow slaughter issue was taken up to consolidate the Hindu vote bank and to deter it from the secular Congress Party, for which Muslims and other minorities usually voted (1996).

In the 2014 general election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) followed an already well-tested strategy of using Hindu religious symbolism for political mobilization. In the Party manifesto it proclaimed among other points that, "In view of the contribution of cow and its progeny to agriculture, socio-economic and cultural life of our country, the Department of Animal Husbandry will be suitably strengthened and empowered for the protection and promotion of cow and its progeny" (Bharatiya Janata Party 2014: 41). Their election campaign was based on popular slogans *Modi ko matdan, gai ko jeevedan* ("Vote for Modi, save the cow"), *BJP ka sandesh: bachegi gai, bachegi desh* ("BJP's message: save the cow, save the country") (Roy 2014). At the time of elections all major national and international news headlines announced that India under the Congress rule was the world's number one exporter of beef (Kannan 2014), a fact that the Party found to be instrumental for election campaign. Internet memes soon appeared showing flourishing cow farms under the future BJP government and this was contrasted with cow slaughterhouses under the Congress rule.

With the BJP coming to power in the central government in 2014, the cow protection sentiments and policy has been gaining momentum. In 2015 in the state of Maharashtra, the local government passed legislation criminalizing cow slaughter in the state, leading Muslim butchers, minority groups and even some parties into protests (Shaikh 2015; Johari 2015). Hundreds of students at Hyderabad universities (UoH, OU and EFLU), led mainly by the Dalit organizations, staged protests against the beef ban in Maharashtra, publicly indulging in *kalyani biryani* (famous Hyderabadi beef and rice dish) ("Maharashtra Beef Ban Sparks," 2015). More recently, in January 2021, Karnataka Prevention of Slaughter and Preservation of Cattle Act, 2020, came into effect criminalizing the slaughtering, buying, selling and transporting all types of cattle, and prescribing punishments from monetary fines (Rs 50,000 and Rs 5 lakh) to up to seven years' imprisonment (Sood 2022).

In recent years, cow and beef issues emerged not only in politics, but what is most important, also affected the everyday lives and relations of ordinary people, both in urban and rural localities. Chigateri enlisted several cases in which cow was a main cause of religious (anti-Muslim) and caste (anti-Dalit) conflicts and ensuing violence (lynching Dalits and Muslims for supposedly killing a cow, repetitive communal attacks on Muslims celebrating Eid etc.).[8] Right-wing groups attempted to censor academic writing and teaching syllabus by erasing the traces of beef-eating practices of Hindus which was seen by them as contradicting the Hindu holy cow sentiment (2008: 15–16). In 2014, there was a notorious scandal related to the national daily *The Hindu* prohibiting its staff to bring beef dishes into a common canteen room, which supposedly caused discomfort for the majority of vegetarian upper-caste staff members (Kumar 2014). Many of these cases indicate that behind beef issue stands a strong religion and caste sentiment, and that attempts to prohibit beef entering public spaces are actually attempts to sustain upper-caste dominance and its cultural hegemony.

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[8]Cow vigilantism has strengthened in the last decades leading to numerous injuries and killings of Muslims and other minority communities (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

These incidents bring us to a more general discussion of the role of food in caste relations. The edited volume *Caste in Life: Experiencing Inequalities* (2011), in which famous Indian scholars and journalists describe their personal experiences of caste, aptly demonstrates how many of the caste practices were essentially constructed through food. One of the authors, anthropologist Balmurli Natrajan drawing on his own personal experience argued:

> The banality of caste is best seen in non-dramatic aspects of everyday life, such as food – the conception of what is food, its production…preparation, the conviviality or lack thereof that accompanies its consumption, etc. Although food-sharing as a marker of caste is on the decline, largely due to the onset of certain aspects of modernity...distinctive food practices continue to provide occasions where caste reveals itself. Or, shall we say, food is still a key site where people perform, produce and reproduce caste. Intimately shaped by caste, or even constituted by caste, food in the Indic context verily contains a 'surplus of meanings' perhaps like no other cultural setting in this world. (2011: 35)

If caste hierarchy and caste identities are intimately related to food practices, accordingly, the dominance of certain castes corresponds to the dominance of certain food habits or food cultures. It results into naming what is normal and what is not, what is acceptable and what should be denounced and banned. G. Arunima, reacting to the incident related to *The Hindu*, aptly argues that "[t]he neologism 'non-vegetarian,' created by vegetarian India itself speaks volumes, and makes the country possibly the only one in the world where meat is not called by its name!" (2014).

However, food is not just a means of dominance but also the locus of emancipatory imaginaries and a means of resistance in India and beyond. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, introduced the practice of *langar*—the sharing of food irrespective of religious beliefs, social background, caste, color, age, gender, or societal rank which was a revolutionary idea in the back then caste-ridden society. It is also known that M.K. Gandhi at some point of his spiritual and political career expressed positive ideas about inter-dining and did not see it as a contradiction of the *varna* order. In other contexts, and closer to the current times, several authors have analyzed how different communities employed food as a medium to communicate the critique of the dominant discourse and assert alternative identities. Psyche Williams-Forson has shown how an African American comedian in the stand-up comedy "Bigger and Blacker" mocked racial prejudges using chicken as a stereotypical referent of African American identity (2008). Dylan Clark has demonstrated how punk sub-culture indulged in raw and rotten foods to define their subculture identity and to critique American mainstream culture, characterized by: "corporate capitalism, patriarchy, environmental destruction, and consumerism" (2008: 19). Similarly, in certain Dalit groups, beef does not indicate merely a social stigma, but also a means of self-assertion. C.J. Arun showed how

Paraiyars, the SC community in Tamil Nadu, re-evaluated *parai* drum[9] and beef—the prior symbols of pollution[10]—into positive symbols of Dalit culture. Arun reported how Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu staged a cultural performance that featured a drumming competition between a Brahmin and a Paraiyar. The Paraiyar, winning over the exhausted Brahmin stated:

> Do you know the secret of my energy? I eat beef every day. Your sambar (lentil and vegetable stew, mostly eaten in these parts by Brahmins who are vegetarian) is useless. Come tomorrow and I will ask the butcher to give you a half kilo of beef and 250 grams of bone. (Arun 2007: 100)

Arun's account indicates that the Paraiyar community "de-polluted" themselves by re-evaluating the symbols with which they were traditionally associated. The symbols of the beef and *parai* drum that before had constituted the main source of Paraiyars' pollution and subordinate position became the source of Paraiyars' pride and superiority.[11]

Similarly, James Staples observed that around 1999-2000 Christian Dalits of coastal Andhra region began changing their perception towards beef eating re-signifying it from social stigma to a positive identity symbol (2017). However, apparently, this was a short-lasting change, as he reported about the "decline in beef's potency as a positive symbol" within these communities since 2004 largely due to the state's anti-slaughter politics, economic and environmental concerns (2018: 70). He also briefly reports about the rejuvenation of beef issue in the beef festivals on Hyderabad university campuses around 2012, however, suggests that this was a largely campus-related issue not finding wider resonance among "ordinary beef eaters [who] are often more circumspect in celebrating their habits" (p. 74).

Beef has also been a central theme in Kancha Ilaiah's (also known as Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd) thought for many years. He can be considered the most visible public intellectual in India with regards to beef question. Ilaiah's most recent and eloquent piece on beef titled "No Democracy Without Beef: Ambedkar, Identity and Nationhood" was published as an introductory article in the recent Navayana's edition of Amebdkar's "The Untouchables" (2020) thus establishing his position as a follower of the historical leader of the Dalit movement. In his earlier article published in 1996, Iliaiah states about beef:

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[9]In the context of the Telangana Dalit student movement, the *dappu* drum, equivalent to the Tamil *parai* has come to represent the Dalit *counter culture*.

[10]One of the traditional occupations of Paraiyars was beating the *parai* drum during funeral ceremonies.

[11]Hugo Gorringe challenges the idea that *parai* drum in the Paraiyar community is unanimously perceived as a symbol of resistance against upper castes. He reveals that some Paraiyars object the celebration of the drum as a community symbol, claiming that this "merely perpetuates [their] degradation" (Gorringe 2016: 1). I observed similar disagreement over the movements' strategies in the context of Asura counter culture when some movement's participants questioned whether the counter culture can indeed be subversive if it communicates through the religious symbolism of the dominant culture.

> The food rights of people form part of their civil and democratic rights. No religious community can ban the food of another religious community until and unless a particular community turns cannibal. So also no caste can ban the food of another caste. The discourse that vegetarian food is morally superior has no validity for those who are historically habituated to eat meat and beef. Among many castes and communities in India, for example, a festival cannot be imagined without meat. Vegetarian food in such communities is treated as inferior food. If a guest is served with vegetarian food, it is considered a humiliation. Among many castes and communities there are jokes that ridicule vegetarianism. Indian society has been co-existing with all these practices and must be allowed to do so…. If beef is banned it will be the beginning of the end of the country's multiculturalism. (Ilaiah 2017)

Ilaiah relates beef to the questions of democratic rights, multiculturalism and identity, prophetically proclaiming the current majoritarian upsurge in Indian politics and society. This significantly differs from the Ambedkar's discourse on beef. When referring to beef, Ambedkar was mostly preoccupied with the historical past and avoided addressing political actualities. If in Ambedkar's writing we do not feel a sentiment of pride in the discourse of beef, Ilaiah's tone is overtly proud, assertive and encouraging. He even slightly mocks vegetarian food habits. In his later writings it gets clear that beef constitutes a key issue in his ideological program of Dalitization—the creation of an alternative Indian society based on democratic, inclusive and multicultural principles that stem from the social experiences and worldview of the marginalized.

There are several accounts that show how beef issue functioned in the field of campus politics. Gaurav Pathania interpreted beef festivals on university campuses in terms of counter-hegemonic assertion of the marginalized groups. He, however, also critiqued this strategy as replicating the strategies of their opponents (Pathania 2016). For Balmurli Natrajan, beef strategy reinforces culturalization of caste identity which limits the capacity of the Dalit movement to turn into the liberatory anti-caste movement that goes beyond one group's culture (Natrajan 2012, 2018). Instead of trying to evaluate beef strategy and its possible effects for the larger Dalit movement, in this article I seek to delve into the complex ideas and meanings that surround beef issue within Dalit student activism and how beef enabled Dalits to imagine and communicate the ideas of the anti-caste future. I contribute to the work of Brigitte Sébastia who provided a participatory account on beef festival in Osmania University in 2012 also focusing on "the plurality of discourses on beef consumption" (2017: 105). In her account, "Beef Anthem" figures episodically, nevertheless, it is not taken as a central focus of analysis, which is the core idea of this article.

"Beef Anthem" and Its Multiple Meanings

Beef ideology in a quintessential form can be found in "Beef Anthem" created by NS Chamar, a Madiga by caste, who back then, during my fieldwork in 2014, was a PhD

student and activist at Osmania University. He created "Beef Anthem" specifically for the beef festival in Osmania University in 2012. Since then, it has been performed many times on various occasions on campus and beyond becoming a significant part of the political repertoire of the local Dalit student movement. "Beef Anthem" is interesting to look at as it reveals the complexity of meanings that are invoked in the construction of beef as a symbol of the anti-caste utopia. The dense text of "Beef Anthem" is embedded in the longer history of the Dalit movement, social and political realities of the Osmania campus and NS Chamar's personal life story; a blend which has come to represent the Dalit "political act in performance" (Redmond 2013: 8).

It is necessary to understand that anthems as a genre are not simple texts, but rather gain their full meaning only through performative practice. Shana L. Redmond in her work on anthems in the African American diaspora noted:

> These sonic productions were not ancillary, background noise—they were absolutely central to the unfolding politics because they held within them the doctrines and beliefs of the people who participated in their performance, either as singers or listening audience. Those involved in the performance were actively engaging in a quest for alternatives to their political present. (2013: 8)

"Beef Anthem", though a rather recent creation, was gaining the central stage in the local Dalit student movement in Hyderabad which reveals its mobilizing and community-building potential. NS Chamar, the author and key performer of "Beef Anthem", popularly called the local Bob Marley or Michael Jackson, would appear on stage in many cultural programs held on the Osmania University and the English and Foreign Languages University campuses, and his anthem became a sort of protocol during several Dalit political gatherings. "Beef Anthem" contains layers of meanings that Dalits on campuses shared in envisaging their own alternatives to the oppressive social and political present. In the following, strophe by strophe, I seek to unpack these complex imaginaries and their meanings.

There is a general assumption that untouchables' demeaning position in caste society was because of their long-standing association with a dead cow's body, which was seen by Hindus as being extremely polluting. Untouchables were obliged to practice dirty professions such as removing dead cows' carcasses from roads, skinning them and producing various leather goods. Due to the scarcity of food and the overall lack of various resources, some untouchable communities consumed dead cows' meat. Already B.R. Ambedkar elaborated on the interrelationship between beef consumption and untouchability in his text "Untouchability, the Dead Cow and the Brahmin," in which he stated that,

> No Hindu community, however low, will touch cow's flesh. On the other hand, there is no community which is really an Untouchable community which has not something to do with the dead cow. Some eat her flesh, some remove the skin, some manufacture articles out of her skin and bones. (2010: 184)

Louis Dumont reaffirmed this understanding by stating that beef eaters and leather workers constituted the lowest ranks of the Indian caste hierarchy. He emphasized that "if you eat beef, you must accept being classed among the untouchables, and on this condition your practice will be tolerated" (1980: 80, 191).

In "Beef Anthem", surprisingly, we hear a completely different tone:[12]

> We resemble black lotus
> We have been shining like a black sun
> We have been singing very beautifully
> We have been learning very easily
> We have been standing very healthy
> Reason for all these things is beef.

The first strophe of the anthem twice invokes black color in quite paradoxical manner to describe lotus and sun, objects that have bright and shining quality. The pronoun "we", appearing in the beginning in nearly all lines of the strophe, indicates that it intends to define the qualities of the Dalit community. The usage of black in this context, stands as an indirect referent to the dark complexion of the Dalit folks, however, here through the association with sun and lotus it is used not in a derogatory but rather celebratory manner. In these lines, the anthem essentially claims that Dalits are proud of what they are, with all their qualities—abilities to sing beautifully, learn easily and stay healthy, quite contrary from what casteist society perceives them to be—without talent, physically repulsive and mentally inferior. The following refrain explains, from where these qualities and abilities emerge:

> Beef secret of my energy
> Beef secret of our knowledge.

"We were born with beef, Chamars, Madigas", NS Chamar told me during an interview, thus proudly declaring that beef constitutes the habitus of his community.[13] The single line of refrain of the anthem asserts power and pride in beef consumption. The physical repulsion generally associated with beef and which is the pre-dominant notion in the Hindu caste society goes unmentioned. Instead, one hears about all the positive qualities that beef provides. While vegetarian Hindu culture perceives beef as religiously polluting, and as any meat, supposedly disgusting and bad for health, the anthem contradicts this notion by stating about beef:

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[12]There is some degree of variation and flexibility in the usage of lyrics during various performances. Sometimes certain strophes are omitted and certain words can be replaced by synonyms.

[13]This can be contradicted by Sébastia's account. According to her, "[t]he students' claim for beef as their own food culture is, however, debatable. Among the Dalit students I met at OU, rare are those who eat beef at home. Because of its condemnation by Hindu higher castes and its 'famine food' identity, bovine meat is no longer prepared in many families." (Sébastia 2017: 115). Some of my Dalit interlocutors in New Delhi and Hyderabad, had sentiments towards cow and did not support beef eating. Others began experimenting with their food habits only on campus for the first time in their lives.

It's fantastic – It's aesthetic
It's our favorite – It's native
It's delicious – It's dearest
It's marvelous – It's precious.

How can one understand this act of the resignification of taste? In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1996), Pierre Bourdieu analyzed how taste relates to one's social position in society and how it is generally employed in marking social difference:

> Tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the tastes of others… Aversion to different life-styles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes. (1996: 56)

Bourdieu proposes that tastes of the dominant classes tend to dominate the tastes of other social classes. If we were to re-apply Bourdieu's class analysis to the Indian context of caste relations, we could say that in India vegetarianism is largely associated with upper caste Hindu culture that was transmitted to the "lower" levels of Indian society through the process of "sanskritization" (Srinivas 2013). Eventually, it has become the widespread form of taste hegemony, which dominates over others either through the imposition of vegetarian food habits or the social stigmatization of those who do not comply with the dominant norms of vegetarian normality. N. Sukumar in his auto-ethnographic piece aptly described the trajectory of the evolution of his taste and simultaneously cultural selfhood when his family began rising through the social ladder. He reveals that in his childhood, beef was a valued food in his community, but once his father got a bureaucratic job, due to social pressure, beef had to be replaced by cleaner meats. He got back to beef consumption through the association with the Dalit movement at the University of Hyderabad that enabled him to reinvestigate his cultural selfhood with regards to food consumption (Sukumar 2015).

The anthem attempts to re-signify the taste of beef and simultaneously re-signify social norms and boundaries. Stigmatizing and having an aversion towards beef eaters, the vegetarian Hindu culture draws boundaries between upper and lower-castes, Hindu and non-Hindu communities. The anthem indulges in the subversive aspect of taste. It re-signifies beef from aversive to delicious, and also similarly to the dominant discourse, puts beef as a marker of reversed social boundary. While the dominant vegetarian Hindu discourse takes beef as a marker of exclusions and stigmatization, "Beef Anthem" employs it for the assertion of an alternative culture and values from those of the dominant society.

We have been eating tasty beef
We have been struggling against the state

> We hate hierarchy in the world
> We hate casteism in the soul
> We hate patriarchy
> We love matriarchy
> Every quality got from shia (Beef).

The strophe is framed in terms of dichotomous oppositions. It declares what Dalits have been "struggling" and "hating," that is, "state", "hierarchy", "casteism" and "patriarchy". While the critique of social hierarchy, casteism and patriarchy is a common line within the larger Dalit movement, the critique of the state can be seen as a product of the specific cultural context—the Telangana state and the Osmania University campus' environment where the communist movement has been particularly vibrant throughout several decades. In this condensed form, the anthem refers to the history of state, caste and gender oppression that has characterized Indian society for centuries and which is seen as a major source of Dalits' suffering.

The mention of matriarchy deserves a longer explanation. I noticed that Dalit activists from Hyderabad, when talking about religion, tend to stress their autonomy from the dominant Hindu tradition and refer to their local religious beliefs and practices where feminine goddesses play a central role. Jitesh, a senior Dalit activist from the University of Hyderabad, a place where beef counter culture first started, noted:

> So Vedic, I mean Brahmanical practices are clearly demarcated from Dalit practices. Their Yajnas [rituals] and the Gods are different from [ours]. We have no God basically. Dalits do not have any God. We worship God, but [our] God does not have a form. He's anywhere, everywhere. So, if we have God - that is Goddesses only. We don't have male Gods. Elama, Pochama, Maisama, Uppalama, Budiposhama all these are female Goddesses…But Brahmins have male Gods. All the Gods of Brahmins are male. Male-centric worship. And we are female-centric worshipers. And they don't eat beef, we eat beef. Ok, we don't, I mean, we don't eat vegetables in the festival. We used to have meat in the festivals. Whatever the festival [we are] eating meat, whether it is chicken, mutton, beef. Sankranti, Dussehra, Divali, any festival, we eat mutton. But Brahmins do not eat…Culture for them is domination, culture for us is resistance. Simple, for them – domination, for us – resistance.

Here we can see how relating to religion and beef, Jitesh constructs the notion of the Dalit cultural autonomy and difference from the dominant upper-caste Hindu culture. It is not the "great" Hinduism, but "little," female-centric Hindu traditions that Dalits grew up with. In his view, instead of worshiping patriarchal vegetarian Hindu gods, Dalits worship various meat-eating goddesses. Similarly, "Beef Anthem" with the reference to matriarchy infuses beef with feminine values. However, despite these references in the anthem, I got the impression from my personal communication with festival participants that the beef festival was mostly attended by male students. Women's abstention from participation in the celebration might be explained by the

fact that beef festivals both at OU in 2012 and at EFLU in 2011 were accompanied by the expression of emotional outrage leading to violent student clashes, reactions that usually pertain to masculinist cultures of protest preventing women's participation.

The anthem is not only explicit about what it denounces. It refers to an alternative social world with different values that existed in the past:

> My forefathers were brave warriors
> Each warrior fought bravely
> Each emperor ruled morally
> Mercy human Mahishashura
> Kind-hearted Narakashura
> Courageous Ravanashura
> Natural Eve Thataka
> They had enriched fraternity
> They had extended equality
> They had founded social freedom
> They had started transformation
> They have eaten cow mutton
> It's an entire Dravidian culture
> They had started transformation.

The anthem historicizes the Hindu religious mythological narrative stating that the values of Dalits—fraternity, equality and freedom—were prevalent during the reign of various Asura kings. In the ancient Hindu religious texts as well as in the popular Hinduism, Asuras are depicted as dark-skinned demons that brought chaos to the world but were eventually conquered by the Hindu gods. In this strophe, Asuras are depicted not as mythological demons but rather as inheritors of Dravidian culture, that prevailed in the Indian subcontinent before the Aryan invasion. Asuras and their reign is represented as a sort of golden pre-Aryan age during which Asuras, not mythological figures, but historical Dalit predecessors, though being powerful, ruled in a courageous and kind-hearted way, spreading fraternity, equality and social freedom. These qualities of Asura Dravidian kings supposedly come from beef. They indirectly, in Aesop's manner, are opposed to cruel vegetarian Hindu gods, while the morally superior Asura-Dravidian social and political order—to the hierarchical caste society. Asura narrative is not an absolutely new line of thought within the anti-caste movement in India. Jotiba Phule, a nineteenth century social reformer, already encouraged to rethink Hindu mythology and its characters (Omvedt 2017). This also resonates with the Dalit students' practice to stage Asura martyrdom commemoration days on the Osmania, EFLU and Jawaharlal Nehru University campuses.

The last strophe of "Beef Anthem" takes an unexpected turn. It states that it was not only Asuras who ate beef and mutton, but also a range of intellectual, religious, historical and popular figures:

> Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Buddha
> Mohammed, Jesus, Marx, Ambedkar

Newton, Einstein, Stephen Hawking
Martin Luther, Malcolm Max
Stalin, Lenin,[14] Lincoln, Che Guevara
Bob Marley, Serena Williams
Paul Robeson, Michael Jackson
All the legends are beef eaters.

While right-wing politicians and supporters, drawing their evidence from Hindu epics, increasingly epitomize ancient Indian culture as an origin of modern knowledge and science (Rahman 2014; Lakshmi 2015; Macaskill & Nair 2014), the Dalits turn their gaze to the West. The anthem refers to Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Newton, Einstein, and Stephen Hawking as if trying to assume that their intellectual abilities are stemming from beef consumption, though it is unclear if the author had any proof of their food practice. Nevertheless, the qualities that these foreign personalities represent stand out in the anthem as symbols of rationality and logic and are opposed to the "irrational" spirituality which surrounds the holy cow symbolism. Following this line of thought, Dalits would argue in a vein of rational choice that beef is a source of proper nutrition since it is a cheaper protein, the best food for workers to be strong since lentils (*dal*) is expensive and unaffordable.[15] Arjit, a Dalit student activist from JNU originating from Andhra Pradesh/Telangana where beef-eating is a prevalent practice, told me while comparing Dalit visual appearance in New Delhi and Hyderabad:

> But workers, you see them, you can't imagine workers looking like this in Andhra…Physically their look is different there, [they are] built different there. Food I think is the way they have controlled us to be weak in the North.

What he meant here is that namely the imposition of vegetarianism on the North Indian Dalits was a conscious strategy of upper castes to starve and weaken untouchables. Apparently, for some Dalits from the Telangana or Andhra Pradesh states, beef is a source of physical and mental strength and does not bear a meaning of social stigma.

Furthermore, by invoking Martin Luther, Malcolm X and Abraham Lincoln, the anthem draws parallels between the Dalit and the black Civil Rights Movement in the USA of the 1960-1970s. This discursive trajectory has been set in motion by the Dalit Panther Movement since 1972 and is elaborated further by the Dalit students on the Osmania campus in a form of performative celebrations. For example, Dalits in OU annually commemorate simultaneously in December Ambedkar's and Nelson Mandela's death anniversary, while in February – Malcolm X's death anniversary.

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[14]Pro-communist activists whom I spoke to did not critically reflect about the negative aspects of communist ideology, its leaders and politics in the larger context. Also, they were not much aware about the tragic effects communist ideology and rule had in the Eastern Europe and the Baltic states.

[15]Sébastia notes that Dalit students often referred to the report produced by Veena Shatrugna from the National Institute of Nutrition that highlighted the nutritional qualities of beef. This report strengthened students' position on the need to de-stigmatize beef and provided them with scientific and rational arguments (2017: 115).

These initiatives stand as an attempt to learn from the success story of the Civil Rights Movement.

Instead of invoking Indian pop-culture icons, which in Dalit understanding usually represent high caste groups, the final lines of the anthem refer to popular music and sport icons of black origin, in a way suggesting their artistic and physical skills come from beef consumption. What is relevant in these icons is not only their blackness, but also their international recognition. In this vein, the anthem calls beef as "a pure international brand," which contrasts with right-wing attempts to exalt the cow as a sacred, all-encompassing symbol of national Indian culture. Thus, the anthem tries to suggest a different vision of Dalits—not as backward and local, but forward, modern and international. This sentiment resonates with the larger feeling among the Telangana Dalits that they were backward and not exposed to colonial and capitalist modernity in contrast to the Dalits from the Andhra region. Interestingly, some Dalits did not have a negative approach towards the colonial past because colonial administration was seen as empowering Dalits. It began the policy of reservations designated for the upliftment of the marginalized communities. Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar was trained in the Western education system and positively related to the values of Western modernity. Contemporary Dalits prioritize English as a language of empowerment and this idea is strongly promoted by certain intellectuals and ideologues such as Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd who stated that "[t]his shared international language would allow them to live as equal and respectable citizens of the global community" (Ilaiah Shepherd 2022). In Uttar Pradesh there is even a Dalit temple created for the English Goddess (Pandey 2011).

Finally, in the lines of this strophe, one can see obvious parallels with NS Chamar's life story—his early involvement with the Christian church, the Communist Party, and later exposure to the Dalit movement and recent career within the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen party. His personal life story is thus reflected in the anthem, producing a broader political narrative of the movement. The reference to Buddha, Mohamed, Jesus, Marx, Che Guevara and others represents Dalits' attempts to shape broader alliances across religious and political spectrums. It also tries to solve inner divisions prevalent within the Dalit movement, especially in terms of religious and political differentiation. In an interview, NS Chamar noted:

> They [right-wing students] believe god and they come outside, they are doing political movement. Celebrate Rama, Vivekananda, Hedgewar. Like that…
> But Christians – only Jesus. They are not connecting Ambedkar, Phule. All Christians in India – they belong to Dalits only. But Dalits are divided. When they are attached [to] Jesus, they are not accepting Ambedkar, Phule…Oh Jesus, please tell our people [that] your one shape is Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar.

NS Chamar assumes that the right-wing draws its power from the ability to fuse various icons into one ideological fold, which is seen by him not as a religious sentiment, but a political strategy. In a similar vein, "Beef Anthem" embraces Buddha, Mohammed, Jesus, Marx, Ambedkar and other historical and contemporary personalities to provide

an inclusive political alternative. The anthem reflects the broader realization that the success of the Dalit movement largely depends on the integrational capacity to include various subaltern communities under its fold. Beef in the anthem stands as a uniting symbol upon which various taste-alliances among minority communities can be constructed. Interestingly, the anthem does not use the term Dalit anywhere, thus the supposed listener and the wider audience is rather open-ended.

"Beef Anthem" in Performance

On May 3, 2015, NS Chamar organized a cultural program on the Osmania campus in front of the Arts College building with fully-fledged stage arrangements—huge posters, stage lighting and sound system.[16] The program was called *Bheem Drum*. *Jai Bheem* is a common greeting phrase among Dalit activists across India, referring to B.R. Ambedkar, while drum refers to *dappu*—an occupational and also artistic symbol of Madigas. The program was intended to showcase the voices of various Dalit Bahujan artists who wrote and sang against the caste system (*Manuvada*). As the poster states, "the actual aim of the Bahujan artists is to fetch state power to Bahujans by being aware and conscious perennially".[17] "Beef Anthem" was performed at the culmination of the program. NS Chamar appeared on stage accompanied by a team of students, mostly guys cheerfully dancing and singing on the stage, dressed in jeans and specially designed blue *Bheem Drum* T-Shirts. A recently departed revolutionary balladeer Gaddar also rose onto the stage in a modern outfit instead of his regular mass attire thus stylistically synchronizing with the Dalit movement.

At the center of the poster advertising *Bheem drum* celebration one sees a *dappu* drum as if referring to the centrality of Madigas in the local Dalit movement. Not by coincidence, since NS Chamar, the author of "Beef Anthem" and the key organizer of the program, belongs to the Madiga sub-caste group. Madigas' cultural and political assertion might be explained by their subordinate position in the traditional caste hierarchy and contemporary class relations. Madigas political assertion began as a protest against Malas, who are also Dalits but of higher caste and class status. Due to various reasons (higher caste status, exposure to colonial modernity) Malas managed to benefit better from the governmental reservations compared to Madigas. Therefore, in the late 1990-ies there began the Madiga Dandora movement seeking the categorization of SC reservation quotas.[18] The university campuses in Hyderabad witnessed similar fragmentation among the Dalit students. The Dalit Student Union, that initiated beef stall at the University of Hyderabad in 2009, had split from the Ambedkar Students Union (largely represented by Malas) to defend the interests and causes of Madigas. They took the beef issue as a symbol of community culture and as a strategy to draw wider support and gain more power in campus politics. Its

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[16]I did not have a chance to attend *Bheem Drum* celebration myself, because it happened after my fieldwork, therefore, while discussing the event I count on the material circuating online.

[17]From the *Bheem drum* poster.

[18]Regarding the reservation subcategorization issues and Mala-Madiga conflict see, Muthaiah (forthcoming) and Rao (2009).

important to mention that beef is eaten by many other non-Dalit groups, therefore, Madiga students at the University of Hyderabad and later Osmania University took it as their key political symbol and major strategy to attract support from non-Madiga and even non-Dalit students. Gundimeda notes that DSU's beef stall in the University of Hyderabad at the *Sukoon* celebration was supported by the wide range of organizations—Student Federation of India, the Ambedkar Students Union, the Tribal Students Association, the North Eastern Students Forum, the Telangana Students Association, and the Bahujan Students Front (Gundimeda 2009: 133–134, 145). The sub-caste differentiation was also present in the Dalit student politics on Osmania campus, as there was a separate group representing Malas interests, that is All Mala Student Association (AMSA). Meanwhile, Madigas at OU tended to embrace their Madiga identity within the larger Bahujan framework which allowed them to assert Madiga identity while shaping broader solidarities.

Hardly leaving any empty space and overcrowded with symbols, the poster of the *Bheem Drum* program characteristically reflects the scope of the Dalit student movement in Osmania University. Similar to "Beef Anthem", the poster targets diverse student groups and is loaded with different ideological influences. The desired solidarities can be seen through the multitude of various historical icons and contemporary personalities depicted in the poster. The biggest portraits are of B.R. Ambedkar and Jotibha Phule, key icons of the Dalit Bahujan community, one relating to the SC, another—to the OBC groups, according to these two ideological icons' caste backgrounds. Behind them, in the right left-hand corner one can see Buddha and on the upper right—Kanshi Ram, the historical and contemporary anti-caste ideologues. In between these two, at the top of the poster there is a row of local leaders, including those of the Indian subaltern communities, African American and Muslim origin. The poster, highlighting its pro-feminine orientation, places women icons in the middle of the poster to be surrounded and protected by the many of the Dalit Bahujan men. Below the image of the *dappu* drum and the festival's title *Bheem Drum: The Rhythm of Bahujans*,[19] there is a row of Telangana movement icons and festival participants, who come from both Dalit and Left political camps. They are separated by the burning guitar which stands as a symbol of modernity and Dalit Bahujan energy, as if declaring publicly, "our fury is burning" (Hardtmann, 2003). In the poster the predominant colors are blue, red and green, thus addressing three separate communities—Dalits, communists and Muslims. Thus, there is obvious semantic correspondence and an overlap of political objectives between the text of "Beef Anthem" and the idea of the *Bheem drum* program.

It is also important to note that the strategy of the symbolic redefinition of beef is employed not only to change Dalits' self-perception and to form broader anti-caste alliances. Beef issue had its outward audience. Keeping in mind the value and meaning of the cow in Hindu culture, beef counter culture appears not only as an integrational, but also prevocational strategy. It seeks to challenge the type of politics and ideology,

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[19]I want to draw attention to the fact that the poster does not use the term Dalit, but instead that of Bahujan, thus addressing the wider audience.

which is built on the symbolism of the holy cow, purity/pollution rules, vegetarian normality and, most importantly, hierarchical caste relations. Similarly, C.J. Arun has argued that Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu purposely instigated confrontation with upper-castes since "they come to realize that they could assert themselves in the village only by creating conflicts" (2007: 93).

This becomes clear if we look to the reaction the beef festivals instigated. The beef festival at EFLU in 2011 led to the stone throwing by the students in opposition and the destruction of the festival place. The beef festival at OU in 2012 was held under police presence on campus that sought to prevent clashes between the conflicting student camps but eventually failed to prevent the burning of a media van and the injury of a student. In 2015, before the beef festival at OU, Raja Singh, a member of legislative assembly declared that, "I have resolved that I will make every effort to prevent this festival, which I believe hurts the sentiments of Hindus" (Janyala 2015). I have come across a poster on Facebook that calls cow protectors to march to OU in protest of the beef festival. At the center of the poster stands Raja Singh, with a red *tilak* on his forehead, dressed in a white shirt and orange scarf around his neck. In his extended hand, Singh holds a sword as if intending to punish those who dare to eat beef and desacralize the Gai Mata ("mother cow"), which is seen on the upper left corner of the poster, depicted as containing various Hindu gods within her body. These examples indicate that beef issue worked successfully not only as a community building, support base expanding, but also as a confrontational strategy that managed to agitate the oppositional groups and bring beef issue even to the national media attention.

Conclusion

Far from being simply a food item, beef in contemporary India reveals a nexus of caste, politics and community sentiments. It functions as a communicative issue through which social relations are negotiated and politics is being performed. The construction of vegetarianism as a cultural norm can be viewed as a discursive practice of the dominant, which marginalizes or stigmatizes those who fail or reject to follow the norm. It is not surprising, thus, that counter culture initiatives of the marginalized and subordinated groups were also framed through the same communicative sphere of food, which functions both as a source of cultural constitutedness and a means of subverting cultural norms. If the food is a constituent of oppression and discrimination, it was also logically taken up as a source of alternative values.

"Beef Anthem" within the contemporary Dalit student movement stands as an encouragement to embrace Dalit identity and not to be ashamed of eating beef. Infusing beef with various positive qualities, the anthem seeks to boost Dalit self-respect and its outward image, as if suggesting that if beef is re-evaluated, the Dalit position in Indian society can change too. The anthem re-constitutes the general notion prevalent among Dalit activists in Hyderabad, that because of their marginalization Dalits have different and supposedly superior moral values. It is Dalits' different social experience

and essentially their segregation from the dominant religion and society that renders them the "better" people.

Besides being a Dalit community symbol, beef was also an attempt to search for broader solidarities that are seen as an inevitable trajectory in forming the alternative anti-caste future. Beef strategy enabled the questioning of the entrenched social hierarchies, inequalities and division by forming minority alliances on campus and, most importantly, gave more public visibility to anti-caste utopias. On campuses in Hyderabad beef issue, indeed, managed to temporarily unite people coming from very different communities, regions, castes and classes. Under different circumstances, it could have been possible to inquire further if beef issue could result into actual and long-lasting political solidarities among various marginalized groups on campus and beyond and whether campus-based beef politics could have a potential to resonate beyond campus walls. With the beef issue literally disappearing from the Dalit student political repertoire in the last few years, the question that could still be relevant today is how Dalit activists retrospectively evaluate the effectiveness of beef issue and how they view the possibility of "survival" of beef as a symbol of anti-caste utopia in the currently politically hostile environment. Also, it would be interesting to investigate, how Dalit activists would justify the beef strategy in the context of the global environmental concerns related to the cattle agriculture and climate change.

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Towards an Alternative Epistemology of Resistance: A Reading of *Pulayathara* by Paul Chirakkarode Against the Backdrop of Dalit Christian Liberation Movements in Kerala, India

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Abstract

Religious conversion in Kerala was an immediate solution for the lower caste people who sought to break free from the slavery and structural inequalities of caste. Though proselytization was accelerated by egalitarian and emancipatory ideologies, it became a shift from one oppressive, exploitative social fabric to another hegemonic structure composed of institutionalized religion underlined by casteist ideologies. Christianity in Kerala turned out to be Brahminical and catered to the interest of upper-caste Christians. Despite its egalitarian claims, discrimination unabashedly pervaded the churches of Kerala. Dalit liberation movements in the twentieth century heralded by both the Dalit and Dalit Christian leaders profoundly influenced the public life of Kerala and brought a new paradigm to the slave castes. Such changes were reflected in the literary articulations of the period also. This article examines how the Dalit Christian discourse is inaugurated in Malayalam novels as the result of the Dalit Christian liberation movements in the twentieth century. By employing textual analysis as the research methodology and intersectionality as a theoretical lens, this article analyses Paul Chirakkarode's *Pulayathara* (1962) and examines how the Dalit Christian liberation movement in the twentieth century is instrumental in shaping an alternative epistemology and Dalit Christian identity.

Keywords

Dalit Christian, Kerala, caste, epistemology, novels, Dalit liberation movements, Dalit identity

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Introduction

The early twentieth century witnessed many progressive, political, and intellectual movements in Kerala, among which the Dalit liberation movements were considered counter-hegemonic movements that made deep inroads into the caste-ridden social fabric of Kerala. Most remarkably, the transformative social movements heralded by leaders from slave castes such as Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan, Pambady John Joseph, Kallara Sukumaran and so on brought unprecedented changes in the socio-cultural and political life of the oppressed castes (Madhavan 2008). Dalit mobilization in the twentieth-century led to the formation of modern civil society (Mohan 2016) and the Dalits started reclaiming their space not as 'abject beings' (Butler 2011) but as subjects with distinct identity politics. Their collective resistance turned into fearless declarations of Dalit identity and agency. The Dalit identity politics stemmed from the realization that they have been an oppressed social group for centuries. The Dalits started analyzing the factors that hindered them from social inclusion and challenged all the 'givenness,' constructedness, and a priori. By emphasizing their oppressed status and understanding their distinctiveness as a community with the shared experience of exploitation and subjugation, the Dalits tried to emerge from Brahmanical hierarchy and related oppressive structures.

Nineteenth-century Kerala witnessed the mass conversion of Dalits seeking emancipation from the multilayered oppressive structure of the caste system. Though Dalit and Dalit Christians shared the same history of caste discrimination, their journey to integrate themselves into Christianity brought Dalit Christians to a different trajectory (Michael 2010). Most remarkably, the Dalit Christians had to deal with two internalized forms of power, one is from institutionalized religion and the other is a casteist society. Caste is a common factor in both systems. The former is double-edged as it is an assemblage of religious dogmas and caste practices (Gladstone 1988). Since Dalit Christians were denied any form of capital accumulation, including epistemic access, they turned into 'Christian untouchables' in the initial phases of conversion. Caste-appellations were also common even after religious conversion (Koshy 1968). Moreover, the upper caste converts rigorously practised the structural hierarchies of caste inside the church (Fuller 1976). Dalit Christians were subjected to a trail of multiple discriminations that often overlapped and contributed to aggravating their marginality. They realized that their multiple identities as Dalits, a Christian minority, and a socially and politically oppressed community had only exacerbated their predicament. When they understood the need to emerge as a collective to address their multilayered marginalities that have not been adequately addressed in the reformist agendas of popular progressive movements, Christian theology, and elitist historiography, Dalit Christian assertion emerged.

It is imperative to note that the presence of the Dalit Christian leaders at the forefront of Dalit liberation movements of the twentieth century opened a new epoch for the Dalit Christians in Kerala (Mohan 2015). They enunciated an alternative history of resistance, bringing new vigour and vitality to the resistance of the

marginalized.[1] The Dalit Christian liberation movements resuscitated them from the state of 'abject agrestic slaves' to assertive Dalits. Their resistance took diverse shapes, and Dalit Christians started using their epistemic agency to question caste privileges and prerogatives of the upper castes. This article seeks to understand how the Dalit Christian liberation movements in Kerala launched an alternative Dalit Christian epistemology and identity.

The alternative epistemology of Dalit Christians in Kerala can be theorized as an evolving discourse of resistance that envisages emancipatory and liberatory epistemic interventions to find a space in the church as well as in society. It is initiated through Dalit theology, Dalit liberation movements, and Dalit Christian literature. The quest for a distinct identity, that equally approves and acknowledges their Dalitness, as well as Christian identity, led Dalit Christians to develop Dalit Christian theology. It emerged as a counter-hegemonic theology in the 1980s and questioned the very core of Indian Christian theology and Christian historiography that excluded the Dalits and their intersectional inequalities (Prabhakar 1989; Mandal 2020).[2] Dalit theology focuses on the differently situated position of Dalits and their unacknowledged historic realities inside the church. In "Dalit Christians and Identity Politics in India," Wyatt considers Dalit theology as a political theory with the potential to reinterpret the faith in terms of Dalit experiences (Wyatt 1998: 18). Through their theological expositions, the theologians and the leaders of the liberation movements tried to connect the gospels with the everyday experiences of the Dalits in church and society. The contributions of Poykayil Appachan should be highlighted here. Appachan questioned the unabated Brahminic monopoly in the Christian evangelical discourse through his songs. He also emphasized the need for an alternative history for Dalit Christians since their history is enmeshed with the history of dominant Christianity (Sekher 2019; Mathew 2020). In Kerala, Dalit Christian liberation movements and Dalit theology disseminated the idea that religious conversion and spiritual upliftment alone could not help them escape the oppressive structure of caste.

Soon, Dalit Christians realized the transformative potential of Dalit literature and the possibility of using it to voice their dissent. In "Crafting Words and Creating Dalit Histories" Shailaja Menon observes how their life writings facilitate Dalits in their political act of building identity and revisiting their history. Menon writes, "These dalit life narratives based on experiential epistemology situate them as historical agents by relocating, reforming and reconstructing the Dalit identity as a challenge to the Brahminical oppressive social order" (Menon 2022: 153). Dalit literature chronicles

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[1] The Pulaya, Paraya and Kurava castes were the most oppressed caste groups in Kerala. They were considered untouchables and used as slaves by the upper caste Hindu and Syrian Christian landlords. Though they were converted to Christianity, they faced most atrocious experiences from the casteist patriarchal society and Brahmanical Christianity.

[2] It was Aravind P. Nirmal, during his speech titled, "Towards a Shudra Theology" at the Carey Society of the United Theological College, Banglore in 1981 who articulated Dalit theology as a protest or counter theology against the dominant Indian Christian theology which is immensely indebted to Advaita Vedanta or Vishishtadvaida in its codification and exposition.

the unmediated lived experience and everyday histories of struggle. For Dalit Christian writers of the twentieth century, literature became a major instrument to address their 'being nowhere' situation. Their writings often mirrored the stark realities and glaring disparities of their lives, as they were placed at the intersection of caste and religion. They unearthed the interstice between what the church preached and what occurred inside the church in real life through their writings. Most importantly, the single-axis framework of foregrounding Dalits as a homogenized category has been questioned with the emergence of Dalit Christian writers in the literary scenario. Though Dalit Christian literature did not flourish as a distinct genre in Kerala, Dalit Christian writers in the twentieth century succeeded in shaping an alternative Dalit epistemology.

The renaissance spirit evoked by the liberation movements and Dalit theological discourse in the twentieth century brought a new paradigm to Malayalam novels as well. Though Brahmanism was deeply ingrained in Christianity in Kerala, it was neither highlighted nor questioned in nineteenth-century literature. Missionary literature also got popularized during this age. However, most of the writings emphasized the progressive aspects of conversion and the material benefits it brought, under which the innumerable plights of Dalit Christians got erased (Paul 2021). In the early writings of the nineteenth century, Dalit Christians were either ignored or they were clubbed within the homogenous Dalit discourse. For instance, in *Saraswatheevijayam* (1892), Potheri Kunhambu problematizes the casteist ideologies in society and he considers conversion as a solution to defy the inequalities. In the novel, most of the converted Christians are represented as happy and content (Mathew 2020). Kunhambu depicts Marathan, the protagonist as a reformed individual who got his education from the mission school and experienced Christianity as an egalitarian fold. However, the underlying realities of the Dalit Christian's life remained unaddressed (Menon 1997). The absence of Dalit Christian writers is one of the major reasons behind the misrepresentation or underrepresentation of Dalit Christians in nineteenth-century Malayalam novels. Since the slave castes were denied basic rights to have access to land, education, and human dignity, it was difficult for Dalit Christians to assert themselves through literature or any other socially sanctioned medium in their early phases. So, their intersectional identities and innumerable exploitations from a caste-ridden society, church, and state were left unattended in the literature of the nineteenth century.

Dalit Christian liberation movements of the twentieth century brought tremendous change in the literary scenario by inaugurating Dalit Christian discourse in Malayalam literature (Mathew 2020). Both Dalit and non-Dalit writers began to consider Dalit Christians as a distinct category in their writings. As Mathew rightly pointed out, "…the Dalit conversion and Dalit Christian literature from the twentieth century can be considered the 'insider's version' of conversion and post-conversion experiences" (Mathew 2020: 56). By textualising their life and shared experiences, Dalit Christian writers carved out the complexities of Dalit Christian lives which were scantily recorded in nineteenth-century Malayalam literature. At this vantage point, this article finds the relevance of configuring the impact of Dalit Christian liberation

movements in twentieth-century Malayalam novels by analyzing Paul Chirakkarode's *Pulayathara* (1962). This article primarily focuses on *Pulayathara* for some specific reasons. The rationale behind the selection of *Pulayathara* is its significance as the first novel in Malayalam by a Dalit Christian writer. Moreover, this article intends to show how a novel written by a Dalit Christian writer became a site to disseminate the Dalit Christian discourse. In the beginning, the article delves deep into the history of reformist movements heralded by Dalit Christian leaders to emphasize their instrumental role in shaping Dalit Christian identity and epistemology. Later, with the theoretical lens of Intersectionality, it elaborates on how Chirakkarode inaugurated a movement of Dalit Christian assertion through novels in Kerala by writing this novel.

Methodology

The primary methodological framework selected for this study is Intersectionality, a theory propounded by Kimberly Crenshaw to understand how different axioms of inequalities operate together and how it leads to the multiple oppression of people, especially Black women. Crenshaw criticizes the single-axis framework employed by the feminist and antiracist discourse to address the issues of Black women and advocates for an alternative analytical framework to bring forth the nuances and different shades of discrimination which have been completely undermined in mainstream feminism and antiracist politics (Crenshaw 2013). This article uses intersectionality to initiate an in-depth inquiry into Dalit Christian subjectivity, which is often overlooked in Dalit discourse's overarching framework. By employing intersectionality, we find that though the Brahmanic interpolations in the church made a clear boundary between the upper-caste Christians and the Dalit Christians, Christian historiography and theology were less concerned about the differences and discriminations that the Dalit Christians have been confronting inside the church. Through the textual analysis and close reading of *Pulayathara,* this article aims to find how Dalit Christians are differently situated in the church and society and examine how the overlapping oppressive structures aggravate the marginality of people in the lowest rung. It also discusses the role of Dalit Christian liberation movements in understanding the intersecting inequalities and the way it leads to the formation of Dalit Christian discourse in the church and society.

Revolution and Representation: Transformative Social Movements and Leaders of the Slave Castes

The Dalit liberation movements in Kerala were a backlash against the abhorrent and repugnant caste practices that existed in society and the church. It was the Channar rebellion (1853–1859) heralded by Channar women that opened an era of resistance of the marginalized social groups in Kerala. The Channar rebellion is hailed as one of the first recorded resistances against the oppressive hegemonic structure in Kerala (Gurukal & Varier 2018). It is observed that other women from the oppressed communities

were also inspired by the Channar rebellion and thus also started agitations for their right to cover their breasts. Their agitation extended till 1859. The Channar rebellion was followed by the *Mukuti* agitation, *Kallumala* and *Irumpuvala* agitation. All these agitations were primarily aimed at revoking age-old systems and beliefs perpetuated by the Brahmin preceptors (Valsa 2018). Thereafter Kerala society witnessed an array of progressive movements. Ayyankali (1863–1941) played an irreplaceable role in inspiring Dalits for their collective resistance. Ayyankali did not consider religious conversion as an immediate solution for caste oppression, and he paid attention to the revival of the oppressed castes in general (1878–1939). Poykayil Sree Kumara Guru or Poykayil Appachan's entry made Dalit Christian discourse an epicentre of discussion. He formed a separate sect called Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) and embarked on the spirit of liberation through songs and spiritual practices (Sekhar 2010). Appachan burned the Bible as form of protest against institutionalized religion.

Pambadi John Joseph is another prominent figure who staunchly stood for the emancipation of Dalit Christians. Converted Dalits under the leadership of Pambadi John Joseph organised Cheramar Mahasabha in 1921 and submitted a memorandum before the British government about several inequalities and untouchability they faced from upper-caste Christians (John 2018). The contributions of Kallara Sukumar in the Dalit and Dalit Christian assertion also cannot be ignored. Sukumaran delineated the unmediated experiences of his community and challenged the Brahmanical bureaucracy that denies basic rights to the oppressed caste through his writings.[3] Sukumaran opposed the pervasiveness of institutionalized religion and the presence of an incongruous caste system that prevented Dalit liberation and emancipation. He realized that unless the Dalits liberate themselves from the shackles of the slavish past and the bonds of religion, they would not be able to find a distinct space in society. At the age of seventeen, he started an organization, Peerumedu Taluk Harijan Federation, which emerged as a clarion call for the revival of Dalits of all the oppressed castes. The Harijan and Awkward Christian Federation were also merged with his organization. In 1972, they changed the name of the organization to All Kerala Harijan Federation. With the farsightedness of Sukumaran, it soon flourished as an assemblage of Schedule Caste, Scheduled Tribes and backward Christians and emphasized the integral development of Dalit and other backward communities through economic, educational, and political empowerment. The array of leaders from the previous slave castes did not end there. Kerala witnessed minor and major Dalit and Dalit Christian assertions after the glorious epoch heralded by these leaders. Since they were exposed to the world of words through missionary modernity (Mohan 2015), major leaders of the Dalit Christian assertion realized the possibilities of using their writings to initiate organized protests. They made use of this linguistic modernity to envisage new hope, aspiration, and political action among the slave castes (Paul 2019). Paul Chirakkarode was not an exception. With the publication of *Pulayathara*, Chirakkarode heralds a

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[3]His parents converted to Christianity to get rid of caste oppression. They christened him Marcose. But later they denounced Christianity as they realized the persisting caste practices in the church.

shift in the literary representation of Dalit Christians in Malayalam novels. Until then, the Dalit Christians were either embedded under the category of Dalits or completely ignored in the literary imagination. Chirakkarode's novel departs from such erasures (Thankamma 2019). *Pulayathara* marked a significant moment in Dalit writing in Kerala through Dalit Christian assertion thereby creating scope for an alternative discourse. It is a discourse of discontent and dissent against Brahmanical Christianity and casteist Kerala society.

Imagining an Anti-caste Utopia in *Pulayathara*

Chirakkarode is drawn into an anti-caste Utopia in *Pulayathara* and anticipates socio-cultural and political upheavals in a Dalit Christian's journey towards an egalitarian social structure. Like the other leaders of the progressive movements, Chirakkarode also did not envisage religious conversion as a sole panacea for the multiple marginalities of the Dalits. Instead he highlighted the intersecting inequalities and post-conversion dilemmas that Dalit Christians confronted inside the church. By drawing on incidents and situations from the past and present as well as visualizing an egalitarian social order for Dalits in the future, the novel serves its purpose of providing a comprehensive analysis of the Dalit Christian life and identity formation in a casteist society and Brahmanical Christianity. This section of the article discusses how Chirakkarode envisioned an alternative public and the construction of an alternative epistemology.

In "Social Space, Civil Society, and Dalit Agency in Twentieth-Century Kerala," Sanal Mohan discusses how the influence of missionary modernity led to the creation of an alternative public from the slave castes (Mohan 2016: 75). In their journey towards social transformation, they eventually understood that the definition of "public" itself varies, depending on one's social location (Raj 2013). It was a moment of departure for Dalits, and they started thinking about independent political mobilization. According to Raj, despite their decisive role in progressive social movements of the period to form an alternative "civil society", the Dalits could not ensure their upward social mobility. Raj writes, "Whether in political or new social movements, we find that the Dalit participants failed to gain mobility precisely because they lacked the economic, social, and symbolic capital to survive the different kinds of repression or backlashes that each of these movements came to face (Raj 2013: 56). However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the radical movements of Dalits in Kerala took new forms, and they began to reclaim what had been denied to them for centuries. Assertion through writing and literature is a major example. The individual articulation of collective memories that emanated through shared experiences marked the formation of an alternative epistemology of the Dalits.

In *Pulayathara,* Chirakkarode critically engages in the question of Dalit Christian identity instead of offering a mere aesthetic experience of novel reading. The novel is woven around an important question—is the Dalit Christian any better off than he was before conversion? It was the same question that resonated in the Dalit Christian liberation movements of the twentieth century. Though the process of transgressing

the boundaries of caste itself was considered a progressive act on the part of the Dalits (Mohan 2017; Singh 2023), conversion did not make a marked difference in their birth-based identity as slave castes, instead, it made them 'Christian Untouchables'. Though the Dalit conversion was a mass movement, integration into Christianity was not easy because of the presence and persistence of a caste inside the Christian churches. Brahmanical Hinduism has been supplanted by Brahmanical Christianity. As a result, the initial threshold that the religious conversion created did not last for long.

A comprehensive analysis of *Pulayathara* reveals how unique Dalit Christian issues are and how differently they have been positioned in casteist society and Brahmanical Christianity. The novel emphasizes the need to consider Dalit Christians as a separate category of analysis and it reveals the problems of employing a single-axis framework to deal with the issues of Dalit Christians. An intercategorical intersectional lens would examine such groups that are situated at neglected points of intersection and expose the intricacies of the lived experience of the members of those oppressed social groups. (McCall 2005). It is observed that at the intersecting point of religion and caste, Dalit Christians were severely tormented. In the novel, Chirakkarode exposes the atrocious experiences that the Dalit Christians confronted from such intersecting points. The upper caste Christians in the novel profusely exercised caste practices and retained untouchability, endogamy, and spatial segregation. Moreover, they constructed separate churches and cemeteries to avoid close contact with Dalit Christians. Even though the church did not promote birth-based categorization, it leaned towards the interests of the Syrian Christians. They claimed Brahmanical lineage and apostolic foundation and found a stronghold in the church. At the same time the fivefold discrepancies—from the state, caste Hindus, fellow Hindu Dalits, Upper caste Christian communities, and the subgroups of Dalit Christians—made Dalit Christians silent and subservient in the initial phase of conversion (Michael 2010). According to Crenshaw, accepting multiple identities is a politicization process (Crenshaw 1989). But the progressive social movements of the period made Dalit Christians rethink their different positioning due to their multiple identities. It brings a perspectival shift in people regarding the atrocities and indignities heaped upon vulnerable groups. Crenshaw writes, "For all these groups, identity-based politics has been a source of strength, community and intellectual development" (Crenshaw 1989: 1242). In the second part of the novel, the Dalit Christians realized their intersecting identities as Dalits, Christians, and politically disadvantaged groups and used the same to initiate a Dalit Christian collective and Dalit identity politics.

In the first part of the novel, Chirakkarode draws his characters from two different generations to highlight the transformation to their identity. The novel begins with the life of Thevan Pulayan and his son Kandankoran who worked as bonded labourers of Narayanan Nair, a prominent upper-caste landlord of Anjilithara. Thevan represented a generation that completely subsumed their identity and lived like passive subjects. The landlord never considered them as humans with distinct selves and desires. Instead, their identity is defined only in terms of their labour. Chirakkarode writes,

"A labourer was not supposed to think for himself. Even if he did, he could not say it aloud. It was forbidden. When Thampuran decided, the worker murmured his assent. That was how it had been for generations" (Chirakkarode 1963: 8). Sadly, the generation represented by Thevan Pulayan internalised their marginality and it prevented them from defying the caste codes. Though they suffered more, they were despondent before the oppressive structure. Thevan's imposed identity prevented him from recognizing his worth. But his son, Kandankoran stood for the Dalit collective who aspired to liberate themselves from bondage and their slavish past. The renewed Dalit consciousness and rejuvenated self that the Dalit liberation movements brought made him fight back against the oppressive structures. Kandankoran, who represented the young generation of Pulayas, was reluctant to conform to the image of the agrestic slave. His reluctance to fit the characteristics that conformed to the agrestic slaves indicates the structural changes that occurred in society through Dalit assertion and progressive social movements in the twentieth century.

The first part exposes the life of Dalits in Brahmanical Hinduism whereas the second part of the novel vividly portrays how Brahmanical Christianity functions to re-assert the marginal identity of Dalits. It delineates the life of Dalit Christians in a Mission land. Though Dalits converted to Christianity with the hope that they would be treated humanely, Christianity failed to dismantle the hegemony of caste echelons. For instance, Pathrose and other Dalit Christians in the novel were tenants of the Hilltop Church. Like the upper caste feudal landlords of the nineteenth century who strictly observed caste hierarchy, the Church also exercised its power over Dalit Christians. Being ignorant about their rights, the first-generation Dalit Christians in the novel blindly followed the Church. Chirakkarode writes about the clear division in the church and the incapability of first-generation Dalit Christians to understand their submissiveness. He writes, "Their fate was to sit on the floor. But they had no complaints about it. That was because they had never considered this a grievance at all. For them, even to sit cross-legged on the floor in front of those upper castes was a privilege." (Chirakkarode 1963: 55) Structural inequalities operated diversely inside the church. It leads to their blind submission before the caste and Brahmanical Christianity. The "new Christians" were constantly reminded that the church was generous enough to accommodate them in the mission land. For instance, custodian Thomas threatens the converted Christians by saying, "You must lead the life of a God-fearing obedient Christian. You are living on Mission land, aren't you? Remember that and respect the upper caste" (Chirakkarode 1963: 152). By interpreting their life and homogenizing their experiences with other Christians, the church ignores their slave identity, years of servility and the brunt of exploitation. It can also be considered as a strategy employed by the church to silence the Dalit Christians and divert them from the organized protest against the unjust ecclesiastical order. Unlike their forefathers, the young generation of Dalit Christians in the novel represented by Paulose, Thoma, and several other nameless Dalit Christian characters began to assert their identity and initiated a collective protest when they realized the intersecting inequalities in the church. It signifies the influence of the progressive movements in the twentieth

century. Paulose asks, "When low caste folk became Christians, they still experienced exclusion. They were kept at a distance. Why was all this done if caste superiority existed within the church? Was it not better that the Pulayar and Parayar did not join the Church?" (Chirakkarode 1963: 101). His lashing criticism against the Syrian Christian landlords and the double standards of the church indicates the emergence of the discourse of discontent among the second-generation Dalit Christians.

Gradually, the first-generation Dalit Christians also began to think about the futility of relying completely on Brahmanical Christianity. They started raising questions. It implies that the politicized Dalit identity they imbibed from the Dalit Christian liberation movements provoked both the first and second-generation Dalit Christians to introspect about their marginal status. Chirakkarode describes the inner turmoils of Thoma to validate this. He writes, "He was a new Christian! But what change did it create? A few drops of Baptismal water had fallen on his head and Custodian Thomas gained one more slave. That was all…" (Chirakkarode 1963: 151). This section of the narrative is inextricably linked to Poykayil Appachan's ideals, which demanded a courageous break from the constricting religious fold.

The identity of the writer must be highlighted here. Being a Dalit Christian writer and activist, Chirakkarode employed a different writing style. Most significantly, he understands the need for a language of resistance to broaden the scope of their assertion. Through Paulos in the novel, who wants to protest against the indelible injustice inside the church Chirakkarode emphasises this. He writes, "There were many things he wanted to say. There were many things against which he wanted to object. But he had not yet acquired a clear language. That would take time. Perhaps he might die and dissolve in the mud without saying anything" (Chirakkarode 1963: 154). It implies that Chirakkarode envisions the emergence of a language through which Dalit Christians can question the structural hierarchy of caste and Brahmanism. The novel ends with this sentence, "The meeting was about to begin. The new generation has decided to speak" (Chirakkarode 1963: 197). It implicates their urge to be heard and the realization that progressive changes would happen only through people with a politicized Dalit identity.

Most of the chapters of the novel end with valid questions. By raising such questions, Chirakkarode invites his readers to engage in the Dalit Christian discourse and identity politics. Raising questions and asking questions to each other are major strategies to redefine the Dalit identity. Through his characters, whether they are major or minor, Chirakkarod raises valid questions about the pervasiveness of caste inside the church and society. Most importantly, his questions leave a sliver of hope in Dalits, and it ignites a spirit to assert their identity rather than deny it. He writes, "It was possible that the next-generation worker would rise against the landlord. Would that be the beginning of a struggle?" (8). The optimism in these lines is directly connected to the anti-caste Utopia he imagines through Dalit Christian liberation movements.

Towards the end of the novel, Dalit Christian characters realized the need for a revolution within and in their community. They rejected religion and elitist historiography which made them untouchables forever (Singh 2023). They never

considered conversion as Utopian rather they continued to question the structural hierarchy of caste that existed in the church. A renewed consciousness made the Dalit Christians redefine their status from defenceless agrestic slaves to determinant Dalits. The young generation of Dalit Christians developed a language of resistance to challenge the pre-ordained structures of caste. They were aware of their political rights and vigilant about the structural changes that occurred in society. Once they realized the worthlessness of institutionalized religion, the second-generation Dalit Christians directed themselves towards collective political action, which is closely aligned with the ideology advocated by Pambady John Joseph and Kallara Sukumaran. The Dalit Christians in the novel understand that their idealized anti-caste Utopia would not soon be realized. It demands relentless struggles and collective assertions. They were aware of how crucial it was to provide their children with sufficient capital to combat systemic injustices. One such resource with emancipatory potential is education.

Major figures of the progressive social movements of the twentieth century, including Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan, Pambady John Joseph, and Kallara Sukumaran, equally agreed that education has an instrumental role in Dalit emancipation. Similarly, in *Pulayathara*, Chirakkarode also exposes the incapability of conversion in transforming the birth-based identity of the Dalits and emphasises education as a tool that enables Dalits to break their centuries of silence. They acknowledged the emancipatory potentials of education and envisioned an egalitarian social structure through the young generation of Dalits. Thoma's response to his son's baptism proved that they idealized a Utopia of Dalits by educating the coming generation. Thoma did not want another Dalit to be offered to the church as a slave. Thoma says, "*Edi*, I am a Pulayan. I will live in the field. I will work for daily wages. I will stay where I can, but… But I will send my son to school, educate him. I will not let him become some landlord's slave. You wait and see." (Chirakkarode 1963: 197). Education plays a vital role in the construction of Dalit identity. It enhances their understanding of the situations and circumstances that make them an oppressed category. Moreover, education helps Dalits learn about their rights in society. Thereby, they will be able to speak for themselves rather than waiting for someone else to represent them.

Pulayathara calls for a nuanced examination of the various modalities and ways in which twentieth-century Dalit Christian liberation movements developed alternative epistemology. The novel shows the attempt towards an epistemological assertion through the insertion of an alternate history from the perspective of the Dalit Christians. Their epistemology constitutes a distinct Dalit Christian discourse which does not conform to the caste formula of Hindu Brahmanism and Brahmanical Christianity. It questions the hegemony rather than being accustomed to their marginality. Most importantly, it makes them the makers of their own history and challenges the elitist historiography that silenced them for centuries (Menon 2022). The Dalit Christians realize their historical marginalization and the factors that have caused them to be positioned differently in the church and society. The kind of epistemology that *Pulayathara* proposes encourages the radical reshaping of the Dalit identity and steers towards a just society. It promotes an idea of selfhood untouched by any form of

oppression, discrimination, and exclusion. They realized the multiple structures that perpetuate exclusionary practices and started addressing the same systematically through collective protest and literary and cultural endeavours. In *Pulayathara*, Chirakkarode established a "world of words" for the Dalit Christians. The language that his characters employed outraged the upper caste because it was unusual for a slave caste to speak a resistance language. For instance, in the beginning, none of the Dalit characters in the novel dared to utter even their names. In fact, they never used 'I.' Instead, they addressed themselves as 'lowly ones', *adiyan, Pelen* and so on.[4] But being part of a Dalit collective, they started developing a sense of self and transformed their slave identity into a distinct Dalit identity. By proudly saying "I am a Pulayan", Thoma and other Dalit Christians in the novel declared that they are no longer slaves of either religion or caste. Such recognition itself is a catalyst that accelerates their emancipation proclamation through political assertions, education, and writings. The novel advocates the need for standing together for the cause of Dalits and it repels the agents of any institutionalized religion from acting as custodians of Dalits. All these progressive ideas are extensively drawn from the Dalit Christian liberation movements and theological interventions that occurred during Chirakkarode's lifetime and he employed literature to navigate and protest against caste-driven society and religion.

Conclusion

Dalit articulation has veered towards two purposes which are complementary and overlapping in nature: assertion and resistance. For Dalits, asserting their identity is a political agenda and Dalit identity-based mobilizations continue to question the hegemonic social norms. Chirakkarode used his epistemic agency to record their unwritten history of resistance amid a sociocultural and political milieu in Kerala that entirely erased the intersectional identity of Dalit Christians and the compounding inequities it brought them. Thereby, he launched a Dalit Christian discourse in Malayalam literature. He focuses on the potential of literature to delve more into the political dimension, through which Dalits could revisit their history and reinvent their subjectivity (Zecchini 2018). Chirakkarode's interventions to highlight the issues of Dalit Christians in the literary imagination are commendable because he situates them as a distinct political subject. Instead of merely mapping all the aspects of Dalit Christian life, Chirakkarode interrogates specific problems and highlights the intersecting inequalities that existed in Brahmanical Christianity. An intercategorical intersectional inquiry shows Dalit Christians are distinctively placed at the intersection of multiple overlapping, oppressive structures. As Crenshaw points out, the issues of exclusion cannot be adequately addressed by placing them into the already established analytical framework. Rather an intersectional analysis is essential to show how differences in identities create specific kinds of oppressive situations (Crenshaw

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[4]Both the Dalits and Dalit Christians had to use such terms to indicate their lowest status. The upper caste Christians as well as Hindus used terms such as 'Pulaya Christian', 'paraya Christians', 'avasa Christians, 'poocha Christians', etc., to refer to the Dalit Christians. They used such terms to differentiate the upper castes from the lower castes.

2013). Here, Crenshaw emphasizes the transformative potentials of intersectionality as an analytical framework as well as practice. Similarly, in *Pulayathara* Chirakkarode demands an alternate analytical paradigm to specifically address the issues of Dalit Christians. In the novel, the search for their roots unpacks several unheard stories of oppression and Dalit Christians began to assert their identity by extracting impetus from their shared experiences of inequality and injustice. It leads to the formation of their identity and alternative epistemology. Here, the Dalit identity they bring forth does not entail shame, but it marks the moment of assertion towards an anti-caste Utopia. *Pulayathara* transcends the conventional contours of elitist historiography by constantly questioning and challenging them through a language of resistance. It finds a distinct place in the larger sphere of Dalit literature by transforming the 'abject subjects' into political subjects with distinct voices and agency. Most importantly, it contributes to the larger objective of the production and dissemination of knowledge about the history of Dalit Christians. Moreover, *Pulayathara* invites the readers and the larger public to engage in the Dalit Christian discourse and it encourages everyone to be actively involved for the cause of the most marginalized.

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Revisiting Inequality and Caste in State and Social Laws: Perspectives of Manu, Phule and Ambedkar

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Abstract

The Constitution, as a formal legal document, reflects a commitment to secure to all citizens, Equality, Justice, and Liberty, as a non-negotiable duty of the State. The nature and context of present society, however, is embedded in its socio-cultural development through civilisations. This study aims to engage with such a manifestation of state power as revealed in the text *Manavdharmashastra,* that marked the origin of codified social laws to derive legitimacy and establish a 'divine' authority to rule. Subsequently, the pioneers to critique the dysfunctions of Manu's social laws became a subject of interrogation by social reformers like Jyotirao Phule and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. Methodologically, our effort will be to weave together an intertextual analysis based on scientific observation of the case of caste subaltern, through three widely acknowledged texts—*Manusmriti*, Phule's *Slavery* (*Gulamgiri*), and Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, on ideals of society and governance, in order to present a historical legacy into the origins of social hierarchy as an institutional mechanism to perpetuate inequality among subjects. The aim is to develop an approach to evaluate the ancient political thought of *Manusmriti*, and probe contradictions and realism in actions, with explicit excerpts of relevant texts, to authenticate the credibility of facts and its alignment with the central thought. The article eventually attempts to suggest alternatives to secure the vision of an ideal Indian society that aims to disintegrate the institution of caste.

Keywords

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Introduction

Inequality is commonly understood as an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. However, the underlying cause of inequality lies in 'domination' (Jodhka 2018). Hence, any analysis that attempts to question structures of inequality must necessarily be located within the "particular framework of history, culture and social configuration" (ibid.). In India, contemporary inequality, in particular, inequality among specific identity groups, is largely an outcome of historical exclusion and marginalisation, perpetuated through the institution of caste as a critical marker of social stratification. Therefore, interpreting inequality from this perspective demands that glories and illusions of religious-scriptural traditions be evaluated within the domain of academic research, to reveal its systemic and operational imperfections. This is because, the nature and context of present society is embedded in its socio-cultural development through civilisations.

The ancient Indian logic behind the establishment and organisation of social order has been a conscious effort to obligate disadvantages, exclusion, and marginalisation, institutionalised through the *Code of Manu*—a widely acknowledged work on social laws in India. The text is known for its caste and patriarchy-based approach to design a hierarchical categorization of society, that codifies conduct and actions, for instance, personal hygiene, manner of attaining knowledge, diet, marriage, interpersonal relations, and spiritual aspects, into a legally bounded system. The authoritativeness of the text may be perceived from the prerequisite of European conquest to uphold Hindu Law Code as a legal sanction, rather than a spiritual or religious narrative of colonial subjects.[1] Unlike this law code, the Constitution of India, as a formal legal document, became an embodiment of an accommodative, socially sensitive, inclusive, and aspirational society. It reflects a commitment to secure to all citizens, Equality, Justice and Liberty, as a non- negotiable duty of the State.

This article tries to weave together an intertextual analysis based on scientific observation of the case of caste subaltern, through three widely acknowledged texts— *Laws of Manu (Manavdharamshastra)*, Jyotiba Phule's *Slavery* (*Gulamgiri*), and B.R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, on ideals of society and governance. These texts are significant as they present a historical legacy into the origins of social hierarchy, its influence on the nature of nineteenth century colonial India, and the responses through constitutional values. The aim is to develop an approach to evaluate ancient political thought of *Manavdharmashastra*, and probe contradictions and realism in actions, with explicit excerpts of relevant texts, to authenticate the credibility of facts and its alignment with the central thought.

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[1] As Naegele (2008) notes, "Europeans "discovered" the Law Code of Manu about the same time as the United States was adopting a Constitution, in the 1790's, when a British judge sent to India, Sir William Jones, learned the ancient Indian language of Sanskrit, translated the Law Code of Manu and published it."

Interpreting *Varna*, Caste or *Jati*

The textbook view of caste presents it as an ancient institution based on the ideas of *varna, karma* and *dharma,* most explicitly elaborated in the classic Hindu text *Manusmriti* (Jodhka 2018: 112). While *Manusmriti* does not explicitly mention the word 'caste', it governed individual conduct and social interactions based on the belief that the organisation of the Hindu social order[2] was divinely ordained through a system of hierarchy that was institutionalised on the notion of 'purity and pollution'. This was achieved by the mechanism of distinctions based on *varna*. The *varna* system established the Hindus into four mutually exclusive and hierarchically ranked categories. Beyond the four *varnas* were the *atishudra or achhoots* (the "untouchables"), 'who by virtue of being classified as the *avarnas* (those without a varna) occupied the lowliest position in contrast to the *savarnas*[3] (those with a varna)' (Deshpande 2011: 19). This intergenerational transfer of hierarchy defining one's social standing in the overall structure was inscribed in ritual terms by a codified framework, that structured almost every aspect of social and economic life of people for centuries. The second related element that naturalised a caste order was the *karma* doctrine. According to it, the present life of a person is a link to the infinite chain of subsequent births and rebirths, and that, the birth of each in a specific (*varna*) position is an outcome of their own past deeds. Therefore, the only way to improve the prospects of a better future birth was to adhere to, and perform well, the role considered appropriate for the stratum in which one was born. Finally, with regards to the concept of dharma in ancient India, it must be noted that, *dharma* governed the criteria of human behaviour and social duties, as adherence to it was stated to be beneficial not only for the individual, but also for the overall welfare of society at large (Meena 2005: 578-579). In the text *Manusmriti*, dharma has been conceptualised as a creation of 'divine power' established on the idea of religion and spirituality for the execution of 'right duties'[4] in all aspects of human life. According to this, the only 'attachment' that mankind must have, shall be the attachment towards one's *dharma*, for the text declares that *dharma* alone, guarantees realisation of the divine creator (ibid.: 579).

The 'caste system'—which essentially communicates the reference to the indigenous term jati—originally started with the four-fold varna classification mentioned above. However, as is known, the operative category is no longer determined

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[2]While the work has a standalone focus (and, a conventional one) on Hinduism, it is important to remember that all religions (especially in South Asia) have an inherent system of social stratification, similar to the Indian caste system. In this context, Deshpande (2011) gives a brief insight on the manifestation of the system within Buddhism (pp. 22-23).

[3]Ambedkar identified two major classes of castes based on varna division in society: *Savarna* and *Avarna*. Within *Savarna*, there are two classes—*Dvija* castes (twice born high castes) and castes of Shudra status. Similarly, the *Avarna* has three groups—tribes, nomadic tribes and those belonging to the category of untouchable castes. (Bagade 2012: 35)

[4]According to Chapter VII *verse* 27 of *Manusmriti*, a ruler who uses his power to properly protect the caste order, will achieve all desires, wealth, and spiritual merit. On the other hand, one who misuses it for personal interests, will end up in destruction.

by *varna*, but individual jatis. This categorisation of jatis is more commonly based on personal claims of its members regarding their respective varna affiliations. Whatever may be the contradictions in such narratives, the nature of the caste pyramid has traditionally been standardised to an imagination that is characteristic of a vast population of "lower castes" to assume the bottommost position. It is equally important to highlight, that caste divisions between the so-called "high" or "low" distinction is most often indicative of the historically subjugated "untouchable" cluster of jatis that were together identified as a specific social category in government schedule during the colonial period. These were subsequently referred to as the Scheduled Castes (and similarly, the Scheduled Tribes). It may therefore be interpreted that, any investigation into the origins of caste and subsequent transformations thereon, necessitates that the emergence of untouchability be analysed in proper perspective.

The foundation of untouchability has its roots in the religious-scriptural tradition of Indian society. Ambedkar argued that 'untouchability was an infliction and not a choice' to ensure compulsory segregation (Ambedkar 1989 [2014]: 5). In *Untouchability and Stratification in Indian Civilisation,* Shrirama (2007) presented a historical study of ancient texts to understand the phenomena of untouchability and the process of its institutionalisation within the system of Hindu social stratification in India. He has eloquently demonstrated how newer invasions gradually transformed social status based on racial differences to one based on ritual purity among the Aryan elites and the pre-Aryan settlers. According to him,

> "…the metaphysical doctrine of *karma* has provided a powerful rationalisation for inequality based on birth and made it acceptable to the wide masses" (p. 49)

To recall, the doctrine of *karma,* as articulated for the first time in the Upanishads implies that, birth in a certain position is directly linked to one's own past deeds. In order to improve later births however, it is imperative to adhere to and perform the assigned role of the *varna* to which the person is born (ibid.: 49). The process of establishment of a four-fold hierarchy to the institutionalisation of low status to Shudras, and the subsequent formation of untouchability, can be broadly divided based on three significant textual evidence. To begin with, *Rig Veda*[5] (the oldest scripture) with the composition *Purushasukta* is the first to mention all four ranks together with their occupations, tracing a mythical origin of each to be symbolically related to different parts of the body of the *Purusha* (Shrirama 2007: 57) or the 'divine creator'. In later Samhitas and Brahmanas, for instance, the *Taittiriya Samhita and Aitareya Brahmana,* the so-called "low" status assigned to Shudras was institutionalised. The

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[5]It is important to highlight that, "in the *Rig Veda*, the word '*varna*' clearly refers to the colour of skin and hair of the people of two different races, the Aryan varna and the Krshna varna. Nowhere in the Rig Veda is the word *varna* used for the four-fold stratification of society. Though the two classes, Brahmin and Kshatriya are mentioned often, the word *varna* is not used to denote them. Even in the *Purushasukta*, where the origin of the four classes is described, the word varna does not occur" (Shrirama 2007:. 49).

relationship of Shudras with other three varnas was reasserted through the social laws of Manu. In this context, *Manusmriti* asserts that,

> …the dominance of priestly elites and the hierarchy based on varna was to be re-established not only through religious prescriptions but by the full might of the king and the state (through the power of punishment or *dand*). (ibid., 2007: 72)

It is therefore, that the position of the king was instituted to 'preserve' the *varna* order. The text declared that, "The king has been created (to be) the protector of the castes (varna) and orders, who, all according to their rank, discharge their several duties". (Chapter VII *verse* 35)

Similarly, the occupational division of Vaishya and Shudras was propounded in the verse, "(The king) should order a Vaisya to trade, to lend money, to cultivate the land, or to tend cattle, and a Sudra to serve the twice-born castes". (Chapter VIII *verse* 410)

It further provided in *Manusmriti* that, 'a Shudra, being unable to find service with the twice-born (a term associated with the three "higher-order varnas") may engage in mechanical occupations such as handicrafts' (Chapter X *verse* 99-100) as their alternative duties. In any case however, it was impossible for the Shudra to be entitled for ownership of wealth or property (Chapter VIII *verse* 416-417). It is necessary to mention the fact that,

> (though) Manu assigns low position to the Vaishyas and Shudras (it) does not mean that he was not aware of their functional utility. In fact, he enjoins the king to ensure that the people of the Vaishya and Shudra varnas continue to perform the work prescribed for them because if these castes 'swerved from their duties, the world would be thrown into confusion'. (Shrirama 2007: 73)

Given the ongoing discussion about origins of the caste system, it is essential to consolidate the extensive revelations by the most widely known ideological critique of such stigmatised classification of social identities. Beginning from the nineteenth century, the most noteworthy challenge to the institution of caste as a form of systemic structural inequality was first posed by the social reformer and thinker Jyotirao Govindrao Phule. This became an equally imperative question for Ambedkar who began to search for a possible redressal for the same nearly a century later. With time, Ambedkar became a notable critique of *Manusmriti* and emphasised on the non-interference of socially codified laws of Manu to the dynamics of state functions so as to attain a just and equitable social democracy that respected the dignity of all. The association as Chairperson of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly enabled him to incorporate through consensus, his core beliefs and values as an institutionalised mechanism that supported the primacy of law over individual interest

or passion. Ambedkar analysed the varna-caste relation by identifying the similarities and differences between the two. According to him,

> Varna and caste are identical in their de jure connotation. Both connote status and occupation. Status and occupation are the two concepts which are implied both in the notion of varna as well as in the notion of caste. Varna and caste, however, differ in one important particular. Varna is not hereditary, either in status or occupation. On the other hand, caste implies a system in which status and occupation are hereditary and descend from father to son. (Mungekar 2017: 17–18)

As Ambedkar's inquiry on the origins and growth of varna-caste system suggests, the evolution of varna into several castes is an evolution in the opposite direction (Bagade 2012: 25). It must be noted that, Ambedkar categorically rejected Manu as the originator of the caste system (Ambedkar 1916: 19). Nonetheless, he held that regimentation of caste identity emerged from the recognition that social status and occupation ought to be governed by the logic of hereditary succession (Mungekar 2017: 18). It is in this respect that Ambedkar contextualised religious sanctions to uphold caste hegemony and the indiscriminate degradation of Shudra and untouchable castes.

As a matter of fact, understanding the term "caste" becomes essential in order to differentiate it from the term "*jati*". Typically, the belief is that caste translates as *jati* in English terminology.[6] In the words of Galanter (1984), jati is "an endogamous group bearing a common name and origin, membership in which is hereditary, linked to one or more traditional occupations"[7] (p. 7). It is to say, while 'jati is not visually ascriptive' (Deshpande 2011: 28), an individual may conveniently be placed under a particular jati based on the last name (surname) of the person.[8] Therefore, while *varna* ranking is visualised as a pan-Indian scheme, and *castes* are conceptualised as a set of regional and subregional groups, the term "jati" is representative of the local caste hierarchy. Therefore, while the article acknowledges the conceptual conflicts between varna and caste, it intends to relate both in a rather comprehensive perspective, and recognizes them as objects of individual or group identity that has an influence on inequality, exclusion and marginalisation.

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[6]"Caste" is not an indigenous Indian term but has its origins in the Portuguese word *casta*. There is no exact equivalent in Indian languages for the word caste (Galanter 1984: 6). Probably, theoretical ambiguities on jati, made the term caste correspond directly to the former.

[7]In general, the term *jati* means kind or genus, commonly seen as natural units of society each representing a distinct variety of human possibility. Therefore, *jatis* are bound to exhibit geographical variations.

[8]This, however, becomes problematic to ascertain due to two reasons: *one*, when people voluntarily decide to drop their surnames or prefer to use generic and not *jati*-specific surnames; *two*, as *jatis* are regional categories, same surname may belong to different *jatis* across/within states (Deshpande 2011: 28–29).

Dharamshastra, Knowledge and the State

The classification of major literary sources for the history of India are broadly categorised under *shruti* (i.e. *Vedas*) and *smriti* (i.e. *Dharamshastra*) texts.[9] The term "*shastra*" broadly connotes an organised compilation of 'knowledge'—"social, political, economic, religious, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions" (Sinha 2011). It is rightly noted that "the title of the work poses a problem for the readers, because the text is known by two different names, *Manusmriti* and *Manavdharmashastra*."[10] (ibid.). Nonetheless, the work is considered a "synthesis of philosophy, religion and law".

Any *shastra* text is acclaimed as a comprehensive treatise on knowledge. While considerable analysis have been attempted by scholars on the *shastra* tradition through another ancient classical text *Arthashastra*, the manner of social conduct enforced within the domain of statecraft in the text has either remained unfamous or uncovered. The thematic contribution of this text on diplomacy and statecraft, often gains primacy over the nature of its cooperative state machinery that gave importance to institutional patronage of *dvijas* for an efficient functioning of the state. According to Chalam (2020: 110), "In the hierarchy of the state, the ministers, who were in general drawn from among the Brahmins, came first and then the *purohits* enjoyed the highest status…The vaishyas have cooperated with the king in carrying out the internal and external trade. Thus, the *Dvijas* had the opportunity to run the state in the past and in the present". Nonetheless, it is equally important to mention that later *dharamshastra*, specifically the *Manavdharamshastra*, borrowed theoretical concepts such as the idea of *saptanga rajya*—the state consisting of seven inter-related functions—from the text *Arthashastra* (Singh 2019). The purpose here, to include reference of *Arthashastra* is in synchroneity with the ideation that, privilege and domination by virtue of 'acquired knowledge' within systems of *dharamshastra* tradition, caused exclusion and marginalisation of some social groups.

It is in this context, that the term 'spirituality' needs further analysis. A common impression of the term evokes a sense of communication of the self, with an invisible mystical power, embodied through the use and abuse of religion. This understanding of spirituality naturalizes the exercise of 'divine authority' to control individual-social conduct and ritual behavior. When such spirituality is located within the religious-cultural notion of Hindu social order, what effectively develops is the *varnadharma* categorization of people, as revealed in the text *Manusmriti*.

The concept of State in ancient Indian political thought, is a complex theorisation of the institution defined in terms of its basic features that includes among others, a definite territory and a 'divine monarch', vested with authoritative and coercive capabilities. The existence of this institution as ascertained by historians and political

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[9]Shruti texts are considered divine revelations, that which is heard; Smriti texts are recollected works of man. (Singh 2019; Sinha 2011)

[10]This article uses the terms *Manusmriti* and *Manavdharmashastra* interchangeably to refer to the text in question.

scientists, reveal that "vedic political organizations were pre-state social formations, and proto-states or states in Indian history first materialized in the post-Vedic period when the primary egalitarian ethos of the tribal society in the mid-Ganga valley gave way to the class-stratified society in which monarchy and aristocratic oligarchy and coercion were needed for the perpetuation of inequalities of property"[11] (Singh 2011: 10). Considering the differential treatment granted to 'divinely created unequal beings' in *Manusmriti*, the logic of governance, that is, the authority to make rules to regulate rights and duties, punishments, and rewards—became a natural tendency. Accordingly, this exposition helps us understand how, in order to ensure continuity of the 'divinely crafted' laws of Manu, political and institutional structures were organized to maintain a stratified social order and perpetuate inequality—of opportunity, resources and human dignity.

It is observed that, "all hierarchies—and especially the inequalities of caste, class, patriarchy, etc.—were built on the claims of knowledge (both of the secular and supernatural religious variety)" (Mani 2012). Within this discussion therefore, it is intriguing to examine the 'knowledge' discourse through realms of—what constitutes 'knowledge', who 'owns' it, and the 'power of knowledge'. The focus here, however, is to interpret the domain of knowledge, independent of the Western conception, and in fact, within the framework of its Brahmanical textual construction.

Structurally, a hegemonic knowledge—its constituents, realization, dissemination and enforcement—was largely restricted to religious sanctions of *dharma*. Therefore, knowledge of *dharamshastras* became a source of power to establish an intellectual domination of the *brahmanas* in ancient India, and thereby, essentially command spiritual adherence from the remaining varnas. The concept of *dharma* in ancient India implied that, acceptance of *dharma* became a means to regulate human behaviour as it was stated that *dharma* is beneficial for the welfare of both the individual and society. In this way, *dharma* recognised both individual behaviour and the social duties. This view made '*Dharma* not only a base for spiritual and moral development but equally a base for stable and regular system' (Meena 2005: 577). Specifically, the context of *dharma* used in the text *Manavdharamshastra* is the creation of the 'divine power' established on the idea of religion and spirituality, for "the execution of right duties" in all aspects of human life. According to this notion, the only 'attachment' that mankind must have shall be the 'attachment towards one's *dharma*', for the text declares that "the accumulation of *Dharma*" alone, guarantees realization of the divine creator or the Supreme God.

It will therefore be interesting to apply the vision of *dharma* envisaged in *Manusmriti* to the complexities of state functioning. In this regard, Manu is considered as the "first to systematize the science of government and administration" (Sinha 2011: 20) and the text as the propounder of the *'Divine Theory of the Origin of State'* (Meena 2005; Sinha 2011). According to it, the king is a divine creation of God to protect all

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[11]The Nandas and the Mauryas of Magadh were the first to establish such a large-scale state. (Singh 2011)

creatures. "For, when these creatures, being without a king, through fear dispersed in all directions, the Lord created a king for the protection of this whole (creation)". (Chapter VII *verse* 3)

Thus, it was assumed that, "God originated both the Dharma and state power at the same time. Due to this, Dharma made the king responsible towards the God" (Meena 2005) and the text declared that the king is free from accountability towards anybody in the world. However, it must be noted that *Manusmriti* validates subservience of the 'divine' king towards honour of the 'great deity' (Chapter IX *verse* 319)—the Brahmanas—"on account of superiority of his origin", that they be regarded as "the lord of all castes" (Chapter X *verse* 3).

Therefore, it is conclusive to state that, constraint and coercion as tools of state power to enforce *dharma*, was embedded in the assigned duties of the King. According to Chapter VII *verse* 27, a ruler who uses his power to properly protect the caste order, will achieve all desires, wealth, and spiritual merit. On the other hand, one who misuses it for personal interests, will end up in destruction. In other words, "unless dharma upheld caste hierarchy, unless righteousness was bound to caste order, unless justice was one with *danadaniti* (rule of force)" (Mani 2012), the strength of "*Dharma*" would become insignificant. Thus, 'knowledge' as defined through the ancient textual tradition of *dharmashastra,* 'blurred the boundary between faith and reason, hierarchy and harmony, and their sole goal being power' (ibid.).

Within this discussion it is important to highlight that, unlike textual sources of knowledge, oral forms of knowledge have traditionally been most closely associated with those commonly known as *shudras* according to the *varnadharma* system (Shepherd 2020). This was because during the pre-colonial era, the *shudras* were denied access to learning of ancient education. In the present age, perhaps, this has gradually transformed as a means for creative expression of their consciousness. In fact, in the anti-caste discourse, the use of new-age mediums of modern forms of entertainment has emerged as a widely popular mode of assertion—the phase of what is referred to as 'dalit cultural resistance' to caste subjugation and humiliation.

Indeed, "brahmanic control over knowledge" remained the prerogative of those socially dominant within the caste structure, and "brahmanical forms of knowledge were critical in the establishment and maintenance of caste" (Mani 2015). Thus, knowledge and education in the context of ancient learning implied strategies of domination and exploitation, rather than an individual's liberation through reason and upward mobility. In this reference, John Fiske's observation on knowledge is important. According to him, "knowledge is power, and the circulation of knowledge is part of the social distribution of power" (Apple 2000: 179).

Caste and Colonialism: Continuity and Change from *Manavdharamshastra*

Theories and documentation that links Brahmanism and colonialism suggests that "caste is a colonial construction: almost a fabrication of the Population Surveys and

Census Reports" (Mani 2015).[12] In this regard, a brief understanding of the history of the colonial administration in India is worth revisiting. The Regulating Act, 1773 was a landmark legislation that introduced a new administrative machinery for the British East India Company (EIC), from the hitherto exclusively commercial entity, to govern the land and its people. Thus, the necessity for a comprehensive and uniform governance structure through 1773 Act, created the foundation of central administration in India. This meant that colonial rule heavily relied on textual prescriptions of both religious denominations, i.e., Hindus and Muslims—that overpowered local realities. Attempts to translate indigenous Hindu texts, including *Manavdharamshastra* therefore, became foundational for the evolution of the colonial judicial system to govern the Hindu population.

Another aspect of the advent of colonialism on the institution of caste in India was the emergence of caste-based enumeration through conduct of official census in the nineteenth century. The Census was a direct survey of population; instead of surmising or using textual references (Samarendra 2011). This implied that individual questionnaire-based survey determined the presence of *varna* hierarchy, instead of interpretation of sanskrit texts. While such assessment had no uniformity in the method adopted, the purpose of the census was meant to count the population and classify it according to age, sex, religion, caste, occupation, among other categories. Such an enumeration exercise "started from census of the North-Western Provinces in 1865, and it continued to be a prominent part of the colonial census till 1931" (ibid.). It was realised gradually that the empirical caste census faced contradictions in terms of text and practice. The *varna*-based classification failed to adequately represent the entire population of the Indian society. Thus, probably for the first time, 'the state' (even if it was colonial), 'questioned the credibility of the propagator of this model – Manu' (ibid.). The fact that the so-called 'outcastes' or those outside the *varna* scheme did find mention in the caste census, the definite criteria for their identification was explicitly mentioned in the 1931 Census. The criteria to define such groups was determined by the degree of social restrictions and discrimination applicable on them. For instance, their inability to be served by barbers, tailors; inability to enter Hindu temples, and use public resources such as roads, wells or schools, became part of such criteria (Singh 1997). It was, in fact, this idea of untouchability, that restricted them from using or accessing natural and public resources (Bagade 2012: 33). Thus, colonial rule institutionalised the categories of caste-based divisions through conduct of official census.

It is in this perspective that social reformers such as Jyotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar viewed the inability of colonial rule to correctly recognise the plight of the bottommost section of the population. This, according to them, was attributed to their use of "Brahmin spectacles" (Phule 1873) to position people within Indian social structure. Phule was convinced that the advent of British rule in India largely freed "the *Shudras* from the physical (bodily) thraldom (slavery)" (ibid.,: 27). Nonetheless,

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[12]In this regard, some other works include *Imagining India* by Roland Inden 1990 and *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* by Nicholas Dirks 2002.

he acknowledged the inadequacy of the British government to initiate equitable distribution of welfare to the masses, especially the neglect of primary education, which he believed to be critical for the emancipation from "mental slavery" (ibid.,) of the downtrodden. Thus, Phule's attitude towards the colonial government was as hostile as it was towards, what he referred to as 'Bhats' (*Brahmins*). On the other hand, Ambedkar, in his struggle against caste and untouchability, sought to awaken the identity of this social category for 'self-respect and self-esteem' (Bagade 2012: 35). He asserted that, "We must have a government in which men in power, knowing where obedience will end and resistance will begin, will not be afraid to amend the social and economic code of life." (Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Vol. I: 505.)

Religion, Social Laws, and the State: Locating Self, Family and the Social

The relationship between spirituality and religion has already been substantiated within this article. Religion is ordinarily perceived as a 'way of life', often accommodated in everyday majority-minority political binaries. However, such a commonsensical understanding tends to overlook the influence of social construct on the economic and political dimensions of equality. Then, in order to trace the ancient logical interconnectedness between religion, social laws of Manu, and the State, it is pertinent to approach the issue from the axis of what is broadly referred to as 'governance'[13] within the state-society relationship. In this regard, the interplay of governance dynamics in the ancient state essentially implied, *an arrangement that influenced interactions among institutions of power, that determined individuals' choices that had an impact on both the individual and collective action*. The article identifies three forms of governance—the individual or self, social relations, and kingship and administration. These are understood as interrelations and interactions of individuals between and within *varnas*, essentially *dvijas* and *shudras* as two distinct units. While the first two are dealt with in this section, the third pillar of kingship and administration has already been elaborated in the previous sections. For a focused analysis, the article intends to look at the question of caste-based marginalization from the perspective of occupation (livelihood) and gender (family and household). The reason for this lies in the theory of *varna-sankara* or mixed varnas, according to interpretation of the text *Manusmriti,* which declares that apart from the three *dvijas*—Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya—and Shudra, "there is no fifth varna" (Chapter X *verse* 4). While it recognizes *varna-sankara*, two critical aspects necessary for the maintenance of social identity and to 'avoid *varna-sankara*' are through conduct of 'legitimate marriage' and prescribed occupational duties.

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[13]The article acknowledges non-availability of a single, uniform definition of Governance. The effort, therefore, was to chart the understanding and contextualize it within the theme of the article.

Caste, Occupation and Livelihood

Rules of occupational division of each varna and the economic organization of labour were an important aspect of social identity in the *Manavdharamshashtra*. Accordingly, the text prescribed 'Brahmana to teach the Veda, Kshatriya to protect people, and Vaisya to trade as their most 'commendable occupation'' (Chapter X *verse* 80). It acknowledged that hierarchies created as a result of the relationship between *varna* and occupation existed even in times of distress, when one is compelled to forgo his assigned means of subsistence based on *varna*. However, in such situations, it attempts to promote what is referred to as 'downward occupational mobility', that is, each preceding *varna* may perform an occupation of the succeeding *varna* but can never adopt the mode of life of their preceding *varna*. This rule was uniformly applicable to all *varnas*.

The identification of one's caste, based on hereditary nature of occupation has been a unique feature of division of labour in India.

> "Division of labour as elaborated by Adam Smith and explained by Marx is a practice where the process of production is divided into different stages, like 18 sequences of pin making, and each process is perfected by one. This raises productivity. But in India, each occupation is held by a caste and the finished product is produced by the family or caste by following all the processes of caste occupation" (Chalam 2020: 13).

Socially marginalized groups, including the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and certain artisan castes, have been historically characterized as involved in specific occupations that maintain their labour supply restricted to those. However, the social history of India reveals that such an 'assignment of work based on specific *varna'* can be located in the text *Manusmriti*. It is to be noted here, that the 'process of production' is equally important as the 'end-product'[14] produced by such castes. For instance, in *Manusmriti* (Chapter X *verse* 99; Chapter X *verse* 100) knowledge and occupation of crafts ("mechanical work") has been assigned to *Shudras*.

It is often said that the past does not remain in the past; its legacy continues to influence contemporary notions of skills/acumen attached to individuals. For example, processing of raw leather and manufacture of specific footwear, as two distinct occupations are included as a consolidated work of SCs. Indeed, lack of occupational mobility failed to improve their income, livelihood, and wellbeing conditions (Chalam 2020). Ambedkar rightly noted that, "As an economic organization Caste is therefore a harmful institution, inasmuch as it involves the subordination of man's natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of social rules." (Ambedkar 1936: 37).

This is where Marx's emphasis on the "unchangeableness of Asiatic Societies" is to be understood in context of the socio-economic character of labour in India. It is

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[14]For the purpose of this article, end-product also includes services delivered by the castes in question.

interesting that K.S. Chalam (2020) in his book, *Political Economy of Caste in India*, attempts to formulate what he calls as the 'Caste Mode of Production' (CMOP) as part of Marx's Asiatic Mode of Production, "as an analytical tool to understand the Indian situation".

In his work, *Annihilation of Caste,* Ambedkar relates caste with limits to occupational mobility of individuals; "…that Caste System is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers." (Ambedkar 1936: 36). According to him, this "division of labourers" was based on the Hindu social structure that is characterized by hierarchy, rigidity, and individual efficiency and competency that depended on one's caste. The contemporary empirical findings suggested by studies conducted on the question of interlinkages between caste and occupation on food and beverages business and dominance of a particular caste among sanitation workers in a way reinforces these arguments. To elaborate, a 2013 research paper by Ashwini Deshpande and Smriti Sharma at the Delhi School of Economics, 'used data from the third and fourth rounds of the Indian Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Survey to show that the share of SC-owned firms in the food and beverages category was much lower than the national average and the average for other social groups. The authors also found that SCs had a disproportionate ownership of leather-related industries'. Thus, historically while, 'caste divisions took place on the basis on occupations, within one occupational caste group divisions of sub-castes took place on the basis of what kind of labour/service/products provided or what technique of production employed were by particular groups/people' (Bagade 2012: 30).

A paper published in 2021 categorically shows the existence of a peculiar occupational pattern among 'urban regular salaried workers aged between 15 and 65 years' using data from the 61st round of National Sample Survey (NSS), Employment and Unemployment corresponding to the year 2004–05 and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2017–18. Its findings reveal "that in 2017–18 SC (Scheduled Caste) workers' share in the middle- and low-level occupations was high (70.56%) compared with the HC (High Caste) (47.23%). The share was particularly high in elementary occupations,[15] followed by service workers, shop and market sale workers, craft and related trade workers, plant and machinery operators, and assemblers. Conversely, the SC share in better quality occupations was low (29.43%) compared to the HC (52.77%). The better-quality occupations include legislators, senior officials and managers, professionals, technicians and associated professionals, and clerks" (Thorat et. al., 2021). According to the paper, inter-caste differences is equally significant in terms of employment rates and wage earning both in the public and the private sectors. What is worth mentioning is that not only unemployment rates among SCs is high, but "discrimination in the probability of access to employment is much higher in the

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[15]According to the National Classification of Occupations, 2004 elementary occupation includes cleaners and helpers; agriculture, forest and fisheries labourers; labourers in mining, construction, manufacturing and trans- port; food preparation assistants; street and related sales and services workers; refuse workers like garbage collectors, sweepers, etc. (Thorat, et al., 2021)

private sector compared to the public sector" (ibid.). This is intriguing and offers a possible evaluation metric in policy-making, especially in context of the discourse on privatisation as a mechanism for economic restructuring, growth and development. It not only points to its logical relatedness to caste prejudices practiced in regular salaried employment, but also demonstrates that differences both in endowments factors (such as education, professional skills, work experience, and others) and due to discrimination faced in employment and wage rates in the labour market, compel greater representation of SCs in low-earning occupations in the informal sector (ibid.). The paper further indicated other factors that influence occupational attainment such as childhood influences, influences due to personal characteristics, and latent discrimination constraints occupational choice or entry among SCs. Further, on the implications of caste disparities in labour market, it suggests that legal and policy measures are necessary to ensure adequate representation of SC in their workforce to make it more inclusive and non-discriminatory. Diversity and inclusion, including perspectives on intersectionality within caste and gender, are not mere rhetoric, but instead form part of the Constitutional framework and values built in response to structural inequality as an outcome of stratification of identities based on caste.

Caste, Gender and Household

The law of marriage, as emphasised in the text *Manusmriti*, marks the beginning of *Grihastha Ashram*—the order of life to be followed by a householder. According to *Manusmriti*, it is stated that, a Shudra can only marry a Shudra woman; a Vaishya can marry any of the two; a Khastriya can marry a woman from his caste or any woman from the caste below him; while a Brahmin is eligible to marry a woman from any of the four castes (Chapter III *verse* 13). Within this scheme, Ambedkar observed that "low-caste women were made sexually accessible to the high-caste men" (Bagade 2012: 27) as his observation on caste and gender were made in the broad spectrum of caste hierarchy.

While the text delves deep into an elaborate classification of marriages, a careful observation indicates that statements around marriage-related ritual ceremonies remain absent. Moreover, the interchangeableness in the use of words 'women' and 'wife' is significant enough to point towards the role of women as restricted to ideal 'wives' alone. It is essential to note that notions of "ideal women" within the text is representative exclusively of *dvija* women (wife). It declares that marital associations with a *shudra* women causes loss of one's *varnadharma* (Chapter III *verse* 14-19).

Aspects related to household and family—roles within caste and social relations—represents an intrinsic predominance of a 'patriarchal authority governing social relations between men and women'. It is worth mentioning that protection of women (wife) is considered the *"highest duty of all castes"* (Chapter IX *verse* 6), as it is stated that "*a woman is never fit for independence"*(Chapter IX *verse* 3)*. This indicates an implicit presupposition according to which, while women (wife) may be a source of dishonour or ruin to herself and her family caused either by separation from husband, disloyalty, or even drinking liquor, but the only way she could bring honour is by duly

performing the duties of a 'virtuous wife' (Chapter IX *verse* 27). Relatedly, the idea of *"honour"* within the text is based on two aspects – one, where it is overtly associated with women's chastity, and the other, where the cause of such reverence of women is presumed as necessary for the welfare of family, explicitly her male relations, i.e. "*father, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law"* (Chapter III *verse* 55-57).

The language of the text *Manusmriti* views women as unworthy of respectful social dealings. It therefore employs the logic of domination and subordination to establish control over women—physical, social, and psychological—and ensure their perpetual patriarchal dependency. This dependency transcends to include the economic dimension, as it considered women as ineligible for 'ownership of wealth or property' (Chapter VIII *verse* 416). The only recognized inheritance right of women pertains to *stri-dhana* (Chapter IX *verse* 194)—a women's sole possession for life.

Clearly, the rules concerning women not only legitimises their subjugation, but also deprives them of their access to knowledge, and restricts their self-determining, autonomous social position. In particular, the concept of gender, family and household are interwoven around ideals of "womanhood". *Manusmriti* was probably among the first in the series of ancient texts to have introduced certain degenerative practices, which compelled the Indian legal and constitutional machinery to introduce and influence several social policies of the state, especially those directed towards gender equality and women empowerment. To illustrate, some such practices includes child marriage (the 'child' is a girl according to Chapter IX *verse* 94), forbidding widow remarriage (Chapter IX *verse* 65), legalizing dowry (Chapter IX *verse* 194), restricting women's mobility to household work (Chapter IX *verse* 11), women's liberty to marry someone of her choice (Chapter IX *verse* 92), her share in father's property (Chapter IX *verse* 127), importance of male offspring "*putra*" (Chapter IX *verse* 137). Interestingly, the common perception towards specially -abled persons is also largely a contribution of *Manusmriti*, which relates bodily formations to sinful activities; with the degree of sin committed determining the level of change in physical appearance or mental abilities (Chapter XI *verse* 53).

The above analysis therefore suggests that sanctity of regressive attitudes on the question of identities around caste or gender, are intricately linked to what Ambedkar referred to as 'rules of religion' (Ambedkar 1936) as warranted by social laws under *Manavdharamashastra*. He was convinced that religious reform meant, that religion itself should be grounded on doctrinal values of cooperation, dignity and worth of all, that encouraged free and just opportunity for all to participate, one that consciously discarded segregation, prejudices, and privileges.

One's religiosity must necessarily be divorced from indoctrination of mind and heart, that may extend to superstition and bigotry (Phule 1873: 20). This necessitates a conscious deconstruction of mythology, traditions, and beliefs shaped by "the code of cruel and inhuman laws" (Phule 1873)—a methodological innovation initiated by reformer Phule (Bagade 2012) in nineteenth century India. In one of his most powerful writings, *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) published in Marathi in June 1873, Phule visualised societal divisions as a continuum of two extremes; one whose existence was defined

by perpetual poverty, exploitation, and ignorance, and provision of material support to all other groups above them. The other constituted those literate castes who, through their inherited authority from religious-scriptural traditions and subsequent privileges, monopolised benefits from English education and clerical or professional employment in the British administration. Dr. Y.D. Phadke, an eminent scholar on Phule noted that, in his book *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak,* Jyotiba Phule warned against "persistent demands for Indianisation of the administrative services", for he was convinced that, "if accepted, (it) would lead to Brahmanisation of the services in India" (Phule 1873: 15)

The interconnections between Phule and Ambedkar on the idea of religion is well-elaborated by the eminent scholar Gail Omvedt in an excerpt from her book *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*. She noted that for both Phule and Ambedkar, 'Hinduism', in its present form was not a true religion and that finding a true religion implied freeing the masses from Brahmanic slavery. Just as Ambedkar's final and major book was to be *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, so the concluding written work of Phule's life also focused on religion—The *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak*, published just after his death. In it, he gave a savage critique of the Vedas, the Ramayana and Mahabharata stories, and undertook the effort to formulate a religious alternative: a true religion as universal; founded on reason and truth and rejection of superstition; anti-ritualistic; ethical; equalitarian, not recognizing caste or ethnic differences, and especially admitting the equality of women (Omvedt 2012).

Towards Annihilation of Caste: Is Hatred more Powerful than Solidarity?

The "system of priestcraft" (Phule 1873: 18) so established to entrench the institution of caste not only meant an unequal order, but it also perpetuated a 'psychological hatred' emanating from the unjust social order, and "the commonest rights of humanity were denied (to) the *shudra-atishudras*" (Phule 1873). According to Phule, "it was difficult to create a sense of nationality so long as the restriction on dining and marriage outside one's caste was observed by people belonging to different castes". (Phule 1873: 15)

Interestingly, his efforts culminated in the formation of the *Satyashodak Samaj* (Truth Seekers' Society) in September, 1873 in Maharashtra. The organisation was a 'non-Brahmanical alternative to the then existing social reform organisations' (Harad 2021), and was founded on Phule's own ideological framework that aimed to '*deconstruct the hegemony of enslavement*'. Till today, 'Satyashodak weddings resist Brahmanical rituals'—where, both the bride and bridegroom 'write their own vows', which they recite in front of guests on the wedding day (Harad 2021).

For Ambedkar, it was the caste apparatus that prevented Hindus from forming a real society or nation—a thought that echoed with Phule's idea. He believed, that a society does not segregate individuals and impede collective cohesion, but caste

consciousness in order to assert notions of hierarchical superiority and purity prevents solidarity among Hindus. He argued that,

> ..inter-dining and inter-marriage are repugnant to the beliefs and dogmas which the Hindus regard as sacred. Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind. The destruction of Caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change. (Ambedkar 1936: 64)

Any reform is a conscious attempt to initiate institutional or human behavioral transformations. In *Annihilation of Caste* Ambedkar declared that, caste (social aspect) prevented all reform (economic and political aspects), whether based on individual assertion or group authority. This may be contextualized in the contemporary period, with everyday cases of caste violence and atrocities. While *Manusmriti* acknowledges 'act of violence' as the 'worst offence', it introduced certain 'rules concerning self-defence of twice-born men', that legalized violence done by them, if they are obstructed in "performance of their duties". This, according to it, is neither a sin, nor does it make guilty those who commit such an act (Chapter VIII *verse* 348-351). The commonality among all incidents is found in the 'magnitude of alleged crime' committed, that range from eating in front of upper-caste men, or owning and riding a horse, wearing a pair of royal footwear generally worn by upper-caste members, viewed as acts of resistance to caste norms and a sign of *reversal of domination*. The dynamics of such violence within urban spaces and among emerging nascent middle class who have benefitted from affirmative action (Chakravartty; Subramaniam 2021) are manifested differently. Instances of spatial segregation and physical violence then are either largely hidden or numerically low, compared to subtle, yet powerful forms of social ostracism, discrimination, and humiliation. International media reports in 2021 on the technology conglomerate Cisco Systems Inc., exposed realities of caste inequalities in a liberal society such as the United States. In the case, a Dalit engineer alleged that he was "ousted as beneficiaries of Indian affirmative action". On complaints to relevant authorities within the company, he was "retaliated by denying him opportunities for advancement". The Cisco case is another addition to the already existing literature of such cases in India. There exists abundant scholarly work that reflects a peculiar pattern of caste discrimination that *equalizes merit with one's caste identity*. Caste-based affirmative action, that intended to widen opportunities for such communities to explore their capabilities through education, have exposed them to continuing realities of *fierce opposition and stigmatisation of their worth* and their social alienation. What exists then, are 'victims of caste-oriented psychological hatred'. The evaluation thus suggests, that traditionally asymmetrical power relations and social capital based on caste-based identities are primarily responsible for reproduction and revival of ideological faith in the hierarchical social system that supports a superiority-inferiority structure.

Ambedkar's political approach to social reform was based on the Constitutional safeguards to acknowledge indifference and neglect of certain sections. His association as Chairperson of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly, enabled him to incorporate, through consensus, his core beliefs and values, as an institutionalised mechanism that supported the primacy of law over individual interest or passion. Therefore, Ambedkar's ideal of a caste-less society reflected his emphasis on equality, liberty and fraternity. For Ambedkar, to treat individuals unequally based on their 'effort', required that they must be treated equally so far as birth, family name, education, parental care, inherited wealth are concerned (Ambedkar 1936). Liberty for him meant full utilization of people's capabilities without enforcing control on their choices. However, an idea that is truly directed towards caste annihilation was his conception of fraternity. For him, fraternity implied that,

> There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words, there must be social endosmosis. This is fraternity, which is only another name for democracy. Democracy is not merely a form of Government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen. (Ambedkar 1936: 49)

He believed that unless notions of 'collective honour' are transformed to 'honour of individual dignity', irrespective of caste identities, it was difficult to emulate in practice the three core values. This was because, according to him, effectiveness of assertion—of belief, independence, and interest—depended on tolerance and unprejudiced nature of acceptance of assertion. If there was anything that withheld such acceptance, it was the sacred nature accorded to religious sanctions, 'that punished dissenters with excommunication' (Ambedkar 1936: 48), for he argued that "religious was social and religious was sacred" (Bagade 2012). Thus, "without using any force individuals are socialized by caste system and subjugated in the world of caste habits"—a form Ambedkar identified as "psycho-social regimentation of caste" (Bagade 2012: 22). Thus,

> …it must be recognized that the Hindus observe Caste not because they are inhuman or wrong-headed. They observe Caste because they are deeply religious. People are not wrong in observing Caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of Caste. If this is correct, then obviously the enemy, you must grapple with is not the people who observe Caste, but the Shastras which teach them this religion of Caste. (Ambedkar 1936: 64)

A pertinent issue therefore, should be to question, if conformity to constitutional principles enforced through law alone can be a real mechanism for emancipation of those socially disadvantaged. The discussion on anti-discrimination law indicates that progressive legislations constitute an important part in the effort to address problems of

inequality and social prejudice. However, as Edward Burke, an Irish social philosopher observed, "law can punish a single solitary recalcitrant criminal. It can never operate against a whole body of people who are determined to defy it. Social conscience is the only safeguard of rights. If social conscience is such that it recognizes the rights which the law chooses to enact, the rights will be safe and secure." Further, while priorities of modern governments to equality and liberty can be addressed to some extent through its social policies, the fact is, that fraternity can neither be legislated nor can it be cultivated within a policy framework. Then, it becomes imperative to explore alternatives for disintegration of the ideology of caste and how it governs within state and society. The article attempts to identify three such alternatives. First, the observation that caste identities tend to mobilize masses politically, implicitly assumes that political participation can be a mechanism to counter dominant traditions of caste-based inequality. However, this must be premised on concerted action by what Phule called "a united collective of the oppressed to counter social forces of caste Hindus" (Phule 1873). Second, a rediscovery of the institutional foundations of religion. In this context, Ambedkar was convinced that religion must be grounded on doctrinal values of cooperation, dignity and worth of all, and one that encourages free and just opportunity of participation to every being. As *systems of belief*, religion must consciously discard inequality, segregation, and prejudices. Third, a greater role of pedagogy in education for a moral empowerment of young minds—a teaching-learning methodology that demonstrates virtues of equality, fraternity, and justice among others, as noble qualities worthy of conscious nurturing. Broadly, it involves an assimilation of sociological and psychological approaches to develop their consciousness, and humane sensibilities that denies violation of individual dignity based on complex socio-religious norms.

Conclusion

Civilizations evolve through efforts to change. This becomes true despite continuous and rather regressive resistance. The text *Manavdharamshastra* is a unique combination of society and law—a contrast to democratic ideals of equality, liberty, fraternity, and justice. As representative of the State's divine power, it established the Hindu social order that marked origin of the use and abuse of codified social laws, to derive legitimacy and perpetuate inequality among subjects. It demonstrated how a traditionally unequal distribution of rights, privileges, and dignity manifests itself in the contemporary age, as varied forms of inequality—social, economic, and political. Subsequently, the pioneers to critique the dysfunctions of Manu's social laws became a subject of interrogation by social reformers like Jyotirao Phule and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. Phule believed that the marginalised experience of injustice, deprivation and humiliation, transcended their everyday episodic social and political life, and was a feature of structural hierarchy based on 'superiority of birth' and access to opportunity and resources. This eventually validates the existing researches, that such asymmetries in equal opportunities, created a foundational impact on their access

to education, health, and employment, that gradually widened both material and moral degradation, which together constituted a significant marker of policy intervention since Independence. The nineteenth century challenge to the institution of caste as a form of systemic structural inequality posed by Phule, became an equally imperative question that Ambedkar sought to address a century later. Ambedkar too became a notable critique of *Manusmriti* and emphasised on the non-interference of socially codified laws of Manu to the dynamics of state functions, to attain a just and equitable social democracy, that respected the dignity of all.

A key theme throughout the article has been to highlight that the purpose of power is not only to demand social control, subordination and exercise restraint on immoral conduct, but also to introduce and nurture social change and transformation through ethical and political values in policy and practices that are based on a larger understanding of the inherent societal structure.

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In Search of a Utopian Society: Situating 'Dalit' Conversions in Contemporary India

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Abstract

Religious conversions, particularly those originating from marginalized communities, have been a subject of scholarly investigation in colonial and post-colonial India. Dalit conversions, in particular, have been examined not only as an attempt in exercising freedom of conscience but also as an act encompassing various dimensions. The existing body of literature on Dalit conversions has recognized them as instances of social protest, group assertion, a direct challenge to caste-based dominance, the pursuit of egalitarianism, and the quest for self-respect. Although discussions surrounding Dalit conversions to different religions have intensified in post-independence India, conversions to Islam and Christianity have received notable attention. It is widely acknowledged that Dalit conversions stand in opposition to the principles of caste system, religious hegemony, and homogenization. This article by examining the instances of Dalit conversions that have taken place in independent India, delves into three significant aspects: first, comprehending the acquired religious identity of Dalits; second, exploring the aspirations of Dalit converts; and third, examining the construction of a utopia within the context of the adopted religion. Additionally, the article argues that Dalit conversions should not be regarded as an endpoint but rather as a transformative journey into an envisioned utopia.

Keywords

Caste, religion, Dalit conversions, acquired identity, utopian society

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Introduction

> Conversion…as a social rebirth, a gaining of a new identity, a way in which the Dalits were leading.
>
> —*Gail Omvedt (1992)*

Numerous scholars have extensively explored the phenomenon of conversion as a response to caste-based oppression. The marginalized Dalit community, enduring grave caste atrocities, often sought relief by abandoning their traditional faiths and embracing alternative religions. Instances of mass conversions among disadvantaged segments of society to foreign religions have been observed since the medieval era (Bayly 1999; Robinson & Clarke 2003). Particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a significant migration of marginalized groups occurred, with many finding sanctuary in Christianity. Notably, in the 1930s, approximately half of India's Roman Catholic population converted through mass movements, and a substantial proportion of Protestants also resulted from such collective conversions (Picket 1933). This trend gained momentum after 1850 when missionary groups collectively decided to challenge caste inequalities and discrimination within Christian communities. The compelling desire for brotherhood, human dignity, and solidarity among oppressed castes propelled them towards seeking freedom and liberation at any cost. Consequently, conversion to Christianity, akin to previous conversions to Islam, represented an ardent endeavour to break free from the stranglehold of the caste system.

Some scholars posit that lower-caste converts to Islam and Christianity viewed these religions as social alternatives to their status. By embracing Islam or Christianity, lower-caste Indians were better equipped to challenge the social presumptions upheld by the upper castes (Sikand 2003; Dale 2003). Similarly, Hindu converts found solace in Sikhism as a means of escaping the discriminatory caste system (Juergensmeyer 1988). However, Bayly (2004) contends that motivations for conversion should not be solely attributed to changes in social status or structure. Conversion does not always entail a complete transformation of beliefs and practices. In fact, early converts to Islam in South India were equally driven by the pursuit of other desired attributes, such as power and sacred energy (Bayly 2004). The multifaceted motivations behind conversions underscore the complex and dynamic nature of the phenomenon.

In contrast, certain scholars argue that conversions to Christianity before India's independence were primarily motivated by the desire to break free from caste-based discrimination, with Dalits being at the forefront of seeking out missionaries. However, this endeavor was met with strong opposition from individuals belonging to the upper castes (Lobo 2001). Eaton (1997) posits that Indians actively participated in the conversion process, integrating aspects of external religions into their pre-existing worldviews rather than blindly adopting foreign ideas. This underscores the agency of Dalits in embracing a new faith, signifying a deliberate search for meaning

and autonomy (Sebastian 2003). Additionally, folk or popular religion emerged as a vehicle for promoting egalitarianism and ending oppression (Puniyani 2005).

The Bhakti movement and its influential leaders, such as Kabir, Ravidas, Chokamela, and Nanak, profoundly challenged social hierarchies and vehemently condemned caste and untouchability (Omvedt 2008). This movement served as a bridge between major religions, fostering interfaith dialogue, promoting social equality, rejecting elitism, advocating for the role of women, and advancing anti-caste egalitarianism (Puniyani 2005). Moreover, Buddhism has been regarded as a rebellion against the oppressive Brahminical Hinduism that was introduced to India by the Aryans. Esteemed scholars, including Bishop Azariah, have emphasized Buddhism as a means of resistance against the oppressive Brahminical Hinduism, thereby becoming significant for the indigenous non-Brahminical people, now identified as Dalits. Dr. Ambedkar, after his highly publicized conversion away from Hinduism, founded Navayana Buddhism, striving to dismantle caste barriers. He revisited history, reviving a lost moment against casteism, and utilized Buddhism as a tool to restore the long-denied dignity of Dalits (Tartakov 2003). It is noteworthy that Ambedkar's impetus for change primarily originated from his desire to leave Hinduism and establish a utopian social order for the downtrodden and marginalized. The establishment of Navayana Buddhism, guided by Ambedkar, prominently revolves around the principle that human distinctions should be based on individual actions rather than familial lineage, reflecting a central objective of Dalit conversions (Tartakov 2003).

This article delves into the concept of utopia that underpins Dalit conversions, as they strive for equality, liberty, and social dignity. It explores how Dalit conversions represent acts of acquiring a new social identity in contrast to their ascribed identity within the rigid social system. The article examines how Dalits navigated through this system to envision a utopian world within their new religious affiliation. The article adopts two main perspectives: first, it analyzes mass conversions of Dalits to Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and Buddhism, and their motivations to denounce the caste order. Second, it delves into the purpose behind these conversions.

Religious Conversion and Dalits in India: A Short Background

The phenomenon of religious conversion among Dalits has a rich historical context and has been a recurrent event spanning various time periods. Dalits have consistently shown a proclivity towards adopting different religions and embracing new religious movements over an extended duration. The understanding of conversion in the Indian context has evolved across different historical epochs. Christian conversion can be traced back to as early as the first century A.D., marked by the arrival of one of Jesus' disciples in Kerala. During the medieval period, there were notable instances of mass conversions to Islam, while in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, India witnessed significant instances of 'collective conversions' to Christianity (Picket 1933; Jenkins 2007; Caplan 1980).

The advent of Islam in India occurred shortly after its inception in the seventh century A.D, permeating various regions of the country. In the southern region, Islam made its entry through present-day Kerala, situated on the Malabar Coast in South India (Bahauddin 1992). Arab traders, who had been engaging in trade with India even before the time of Prophet Muhammad, were instrumental in spreading the religion. These traders, during their frequent voyages to the Malabar region, established marital bonds with local women, resulting in the proliferation of Islam in the area (Robinson & Clarke 2003).

Accompanying these traders were Sufi saints, whose preaching and the appeal of an egalitarian faith inspired numerous local individuals, particularly from lower social strata, to embrace Islam (Kurup 1991; Oddie 1991). It is important to note that such instances of conversion were not confined to the pre-colonial and colonial eras. For example, the Mahars of Maharashtra have undergone conversion to Buddhism, a process that persists to this day. Additionally, conversions to the Bahai faith, as well as to Jainism and Islam, have been documented among various groups (Garlington 1977; Bayly 2004).

In line with various reformist and emancipatory movements aimed at promoting egalitarianism and eradicating caste-based practices from society, Guru Nanak founded the Sikh religion. Sikhism vehemently criticized the prevailing practices of social exclusion and discrimination based on caste, offering an alternative to the existing unequal social order (Marenco 1974). The tenth guru further institutionalized the principle of equality by introducing the ceremony of *amrit or khande ka phul*, wherein participants partake of nectar from the same bowl. During the original ceremony in April 1699, several Dalit men embraced the Sikh faith and underwent the amrit initiation (Talha 2008). This significant event solidified the idea of equality within Sikhism and fostered inclusivity among its followers, transcending the barriers of caste-based discrimination.

In the post-independence era of India, there were several noteworthy cases of religious conversion. One significant instance was the mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in 1956, spearheaded by Dr. Ambedkar. On 14 October 1956, during the auspicious occasion of Vijaya Dashmi, Dr. Ambedkar and nearly 400,000 of his followers arrived at their spiritual destination in Nagpur, Maharashtra, marking a momentous occasion in the history of Dalit empowerment and their embrace of Buddhism (Sangrakshita 1986; Rodrigues 2002; Pandey 2006). Another remarkable religious transformation occurred in 1981 in Meenakshipuram, a lesser-known village in Tamil Nadu, where hundreds of untouchables, commonly referred to as Dalits, converted to Islam (Wankhede 2009). Around 200 Dalit families participated actively in a collective conversion ceremony, symbolizing their adoption of the Islamic faith.

The Meenakshipuram conversion was shaped by a complex interplay of socio-economic and political factors. Dalits in the region had long endured social discrimination and economic marginalization entrenched within the hierarchical structure of the Hindu caste system. This deep-rooted disparity led to pervasive discontent and frustration within the Dalit community. The promise of emancipation

and improved socio-economic prospects offered by Islam served as a compelling impetus for the Dalits to pursue this mass conversion. The convergence of their profound sense of alienation with the aspirational promise of social upliftment under the Islamic framework played a pivotal role in motivating the Dalit community to embark on this transformative journey (Mathew 1982).

Furthermore, there have been recurring incidents reported in newspapers across various parts of the country regarding Dalit conversions or the threat of conversion. In 2017, more than 2,000 Dalits in Aligarh expressed their intention to convert to Islam.[1] In the same year, over 100 Dalit families in Sharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, threatened to convert to Buddhism.[2] Similarly, in 2019, over 3,000 Dalits in Coimbatore District, Tamil Nadu, protested against untouchability by threatening to convert to Islam.[3] In Hindaun, Rajasthan, in 2019, agitated Dalits also contemplated converting to Islam.[4] In 2022, more than 450 Dalits in Shorapur, Karnataka, took a decisive step to abandon Hinduism, seeking to shed the stigmatizing label of being considered "untouchable."[5] Furthermore, in 2023, forty individuals from eight Dalit families in Theni, southern Tamil Nadu, embraced Islam due to their distressing experiences of living among upper-caste Hindus.[6] These instances are emblematic of the motivations and aspirations that lie behind religious conversions among Dalits.

The phenomenon of religious conversion among Dalits represents not merely a change in religious identity but also serves as a potent means of social empowerment and emancipation from the oppressive structures of the caste system (Kanungo 2008). The decision to convert is driven by a desire for dignity, equality, and liberation from the shackles of social hierarchy, prompting Dalits to seek refuge in alternative faiths and belief systems (Bayly 2004; Eaton 1993). These conversions reflect the agency and conscious search for meaning among Dalits as they navigate the complexities of their social environment and engage in a transformative process that transcends mere religious affiliation (Sebastian 2003). Such conversions are deeply rooted in historical and contemporary struggles for social justice, and they represent a paradigm shift from passive subjects to proactive seekers of social change and dignity (Richardson 1985).

Overall, the phenomenon of Dalit conversions in post-independence India represents a complex and dynamic interplay of socio-cultural, political, and religious factors, underscoring the significance of religious conversion as a means of striving

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[1]https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/over-2000-dalits-threaten-to-convert-to-islam-in-up/articleshow/58781064.cms

[2]https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/dalits-threaten-to-convert-to-buddhism/article19100513.ece

[3]https://www.onmanorama.com/news/india/2019/12/27/dalits-conversion-to-islam-mettupalayam-wall-collapse-mudaliyar-coimbatore.html

[4]https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/sick-of-upper-caste-brutality-angry-dalits-threaten-to-convert-to-islam-in-rajas/310558

[5]https://theprint.in/india/called-untouchable-in-2022-why-hundreds-of-dalits-in-karnataka-embraced-buddhism-last-week/1170024/

[6]https://telanganatoday.com/eight-dalit-families-convert-to-islam-in-tn-alleging-upper-caste-atrocities

for equality, liberty, and social dignity among marginalized communities. It serves as a transformative process that redefines not only religious identities but also societal power dynamics, ultimately contributing to a more egalitarian and inclusive social fabric (Pandey 2006).

Motivations and Aspirations behind Dalit Conversions

This section delves into the multifaceted motivations and aspirations driving Dalit conversions in post-independence India using theories from sociology, psychology, social identity perspectives. It highlights conversion as a transformative process fostering equality, liberty, and social dignity among marginalized communities.

Conversion as Social and Religious Remonstration

The Dalit converts exhibit a notable proclivity towards embracing new religious ideologies, often engaging in collective conversion processes that center around their caste identities. These group conversions give rise to conflicts and tensions as the converts grapple with the establishment of their transformed social positions. It is essential to recognize that conversion entails not only an individual's shift in status but also a comprehensive restructuring of social dynamics. Interestingly, when discontentment arises among marginalized castes, they turn to religious expressions as a means of transcending the oppressive constraints imposed by the caste system and elevating their social standing. The pursuit of enhanced social status consistently acts as a significant driving force behind large-scale conversions, intricately intertwined with their spiritual dimensions.

According to Copley (1994), conversions from Hinduism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are the result of a multifaceted interplay of psychological, political, cultural, and often spiritual motivations. The minds of Dalits are not passive vessels awaiting external religious influences; instead, their conversions are deeply rooted in centuries of oppression, religious subjugation, and social bondage. The conversion of Dalits, marked by heightened religious consciousness and a significant departure from traditional practices, takes place despite formidable challenges. It represents not merely a radical personal transformation but rather a profound shift in social connections and behavior, as individuals abandon their previous belief systems. Dalits actively engage in planning, decision-making, and shaping their life experiences before renouncing their traditional religion. They embody proactive seekers, characterized by a sense of "autonomy" and an inherent "search for meaning" in alternative faiths.

Conversion as Process, not Event

Conversion represents a profound and intricate journey involving a process of identity transformation, engendering a utopian vision, and paving the way for an equitable society. It transcends a mere change of religious affiliation, particularly in the context of Dalit conversion. This transformative endeavor reflects their pursuit of utopian ideals, which serve as the bedrock for achieving social equality and liberation.

Heredia (2007) argues that characterizing conversion as an abrupt, isolated, and irreversible event, following the traditional passivist perspective, oversimplifies its intricate nature. Instead, it is imperative to acknowledge the necessity of a brief period of assessment and observation to comprehend the consequences of conversion for both the individual and the community. This process entails a gradual transformation of existing belief systems, wherein new sets of beliefs and practices are integrated alongside pre-existing ones, often symbolized through certain initiation rituals. Gauri Vishwanathan (2001) emphasizes the present challenge of viewing conversion not as an endpoint but as a starting point for knowledge and communication. Adopting a process-oriented perspective allows for seamless connection between the initial phase and subsequent stages, without fixating solely on the intervening events. This dynamic process unfolds fluidly, navigating complexities as it traverses from the individual to the social and from the psychological to the socio-cultural realm. For Dalits, conversion may initially stem from experiences of discrimination and injustice, evolving into a religiously motivated form of protest. Nevertheless, the transformative journey does not culminate there; rather, Dalits must assert and establish their newly acquired religious and social identities within their new religious framework. Consequently, conversion becomes an ongoing process rather than a single isolated event.

Conversion as Paradigm Shift

The conversion motivations explore the two overarching paradigms, 'activist' and 'passivist,' that have shaped the scholarly discourse on religious conversion. Focusing on the 'activist' paradigm, the study delves into its implications in understanding Dalit conversion in India. The 'passivist' paradigm perceives religious conversion as a process that happens to individuals, driven by external forces, and rooted in deterministic views of human behavior. However, a paradigm shift has been witnessed, reflecting changes in social psychology and sociology (Kuhn 1962). The 'activist' paradigm views conversion as a product of an actively engaged seeker who exercises volition and agency in embracing a new religious belief system. This perspective emphasizes the role of the convert in shaping their own identity and personhood. Conversion entails a profound shift in one's sense of ultimate grounding or core reality, leading to a paradigmatic change in behavior and religious practices (Richardson 1985). Various disciplines such as Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology, and Politics contribute to understanding conversion. The 'activist' paradigm has gained prominence in recent times, providing insights into the motivations behind religious affiliations (Snow & Machalek 1984).

Applying the 'activist' paradigm to Dalit conversion highlights the transformative role of agency in the pursuit of social and spiritual emancipation. The 'activist' paradigm deepens our comprehension of the complex interplay between individual agency and societal context in the conversion process. The 'activist' paradigm offers a nuanced and dynamic perspective on religious conversion, especially in the context of Dalit conversion in India. Acknowledging individual agency and choice as drivers of conversion underscores its transformative impact on identity.

Identity Shift: From Ascribed to Acquired

The notion of identity has undergone a significant transformation in the post-structural period, marked by a shift from ascribed to acquired identities. Political theorist Charles Taylor (1989) and psychologist Roy Baumeister (1986) have elucidated the modern shift towards subjective and customizable identities, allowing individuals to fashion their religious, educational, occupational, sexual, and domestic roles. In medieval times, identity was predominantly ascribed by societal norms, encompassing one's religion, occupation, and economic status. However, in the modern era, identities have become less deterministic and more amenable to individual choices. This shift has resulted in a revival of identity with post-modernist characteristics. The existence of acquired identities presents a critical challenge for social identity researchers, as it allows individuals the flexibility to adopt multiple identities that are not fixed. Traditional social identity theories, emphasizing group membership salience as the primary determinant of identity, may overlook the role of individual choice in shaping identity development. While social identity theory researchers often prioritize the salience of group membership in identity development, this view may be overly deterministic, neglecting the influence of individual agency. The malleability of acquired identities implies that individuals can exercise control over their self-concept and social roles (Giddens 1991).

The shift from ascribed to acquired identities holds particular relevance in the context of Dalit conversion. As Dalits embrace new religious affiliations, they exercise agency in crafting their identities beyond the constraints of the caste-based social hierarchy. The concept of salience, a key force driving identity shifts according to social identity researchers, highlights the influence of situational factors rather than fixed characteristics in shaping individual identities. This fluidity underscores the dynamic interplay between individual choice and societal dynamics. The transformation of identity from ascribed to acquired in Dalit conversion challenges conventional deterministic views and emphasizes the significance of individual agency. Understanding the complexities of acquired identities is essential for comprehending the multifaceted nature of Dalit conversion and its implications for social identity theory.

Understanding Utopian Ideals within the Context of Dalit Conversions

Dalits, who have endured historical oppression and social marginalization within the hierarchical caste system, have pursued religious conversion as a mechanism to transcend their circumstances and envisage an ideal society liberated from caste-based discrimination. Within this pursuit of utopia, religious conversion assumes a pivotal role by providing Dalits with an avenue to contest prevailing social norms and entrenched practices that perpetuate caste-based inequities. Through the process of conversion, Dalits not only acquire a new religious identity but also cultivate a

collective consciousness aimed at dismantling caste-based hierarchies and advancing principles of social justice.

Ambedkar, Conversion and Utopia

The theory and model elucidating the phenomenon of conversion in India find their most profound exposition through the lens of a prominent figure who meticulously strategized and scrutinized the conversion of Dalits for a remarkable span of twenty-one years. Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, after publicly announcing his own conversion at Yeola on 13 October 1935, firmly declared, "It was not my fault that I was born an untouchable. But I am determined that I will not die as a Hindu" (Gore 1993).

Dr. Ambedkar's perception of the social backwardness and exclusion faced by Dalits underscored the notion that such discrimination was deeply rooted in the legitimate religious sanctions of Hinduism itself. In his unwavering critique, he portrayed Hinduism as an oppressive religion, perpetuating a hierarchical system of graded inequalities that condemned Dalits to live in a state of subservience under the mercy of caste Hindus. Initially, Dr. Ambedkar embarked on a mission of reform, seeking to address the unequal and exploitative social order within Hinduism. In 1924, he founded the Bahiskrit Hithkarni Sabha, guided by the motto, "Educate, Agitate, and Organize," and launched movements of satyagraha to challenge caste oppression. Throughout this period, he pursued his agenda within the fold of Hindu culture and religion, advocating for equality through agitations demanding access to drinking water in the Chowkdar Tank campaign and various temple entry movements (Jaffrelot 2006).

However, as time passed, Dr. Ambedkar's perspective evolved, and he expressed his aspirations more assertively through his correspondence with Bahiskrit Bharat, stating, "We seek equal rights in society. We will strive to achieve them as far as possible while remaining within the Hindu fold, or if necessary, by disentangling ourselves from this futile Hindu identity" (Heredia 2007). This marked a significant shift in his approach, underscoring a growing inclination towards seeking liberation from the constraints of Hinduism and embracing a new identity as a means to attain the cherished goal of equality for Dalits in society.

Having encountered obstacles in his attempts to bring about meaningful reforms within the inflexible framework of Hindu social structure, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar made a decision to openly renounce Hinduism. His unwavering optimism regarding the attainment of equal status for Dalits beyond the confines of the Hindu fold compelled him to reassess and refine his approach to the movement. Dr. Ambedkar firmly believed that the emancipation of Dalits lay outside the confines of Hinduism, rather than within it. His endeavor aimed at liberating Dalits by establishing their rights through political power, transcending the limitations imposed by the current religious and social order. In his speeches published later under the thought-provoking title 'Muktikonpath' (meaning the path to liberation), and by the Buddha Dhamma

Education Society of India, Dr. Ambedkar articulates his vision of a utopian state that lies in the conversion of Dalits.

> According to me, this conversion of religion will bring happiness to the Dalits and to the Hindus. So long as you remain Hindu, you will have to struggle for social intercourse, for food and water and for inter-caste marriages…by conversion, the roots of the quarrel will vanish…This path of conversion is the only right path of freedom which ultimately leads to equality.[7]

Ambedkar was of the opinion that conversion would establish a utopian society based on equality, liberty and overall well-being and a happier existence (Beltz 2005). Ambedkar interrogated caste Hinduism and tunnelled a way out from it through the practise of conversion. He critically examined the structure of caste-based Hinduism and sought an escape from its confines through the act of conversion. For Ambedkar, the perpetuation of caste was an inevitable outcome of Brahmanic Hinduism, with untouchability standing as its most degrading manifestation. Therefore, he asserted that "Conversion" is of paramount significance for Dalits, just as self-government is crucial for India, as both share the same ultimate goal (Ambedkar 1989).

Ambedkar's vision of utopian Dalit conversion encompasses two crucial dimensions: the social and religious aspects, and the material and spiritual aspects. He identified sympathy, equality, and liberty as indispensable factors for individual upliftment, and viewed conversion as a transformative process, moving away from the stagnant confines of traditional beliefs and practices (Ambedkar 2004). This transformative shift, brought about by adopting a new name and religion, engenders a comprehensive change in one's identity. In elucidating the reasons behind his decision to change his religion, Ambedkar expounded further on the utopian ideals of conversion during a conference in Bombay on May 30–31, 1936. "…Convert for getting organized. Convert for becoming strong, Convert for securing equality, Convert for getting liberty, and Convert so that your domestic life may be happy."[8]

Conversion emerged as a powerful instrument of unity, organization, and emancipation for the marginalized, a theme recurrent in Dr. Ambedkar's extensive body of writings. In his seminal work "The Annihilation of Caste" (Moon 1979), he perceives caste as a complex interplay of cultural conflicts, political maneuvers, and ideological deceptions. Subsequently, in "Who were the Shudras?" he frames caste as a class struggle between the Brahmans and Non-Brahmans (Moon 1990). A more elaborate exposition of this argument is evident in "The Untouchables," where he

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[7]Speech published in *'Mukti Kona Patha'* (which is the liberation path?) (Extracts of Marathi text were edited by Khairamode (caritra, vii: 87–89) and by the Buddha Dhamma Education Society of India 1992.

[8]B.R Ambedkar's written speech in Marathi at the conference held in Bombay on May 30–31, 1936. This speech was first published in the Maharastra Government 's special Issue, 'Lok Rajya' brought out on April 16, 1981. It had been translated into English by Vasant Moon and was first published with 'Oppressed Indian', the organ of BAMCEF. Also published in the Jantak Lehar, Jalandhar (Punjab) Vol.3, No.4, April 1986.

posits that the ascendancy of Brahmanism over Buddhism resulted in the suppression and oppression of tribals and Dalits by the caste Hindus. Ambedkar further advances his ideas through works such as "Revolution and Counter Revolution" and "Buddha and Karl Marx," forging a cohesive ideology to fortify his advocacy for Buddhism (Moon 1987, 1979). Importantly, he elucidates Buddhism as a liberation theology rather than solely a spiritual source, presenting his vision of Buddhism as Navayana.

For a distinct segment of the Dalit community, the conversion movement represents a form of protest. The underlying meanings and objectives behind Dalit conversions were centered on dismantling the hierarchical structure of the caste-based society. This entailed advocating for an egalitarian ideology and a just value-system that the society had not been founded upon, as these elements were deemed pivotal in shaping mass consciousness and identity. Hence, a dual thread of logic ran through the entire fabric of the conversion movement, emphasizing equality and self-respect. The objective was to generate a propelling force that would elevate Dalits from a position of humiliation and subordination to one of social and cultural elevation (Pillai 1982).

Dr. Ambedkar, recognizing the transformative potential of Dalit conversion, embraced Buddhism himself, marking a momentous beginning for historically oppressed and marginalized communities. He established Navayana Buddhism as a new vehicle for their emancipation and identity (Tartakov 2003). Subsequently, large numbers of Mahars and Chamars in Maharashtra and Jatavs in Uttar Pradesh embraced the utopian worldview during 1956–57 (Beltz 2005; Jaffrelot 2006). The Dalit movements denouncing Hinduism did not conclude with Ambedkar; his utopian vision continues to inspire successive generations to experience conversion. Dalits sought to shed their traditional lower caste social identity and embraced conversion as a means to embrace modernity (Gold 1994).

Significantly, these studies have consistently demonstrated that conversion constitutes a highly disruptive act capable of altering India's demography and character. Thus, their vehement support for conversion through social organization can be regarded as justified from multiple angles. As Ambedkar espoused, conversion serves as a means to attain autonomy, challenge the prevailing status quo, and usher in a new social order. The Dalit conversion movement embodied elements of utopianism, as it sought to effect social action and instigate transformative change (Rodrigues 2002). Ambedkar and his followers staunchly asserted that the motivation and intention behind Dalit conversion were not driven by economic or political gain; rather, it served as a powerful tool of protest to secure social acceptance. This social transformation held immense potential to benefit the untouchable communities profoundly (Ambedkar 1989). Eaton, in his astute observations, challenges the prevailing assumption that Dalits were passive recipients of conversion, rather than active agents in their decision-making. He points out that Dalits made reasoned choices, incorporating elements from various religious traditions into their pre-existing utopian worldviews, thereby demonstrating thoughtful engagement rather than mere acceptance of foreign ideas (Eaton 1993). This assumes significance when examining the Dalit conversion through the lens of Dalits themselves. Their perspective encapsulates the concept of

emancipation from the entrenched caste-based subjugation, which forms a pivotal element in the aspiration to establish a utopian realm for the newly converted, facilitating a purposeful and significant existence.

Fissures in Utopia

Despite the fervent aspiration of Dalit conversion to establish an egalitarian and dignified utopian society rooted in principles of equity and self-respect, the persistent existence of caste-based prejudice and hierarchical stratification within diverse religious frameworks, including Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism, belies the professed tenets of parity and repudiation of bias. A study conducted by Louis (2007) pertaining to Scheduled Caste (SC) converts to Christianity underscores that post-conversion, the overall social and economic circumstances of ex-untouchables remain comparable to those of non-converts within the same caste thus require recognition and reservation. Notably, despite adopting Christianity, Dalit Christians remain subjected to subjugation perpetuated by caste Hindus. Evidently, the transition to Christianity did not effectuate a change in the oppressors' mindset, as they continue to subject Dalit Christians to untouchability and discrimination, often forcing them into reliance upon caste Hindus for sustenance. Throughout different historical periods, Dalit Christians encountered varying forms of discrimination and social exclusion within the Christian domain. In response, they engaged in challenges against caste-based practices both within and outside the church. Discrimination and exclusion within the church compelled them to advocate for integration, triggering conflicts between Dalit Christians and higher-caste Christians.[9] In the context of institutional exclusion, Dalit Christians struggled for representation and equitable treatment. Despite constituting a significant portion of the Catholic population in Tamil Nadu, Dalits remain vastly underrepresented among priests, nuns, and bishops. The imbalance underscores the exclusion perpetrated by higher-caste Christians against marginalized sections of society. Depicting the same in "Karukku," Bama (in her autobiography) shares her experiences with Christianity as a Dalit woman in India. Her portrayal of Christianity is deeply intertwined with her

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[9]During mass conversions and subsequent periods, Dalit Christians confronted the marginalization of their community within the church. Instances such as a legal dispute by a group of caste Christians against the Bishop of Trichiropoly in 1916 highlighted demands for caste privileges in church premises. These disputes centered around issues like separate entries, exclusive ownership of church property, and segregated seating arrangements for Dalit Christians and caste Christians. Similar incidents, such as the episode involving the celebration of 'Our Lady of Seven Dollars' festival in 1936, illustrated the tensions between different groups over traditional practices. For more read, Chandra Mallampalli, *Christians and Public life in Colonial South India, 1863-1937: Contending with Marginality,* London: Routledge Currzon, 2004; J. Massey, *India 50 years of independence: 1947-1997, Dalits: Issues and Concerns,* Delhi: B.R Publication Corp., 1998; John Webster, *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An examination of Perspectives,* New Delhi,Manohar publications, 1999; James Massey, *Dalits in India: Religion as a source of bondage or liberation with special reference to Christians,* New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999; Duncan B Forrester, *Caste and Christianity,* London: Curzon, 1979.

exploration of identity, social struggles, and the search for liberation from caste-based oppression (Bama 2012).

Similarly, Dalits who embraced Islam underwent a parallel experience characterized by the persistence of caste-based hierarchies and discriminatory practices that ran counter to their envisioned utopian aspirations. Prominent scholarly works by Muslim researchers have brought to light the existence of caste practices within Muslim society. Imtiaz Ahmad's influential research, "Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India," and Ali Anwar's recent work in Hindi, *"Masawat ki Jung: Pasemanzar Bihar ka Pasmanda Musalman,"* have effectively unveiled the reality of caste among Indian Muslims.[10] The grading of Ajlaf (non-Ashraf lower caste) castes is based primarily on the perceived impurity or pollution associated with their occupations, along with physical proximity to Ashraf castes during services. This hierarchical arrangement mirrors practices observed in Christianity. The discrimination against lower-caste Muslim converts has given rise to a distinct social group within Muslim society known as Dalit Muslims. A comparable scenario unfolded within the contexts of Sikhism and Buddhism, wherein the emergence of caste divisions gave rise to distinct groups known as Mazhabi Sikhs and Dalit Buddhists.

Despite Sikh doctrine's rejection of caste, caste divisions persist in social practices.[11] Within Sikhism, the Dalit Sikhs are bifurcated into two categories: Mazhbis

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[10]In Northern India, the term 'Zat,' equivalent to the Hindu 'jati' or caste system, is used to denote caste. The Ashrafs and non-Ashrafs are collectively referred to as 'oonchi zat' (high caste) and 'neechi zat' (low caste) respectively. Interactions between these two groups are governed by established patron-client relationships within the jajmani system. The patrons, belonging to the high caste, are known as jajmanis, while the clients, comprising various occupational castes of the low castes, are referred to as kamin. The kamins, in a hereditary relationship with the dominant Ashraf lineage, provide specialized services to them for customary remuneration. They receive housing sites and land leases for cultivation from their jajmans. For more, Bahauddin, K.M., *Kerala Muslims: The Long Struggle*, Kottyam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-op society, 1992; Robinson, Rowena and Clarke, Sathianathan, (ed.) *Religious Conversions in India*: *Modes, Motivations and Meaning, ND*: OUP, 2003; Alam, Anwar, 'Democratisation of Indian Muslims', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 38, No. 46, November 15, p. 4881, 2003; Bhatty, Zarina, 'Social Stratification among Muslims in India', in M N Srinivas (ed.) *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1996.

[11]Punjab's censuses in 1881 and 1921 listed over 25 castes within the Sikh community, encompassing Jats, Khatris, Aroras, Ramgarhias, and others. Dalit Sikhs are divided into two segments: Mazhbis (Rangretas) and Ramdasias (Ravidasias). Mazhbis, formerly Chuhras (sweepers), reside mainly in the Majha sub-region and are noted for their potential as soldiers. Rangretas are a subset of Mazhbis. Ramdasias and Ravidasias are Chamars who converted to Sikhism, with Ramdasias primarily engaged in weaving and Ravidasias in leatherwork. For more, Marenco, Ethene K., *The Transformation of Sikh Society,* Portland: HaiP press1974; Saberwal, Satish, 'Receding Pollution: Intercaste Relations in Urban Punjab,' *Sociological Bulletin,* New Delhi, Vol. 22, No. 3, September 1973; Kaur, Ravinder, 'Jat Sikhs: A Question of Identity,' *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, New Delhi, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1986; Verma, Archana B., *The Making of Little Punjab in Canada: Patterns of Migration* , New Delhi: Sage, 2000; Ibbetson, Sir Denzil, *Punjab Castes*, Punjab: Language Department, 1883, rpt. 1970; Juergensmeyer, Mark, *Religion as a Social Vision, the Movement against Untouchability in 20th Century Punjab,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981; Juergensmeyer, Mark,

or Rangretas, traditionally engaged in scavenging and cleaning, and Ramdasias and Ravidasias, Chamars who converted to Sikhism (Puri 2004). Notwithstanding their rigorous adherence to Sikh precepts, these groups are confronted with social isolation, being excluded from religious ceremonies and maintaining a hereditary stigma. Dalit Sikhs, despite converting to Sikhism, grapple with enduring hierarchies and disparities that undermine the overarching principle of caste equality advocated by Sikh teachings.

In each of these instances, a dissonance becomes evident between the professed doctrines extolling egalitarianism and the tangible realities faced by marginalized factions, particularly Dalits or those relegated to lower castes, who remain ensnared in cycles of marginalization, exclusion, and disparate treatment within their respective religious enclaves. These religious contexts unveil an intricate interplay between theological teachings and social conduct. While religious doctrines may ardently endorse notions of parity and denounce discriminatory practices, the persistence of historical and cultural influences has engendered the perpetuation of caste-derived hierarchies and exclusionary behaviors. The ordeals encountered by Dalits within these religious settings accentuate the enduring complexities inherent in translating theological precepts into substantive societal transformation.

The emergence of 'ghar wapasi' poses an additional obstacle to the nascent realm of utopia. Initiated by Hindu revivalist organizations, spearheaded by Arya Samaj under the guidance of Dayanand Saraswati during the nineteenth century, this movement laid the groundwork for reabsorbing converted Christians and Muslims into the Hindu fold through the establishment of the Shuddhi Sabha, or Purification Council (Vandevelde 2011). The impetus gained momentum in the early twentieth century, propelled by Swami Shradhananda's leadership in orchestrating the 'ghar wapasi' or homecoming initiatives, particularly evident in the United Province where conversions of Muslims took place (Gupta 1998). In the late 1990s, the Shuddhi movement experienced renewed vigour, with Hindu organizations embarking on the conversion and reconversion of Dalits and tribal communities under the banner of 'ghar wapasi' (Katju 2015). This process aimed to reclaim Dalits who had previously converted to Christianity and Islam, bringing them back into the fold of Hinduism. 'Ghar wapasi' not only impedes Dalit conversions to Christianity and Islam but also augments the demographic composition of Hindus. By reasserting the presence of formerly converted Hindus, particularly Dalits, during census enumerations, this phenomenon underscores the potential numerical strength of the Hindu population.

Consequently, this development poses a challenge to the conceptual framework envisioned by Dalits through the avenue of Dalit conversions, as the 'ghar wapasi' movement undermines the creation of a new utopian paradigm. Despite these dynamics, it remains noteworthy that a substantial number of Dalits continue to convert to Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam each year. Notably, Despande and Bapna's report from 2008 does not reveal significant disparities between Dalit Hindus and those who

Religion Rebels in the Punjab: The Social Vision of Untouchables, Delhi: Ajanta Pub. 1988; Ram, R., Internal Caste Cleavages among Dalits in Punjab, *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 52, Issue No. 3, 21 Jan., 2017, pp. 54–57.

have converted to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Sikhism, particularly concerning socioeconomic indicators. However, it is important to acknowledge that conversion, as explored in previous discussions, extends beyond mere pursuit of material well-being, encapsulating profound psychological and spiritual implications.

Conclusion

Religious conversion holds a significant place in the Dalit struggle for liberation and the pursuit of a casteless utopia. By embracing alternative religious identities, Dalits challenge the hierarchical structures of the caste system and envision a society founded on principles of equality and justice. The process of conversion empowers Dalits, enabling them to reclaim their agency and engage in socio-religious transformations aimed at dismantling caste-based discrimination. As Dalits continue to assert their rights and pursue their vision of utopia, religious conversion remains a crucial tool for their empowerment and emancipation. The phenomenon of Dalit conversions in India presents a compelling narrative of agency, resilience, and aspiration for a better social order. Extensive scholarly exploration reveals that conversions were not merely a response to caste-based oppression but represented a dynamic process of identity transformation. The multifaceted motivations behind conversions, ranging from seeking liberation to challenging social presumptions and pursuing desired attributes, highlight the complexity of the phenomenon. Dalits actively engaged in the conversion process, shaping their identities by embracing alternative faiths as a means of breaking free from discrimination and seeking autonomy. The Bhakti movement and the emergence of Buddhism further exemplify the efforts to challenge social hierarchies and promote egalitarianism.

The quest for a utopian society lies at the heart of Dalit conversions, providing them with a sense of equality, liberty, and social dignity. The article emphasizes that Dalit conversions should not be seen merely as a shift from one religion to another, but as a journey of acquiring a new social identity and envisioning a transformative world. The motivations and aspirations behind these conversions reflect the deeply ingrained desire for a just society, free from the shackles of caste-based discrimination. To understand the complex nature of Dalit conversions, it is essential to adopt a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses historical, sociological, psychological, and religious perspectives. Such comprehensive analysis can shed light on the intricate interplay of individual agency and broader societal forces that drive the process of conversion.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of Dalit conversions in India is a testament to the resilience of a marginalized community striving for social justice and dignity. By embracing alternative religious identities, Dalits assert their agency and actively shape their destinies. The transformative nature of conversions challenges traditional paradigms and emphasizes the multifaceted motivations behind this significant social phenomenon. Understanding the dynamics of Dalit conversions can pave the way for a more inclusive and egalitarian society, where individuals are empowered to transcend the barriers of ascribed identities and pursue the path of self-determination.

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Teaching Dalit Bahujan Utopias: Notes from the Classroom

N. Sukumar[*]

Abstract

The production of knowledge in India operates within a rarefied domain enclosed within the structures of caste, class, ethnicity and gender. This has enabled the unabashed peddling of one-dimensional epistemology of glorifying the past, justifying the prevalent social hierarchies and manufacturing consent for the existing social order. Periodically, the status quo was interrogated and the resultant debates are secreted within the pages of history. Rarely if ever, these contestations become a part of the pedagogy thereby igniting a quest for a more emancipatory social apparatus. This is not surprising as the reproduction of the symbolic power needs to be closely guarded. The ancient world considered land as the paramount resource and wars were waged to capture more territories. For the industrialized societies, capital was the source of sustenance but in the modern era, privilege and power based on knowledge is the magic mantra, the currency of socio-economic relations. This article revolves around the attempts made by the researcher to introduce a full-fledged course on *Dalit Bahujan Political Thought[1]* at the Masters level in Delhi University. This intervention was opposed by the entrenched academia hailing from the privileged castes who wished to perpetuate their Brahmanicalweltanschaung. The texts/readings prescribed for the course were sought to be banned by the higher authorities. The pantheon of thinkers who advocated an Indian version of liberation theology was never engaged with at an ideological level. The everyday engagements with the students who joined the course and their interactions in the classrooms provide a multi-layered understanding of negotiating utopias. This article is based on discussions with various stakeholders—academic committees who decide on pedagogy, feedback from students and classroom engagements for more than five years.

Keywords

Pedagogy, Dalit Bahujan epistemology, classroom, knowledge production

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[1]Two years back, the university's higher academic bodies removed the term 'Political' from the title.

Pedagogy and Knowledge Construction

As pointed out by John Fiske, knowledge is never neutral; it never exists in an empiricist, objective relationship to the real. Knowledge is power, and the circulation of knowledge is part of the social distribution of power. The discursive power to construct a commonsense reality that can be inserted into cultural and political life is central in the social relationship of power. The power of knowledge has to struggle to exert itself in two dimensions. The first is to control the "real," to reduce reality to the knowable, which entails producing it as a discursive construct whose arbitrariness and inadequacy are disguised as far as possible. The second struggle is to have this discursively (and therefore socio-politically) constructed reality accepted as truth by those whose interests may not necessarily be served by accepting it. Discursive power involves a struggle both to construct (a sense of) reality and to circulate that reality as widely and smoothly as possible throughout society.[2] One of the institutions through which this sense of reality is constructed and circulated is through schools. For some groups of people, schooling is seen as a vast engine of democracy: opening horizons, ensuring mobility, and so on. For others, the reality of schooling is strikingly different. It is seen as a form of social control, or, perhaps, as the embodiment of cultural dangers, institutions whose curricula and teaching practices threaten the moral universe of the students who attend them. While not all of us may agree with this diagnosis of what schools do, this latter position contains a very important insight. It recognizes that behind Spencer's famous question about "What knowledge is of most worth?" there lies another even more contentious question, "Whose knowledge is of most worth?"[3]

The University in India

Habermas considered universities as essential for society's progress, but the fact that it contains within itself the seeds of the reproduction of social lifeworlds, meant that constant vigilance is required to unleash its transformative potential. Hence, education has always been viewed as a contested terrain especially in highly unequal societies. Heuristically speaking, education is perceived as serving one of two purposes in society. It either serves to 'domesticate' and strengthen the existing relations of power and therefore perpetuates the ills such as socio-economic, cultural and environmental, critiqued throughout its corpus of literature, rendering conditions of oppression as non-existent or else it serves to 'liberate' in contributing to the ushering in of a new world in which principles of social justice and ecological sustainability are upheld.

Reflecting on the lived realities of Dalit-Bahujan students in the university, P. Thirumal[4] argued that the reproduction of everyday institutional embodiment

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[2] John Fiske (1989). *Reading the popular*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, pp. 149–50.

[3] Michael Apple (2000). *Cultural politics and the text: Official knowledge*, 2nd Edition, London: Routledge, pp. 42–60.

[4] Thirumal P. (2020). Dominant bodies and their ethical performances: Violence of caste embodiment in higher educational institutions. *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 18, Vol.LV, No. 3, pp. 36–40.

that displays a direction and an intensity that allow dominant bodies to realise their unfinished being. Thirumal demonstrates this process of embodiment as revealed in the cultural world of the upper castes in three phases; the domains of cellular, intellectual and social reproduction. He refers to caste-plaining in everyday discourse. The universities are organized like elite clubs which need to be barricaded against the entry of the rustic/mofussil riffraff. It will undermine the cosmopolitan character of these institutions. "The backward as a servant, 'subziwala', dhobi' or cobbler is all right, but god forbid if his children were to rub shoulders with you. Teaching agricultural economics is relevant but heaven forbid if you have to teach it to the lesser Devi Lals of the world. The biologist Garret Hardin used the picture of the lifeboat to convey a basic idea in sociobiology. Picture an ocean where a lifeboat full of rich people is floating. Swimming around them are the poor. The question is, should one go to the aid of the poor and backward or let them drown? Hardin argues that the poor are irredeemable and going to their aid may sink the boat. Only our elite do not use the language of sociobiology. We talk the language of merit as justice assuming that life is a race without handicaps".[5] Unfortunately, the National Education Policy (hereafter NEP) fails to provide a roadmap to create truly egalitarian institutions which would influence society.

The NEP document commences with a scientific axiom by pointing out that 85 per cent cumulative brain development is completed by age 6. The reality is that as of 2022, India would have had 46.6 million children who are stunted, and 25.5 million children with low weight for height.[6] The mid-day meal scheme is one of the largest nutrition programs in the world and various studies have shown its positive benefits on learning outcomes.[7] However, when food is spiritualized at the cost of nutrition, the nutrition levels get adversely affected. Such stunted children lose the race even before the starting gun has fired.[8]

The NEP aspires to restore the '*Indianness*' of the education system and envisages that the curriculum and pedagogy should be "rooted in the Indian and local context and ethos in terms of culture, traditions, heritage, customs, language, philosophy, geography, ancient and contemporary knowledge, societal and scientific needs, indigenous and traditional ways of learning etc".[9] On the one hand, there is a lot of talk on dismantling rote learning, making the students think creatively and innovatively.

[5]Vishwanathan Shiv (2000). Democracy, plurality and Indian university. *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 30, p. 3604.

[6]https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-has-one-third-of-worlds-stunted-children-global-nutrition-report/articleshow/66865016.cms?from=mdr, Accessed January 12, 2021.

[7]Shreya Roy Chowdhury, The correlation between midday meals and learning outcomes. Available at: https://idronline.org/the-correlation-between-midday-meals-and-learning-outcomes/ Accessed March 19, 2019.

[8]N. Sukumar and Shailaja Menon, https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/storming-libraries-achhe-din-and-the-new-education-policy/Accessed August 4, 2020.

[9]National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, p. 16.

How is it possible when the template of what constitutes *'Indianness'* and who is identified as an *'Indian'* is already laid out by the state? Will the pedagogy be comfortable discussing North East cultures and cuisines or Dalit food habits/festivals? The story of the Breast Tax in Kerala mysteriously vanished from NCERT textbooks. In the name of rationalizing school syllabus after the pandemic, chapters on the Mughals were deleted from the high school history syllabus. Chapters on democracy and diversity, popular struggles and movements and challenges to democracy have been deleted from Class 10 textbooks. The NCERT had rationalised the CBSE syllabus for Classes 6 to 12 during the pandemic, where chapters were temporarily excluded from the curriculum.[10] The emergence of religious obscurantism and its glorification in the academic domain has only promoted half myths and spurious science. Even during the pandemic when quacks were peddling cow urine as a medicine or the public ritual of beating utensils and lighting candles to banish the disease, any official policy which states its objective of promoting scientific temperament is laughable. When the powers that be frown on any expression of dissent and scholars/artists have been jailed on flimsy excuses, how will critical pedagogy be encouraged? "To make it easier for both governments as well as non-governmental philanthropic organizations to build schools, to encourage local variations on account of culture, geography, and demographics, and to allow alternative models of education, the requirements for schools will be made less restrictive".[11] The fine print makes it clear that *Saraswathi Shishu Vihars* and *Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams* will be legitimized under the garb of philanthropic organizations and there will be fewer bottlenecks to set them up. Since the party in power finds terms like *secularism, socialism, republic* to be problematic, the NEP document is silent on them.

In the Indian context, the production and circulation of knowledge operates in a rarefied domain under an aura of sacrality. Only ritually pure and sacred teachers can impart knowledge and similarly, the students need to be in a state of ritual purity while accessing this knowledge. Indian academia thrives in a self-contained cocoon. To illustrate: In his obituary on the celebrated social scientist Ranajit Guha who passed away recently, Ramachandra Guha makes an interesting observation, "A more serious weakness is Ranajit Guha's Bengal-centred-ness. Guha often refers to himself as "Indian", but it appears that the one province of India he has any real interest in is his own. Bengali ideas and individuals are often compared and contrasted to ideas and individuals in the West. However, the name of [BR] Ambedkar does not, so far as I can tell, appear in the book (there is no index), nor that of [anti-caste icon Jyotirao] Phule or EV Ramaswami [also known as Periyar] either. Surely they (and other thinkers) would have made an interesting counterpoint to the likes of Bankim and Rabindranath".[12]

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[10]https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/story/ncert-syllabus-rationalisation-political-parties-challenges-democracy-chapters-deleted-2387531-2023-06-01, Accessed June 11, 2023.

[11]NEP 2020, op. cit., p. 12.

[12]Ramachandra Guha, https://scroll.in/article/1049508/from-one-historian-to-another-remembering-ranajit-guha-who-redefined-indian-historiography, May 23, 2023.

Similarly, an edited work-'An Intellectual History for India',[13] addresses the power of ideas in the making of Indian political modernity. The ideologues range from Rammohan Roy, Maulana Azad, B.G. Tilak, Mohammad Iqbal and Mahatma Gandhi. There is virtually no discussion on any other oppositional intellectual tradition. This brings to mind the pertinent observation, "Introspection about their own location in society has not been too common among Indian historians….What is neglected is the whole question of the conditions of production and reception of academic knowledge, its relationships with different kinds of common sense. We lack, in other words, a social history of historiography".[14] Many communities are not privileged enough to possess histories which also reflects their precarious position in the socio-cultural hierarchy. As Trouillot observed, "History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis become superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility, the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots."[15] Thus the possession of history scripted or otherwise, is a privilege seldom granted equally. There are myriad examples of many Dalit intellectuals who languish due to lack of academic attention. G. Aloysius points out that "social crises in subaltern life had begun to throw up organized activities as early as the middle of the 19th century," though such actors "still await the historiographers and social scientists to unearth and install them in their legitimate niches of history".[16] Till the 1990s, scholarly works on B.R. Ambedkar or Jyotiba Phule were rarely seen in the market or libraries. A notable shift since the 1990s has been the recognition of Dalits as actors in India's history. New attention has been devoted to the contributions of Dalits to the shaping of modern India, both in terms of their political struggle and in the recognition of their key leaders. This is in marked contrast to the absence of attention to Dalit struggles and intellectual agendas in English-language publications and mainstream academic writings in the long twentieth century.[17]

Thus, the trajectory of knowledge production in India continues to reflect the paradigms of the socially dominant communities. Through various modes of discourse, this scholarship continues to valorise traditional caste practices. To illustrate, Ashis Nandy wrote an essay reprimanding and mocking the Indian feminists who were protesting the Rup Kanwar sati incident in 1987, saying that they were unable to understand the value systems of India and were enthralled by the West.[18] Along

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[13]Shruti Kapila (Ed.) (2012). *An intellectual history for India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[14]Sumit Sarkar (1998). *Writing social history*, Delhi: OUP, p. 1.

[15]Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*, Boston: Beacon Press, p. 19.

[16]G. Aloysius (1998). *Religion as emancipatory identity: A Buddhist movement among the Tamils under colonialism*, Chennai: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, p. 49.

[17]Ramnarayan S. Rawat, K. Satyanarayana (Eds.) (2016). *Dalit studies*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 9.

[18]Divya Dwivedi, Shaj Mohan and J. Reghu, The Hindu hoax: How Upper Castes invented a Hindu majority,https://Caravanmagazine.In/Religion/How-Upper-Castes-Invented-Hindu-Majority Mohan, January 1, 2021, 49 and J Reghudivya Dwivedi, Shaj Mohan and J Reghu

similar lines, Dipesh Chakrabarty has claimed that nature is 'coeval' with supernatural powers. He dismisses all monotheisms to claim a peculiar superiority for 'polytheism', easily recognisable as Hinduism. 'I take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with being human', he writes in his book *Provincialising Europe*. Chakrabarty states that different cultures and places determine their own forms of thought, and such forms cannot be tested against other standards. An obvious implication of this position is that Newton's Laws of Motion would hold only in the United Kingdom and particles will conform to 'the standard model' only in the United States. He also argues that India was already a republic before colonial rule, referring to upper-caste rule through panchayats. Nandy, in a 1979 essay, went so far as to consider traditional cultural practices as an alternative to modern technology. The self-assertion of the upper castes and the justification for their continuing social dominance in these texts often take place through semantic contortions and theoreticised language. Rajeev Bhargava uses the term 'vertical diversity' to refer to the caste order, masking its exploitative character by giving it the positive connotation of diversity. He goes on to contrast this vertical diversity with 'horizontal diversity', by which he refers to many religions existing in the subcontinent. The implicit injunction in such verbal acrobatics is to celebrate and foster diversity of both kinds—an upper-caste dream since the nineteenth century—rather than challenge the oppression wrought by this 'vertical diversity'.[19] A similar case is evident in the discipline of philosophy in Delhi University which provides a paper on gender but does not include any topic or reading on caste even in the section on Indian philosophy. Focus on 'Hindu' philosophers alone gives a misleading impression that Hindu philosophers are the only important figures in Indian philosophy debates. In a similar manner, Brooks criticized the absence of mention of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in A. Raghuramaraju's book, *Debates in Indian Philosophy: Classical, Colonial and Contemporary* (2007).[20] As argued by Umesh Bagade, Ambedkar evolved new conceptual methodological tools to write the social history of India. He argued that caste operates as economic system of surplus appropriation based on the principle of graded inequality and exploitation. He used caste-class as a category of social analysis. He explained the linkages between caste and patriarchy and explained the nature of caste consciousness. His exploration and interpretation of India's history and culture have immensely contributed to the evolution of the philosophy and methodology of non-Brahmin historiography.[21]

Unraveling the Epistemicide

The formulation of the syllabus in any institution is a pedagogical exercise tinted with ideology. Unless the knowledge-power nexus is deconstructed, the hierarchy of power

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[19]Ibid., p. 49.

[20]Damni Kain (2022). How the absence of caste in curriculum aids the presence of caste in pedagogy. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, Sage Publications, DOI: 10.1177/2455328X211066185, pp. 1–12.

[21]Umesh Bagade, Ambedkar's historical method: A Non-Brahmanic critique of positivist history, https://www.jnu.ac.in/sites/default/files/9th%20Dr.%20Ambedkar%20Memorial%20Lecture.pdf Accessed on December 25, 2021.

will persist in the struggle for cultural capital. Any discipline in this respect, is like an enclosed space with its own set of ascriptive norms and hierarchies. Such academic politics are made invisible by communicating ideas and researches in a specialist language that serve the dual function of warding off the non-specialists and concealing the hierarchical power politics of its practitioners.[22] The brahmanical pedagogy seeks to produce docile subjects. Thus it is essential to democratize the *pedagogy and social relationships* in the university spaces.

Michel Foucault coined a term, 'regimes of truth' while referring to a discourse that holds certain things to be 'truths'. He interrogated the power structures of society which produced knowledge and truth. Critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, and anti-racist pedagogy are responses to education, which has often been exclusionary and functioned to assimilate students by normalizing dominant knowledge and values through the hidden curriculum.[23] Education continues to maintain the dominant system through the recent corporatization of higher education, where education becomes a commodity/service, provided by faculty/staff, and consumed by students.[24] At the same time, education can be a site for resisting dominant ideologies, for example, through courses that foster critical analytical skills. These critical pedagogies challenge the hidden curriculum and critique the banking system of education. In addition, these pedagogies critique the positivist assumptions of knowledge, of an objective and universal truth, which fails to acknowledge the embedded Eurocentrism and male privilege. These approaches critique the power relations in knowledge production, which can be oppressive as well as oppositional and transformative. As Freire stated, '[t]he solution is not to "integrate" them [the oppressed] into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become "beings for themselves".[25]

One of the first critical epistemic engagements was ushered in by Jyotiba Phule, who in his Marathi play 'Trutiya Ratna' drew complex linkages between religious-cultural and educational authority and re-imagines education therefore as the Trutiya Ratna (third eye) that has the possibilities to enable the oppressed to understand and transforms the relation between power and knowledge.[26] Ambedkar believed that acquisition of fresh knowledge is a necessary precursor of every step in social progress. Doubt is a precondition of inquiry and inquiry leads towards knowledge. Painstaking efforts and sacrifices are needed to produce new knowledge. The Brahmin, being self-contented, cannot labour or make any sacrifices for the acquisition of new knowledge.[27]

[22]Bourdieu Pierre (1988). *Homo Academicus*. Trans. Peter Collier. Cambridge: Polity.

[23]Darder, Antonia, Marta P. Baltodano, and Rodolfo D. Torres (2009). Critical pedagogy: An introduction. In *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*. (Eds.) Antonia Darder, Marta P. Baltodano and Rodolfo D. Torres, New York: Routledge, pp. 1–20.

[24]Mohanty, Chandra Tapalde (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

[25]Kyoko Kishimoto (2018). Anti-racist pedagogy: From faculty's self-reflection to organizing within and beyond the classroom. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 540–554.

[26]Sharmila Rege (2010). Education as *Trutiya Ratna*: Towards Phule-Ambedkarite feminist pedagogical practice. *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 30, Vol. xlv, No. 44, pp. 80–98.

[27]B.R. Ambedkar (1987). *Writings and speeches*, Government of Maharashtra, Vol. 4, p. 8.

According to him, 'Brahmin subjectivity was so conditioned that it could not critically engage with Sanskrit scriptures and therefore was incapable of ascertaining historical truth'. He stated: 'Brahmins, as learned men, are class-conscious; they are not intellectuals who are emancipated from class conditioning. They are severely limited by the anxiety to preserve their interests. The subjective position of the Brahmin does not allow his intellect full play with honesty and integrity. The Brahmin scholar's search is not for accomplishing historical truth but is intended to maintain sanctity of Sanskrit scriptures. He defends the scriptures with the view of defending Brahminic-privileges. His concern for upholding the prestige of the social system built by his forefathers prevents him from searching for the historical truth. As a result, Brahmin scholar engages himself with fixing dates and tracing genealogies'.[28] A similar logic can be applied to the dominant non-brahmin castes too. Hence, it is not surprising that there exists what Gopal Guru would term as the epistemological isolation of the Dalit. The strict observance of a language code, protocols, body language and ground rules effectively converts seminar halls into a hostile space that very often inflict humiliation on the Dalits who then feel nervous or intimidated to enter such structures. Ultimately, Dalits are denied access to knowledge and its articulation. They are also denied the critical faculty to interrogate the dominant mode of thinking.[29]

Pedagogy and Social Identities

I joined the Department of Political Science (Delhi University) as a faculty in 2001. I belong to an untouchable[30] community, availed the provisions of affirmative action as promised by the Indian Constitution, and was fortunate enough to get formal education in institutions which had socially progressive teachers. In addition, I was also nurtured by various political groups on the campuses which influenced my social consciousness. For more than two decades, I was the only teacher representing the marginalized communities in my department. Officially, I was recruited to teach Indian Political Thought and gradually started paying close attention to the syllabi. My research areas were on Ambedkarite ideology and caste conflicts. I was asked to teach *Gandhian Thought and Action* (subsequently the paper was dropped). Along with this, I also taught *Themes in Indian Political Thought*. In the process, I realized that a teacher can cherry pick the thinkers/themes he/she chooses and exclude the rest. To exemplify, one can teach only Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda, etc., as part of Indian Reformation and ignore any critique or new ideas proposed by Phule or Pandita Ramabai. I insisted that there should be a paper revolving only around thinkers and included Ambedkar,

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[28]B.R. Ambedkar (1990). *Writings and speeches*, Government of Maharashtra, Vol. 17, pp. 240–241.

[29]Gopal Guru (2002). How egalitarian are the social sciences in India?. *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 14, p. 5006.

[30]According to brahmanical scriptures, untouchables were the outcastes of the Hindu social order and were historically denied education and other economic, political and socio-cultural resources. Even if they overcome this stigma, they are considered as extremely low in the social order.

Mohammad Iqbal[31] and M.N. Roy, among others as part of *Modern Indian Political Thinkers*. Additionally, from 2008 till date I offered various papers on similar themes such as *Dalit Politics in India*, *Ideating Dignity* and *Texts and Marginality* for the MPhil Program. A colleague of mine from a socially dominant community expressed astonishment that I am offering courses based on political theory. This prompted me to reflect as to whether they were questioning my teaching abilities, because after all, I am a 'quota appointee'. At a subterranean level, they might also have been threatened that gradually their hold over pedagogy is being encroached upon and challenged.[32]Such epistemological imperialism is a sad reality of knowledge production and works to safeguard the rituals and protocols of academia.[33]

This reflects the skewed nature of the prevailing knowledge system. The germination of an idea, the drafting of a course, seeking approval by the department council and committee of courses, to the larger university bodies is a journey fraught with contestations. To illustrate, when the course, *Understanding Ambedkar* was proposed in Delhi University for undergraduates, the counter questions were: Why devote a course only on Ambedkar? Why not Gandhi and Ambedkar and why not Ambedkar with other social thinkers? For the established academia, the idea of Ambedkar is indelibly associated with caste and his ideas on nationhood, gender, economy, etc., are of no consequence. Though this course is very popular amongst undergraduate students, many colleges do not encourage students to opt for this elective course. The irony is that very few teachers are familiar with Ambedkar's work to deliver the course. These courses frame the idea of caste as a socio-cultural construct, within a historical and political context. Further, such hierarchies are not based on individual prejudices solely but a system of graded inequalities maintained and strengthened through the unequal distribution of power and material resources, backed by statist authority. Unlike other forms of discrimination, caste inequities are sanctioned by religious scriptures. An intersectional approach is extremely essential (caste, gendered identities, sexualities, cultural habitus and race) to unravel the idea of exclusion and discrimination. It is also particularly important that these marginalized communities are not portrayed as 'victims' of an unequal social order but are agential beings bearing certain inalienable rights and capable of speaking a counter narrative. These courses are based on the original writings of thinkers/ideologues that challenged the dominant brahmanical 'regimes of truth' and democratized the idea of freedom, justice and human dignity. As the course commences with the challenge posed by the Buddha to brahmanism, there is a historical trajectory interwoven with the social and political changes in the sub-continent. Kabir and Ravidas are usually taught as Bhakti

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[31]This particular thinker has been dropped from the undergraduate syllabi in 2023.

[32]N. Sukumar (2021). Embodied memories: A journey with Ambedkar, Social Scientist. *South Asia: Personal narratives, social forces and negotiations*. (Ed.) Achla Tandon, Gopi Tripahty and Rashi Bhargava, NY: Routledge, p. 144.

[33]For an in-depth discussion on caste and the Indian academia, refer Chapter 1 in *Caste Discrimination and Exclusion in Indian Universities: A Critical Reflection*, London: Routledge, 2022.

poets, but the course seeks to analyse their poetry from a critical political lens—the idea of an utopia embedded in Ravidas's 'Begumpura' (A City Without Sorrow) Similarly, Jyotiba Phule's 'Ghulamgiri' was dedicated to the Black people of the United States, reflecting a universal concern for the dignity of the oppressed everywhere. Tarabai Shinde's seminal work, 'A Comparison between Men and Women' is seldom used in the classroom as it critiques patriarchy and caste. Ambedkar's 'Prabuddha Bharat' or Periyar's 'Dravida Nadu' discussed utopias both in intellectual and spatial terms. It also exposes the student to the notion that the idea of 'caste' has been continuously challenged in Indian history and there are multiple narratives which contest the assumed linearity of political ideologies. Even the titles of the texts used as references create a sense of unease amongst the entrenched ideologies. To discuss caste and patriarchy, Ambedkar's text/readings, 'Rise and Fall of Hindu Women' and 'Critique of Caste and the Hindu Social Order' are discussed in the classroom. The Standing Committee on Academic Affairs of Delhi University[34] found the term 'Hindu' problematic while revising the courses for the Four Year Undergraduate Program. These readings revolve around a specific social category and its related issues, removal of the specified term would make the texts pedagogically redundant. Similarly, a course dealing with Ambedkar's philosophy was sought to be removed from the syllabi for undergraduate students. In a strategic move, a course on 'Veer' Savarkar (a prominent Hindutva ideologue) was introduced for undergraduates and the constituent colleges of Delhi University who wish to seek political favours will choose to only teach Savarkar's thought and discourage Marxist, feminist, liberal and anti-caste perspectives.

Classroom Composition

My entire academic journey has been in public institutions, from government schools, college to the university where now I teach. Increasingly, public schools/colleges/universities are patronized by the marginalized social groups, female students and those who are linguistically challenged in the neo-liberal socio-political order. In the past three decades, South India has leap-frogged into technical and professional education with the help of hefty private investment. Comparatively, in the Hindi heartland (North India) investment in education has taken a back seat. Hence, there is an increasing migration to Delhi by students seeking admission to various arts and humanities courses. One needs to keep in mind that the majority of the students who opt for Political Science in Delhi University (the intake is abnormally high—at least 600 students join the regular Masters programme), apart from the students who join the Open Learning programme, are from the Hindi medium, financially weak and socially marginalized. This is also fuelled by the demand to enter government service at various levels. For girl students, having a continuity of education till marriage is useful. In South India, the felicity of English (the language of the market)

[34]Nishu Malik, Delhi University recommends dropping the word "Hindu" from the titles of two chapters, https://www.duupdates.in/delhi-university-recommends-dropping-the-word-hindu-from-the-titles-of-two-chapters/ Accessed May 25, 2023.

meant that other job opportunities are available and students are not dependent only on government service. Interestingly, more girls (majorly 'upper caste'), Dalit and Other Backward Caste students opt for these courses. Many students who opted for the courses on *Social Exclusion: Theory and Praxis, Democracy and Human Rights in India, Dalit-Bahujan Political Thought and Ambedkar in Contemporary India* gave the feedback that such courses democratized the academic space. They became curious about the alternate epistemologies and their contemporary relevance. While transacting the course, training students about their writing skills, sensitizing them on gender and caste issues is very challenging. As Social Darwinism is being confronted in the classroom, Hindutva groups in the university are deeply rattled.

For the purpose of this article, only the feedback from the course—Dalit Bahujan Political Thought is being discussed. The feedback was divided into four broad themes: 1) How is this course different from other 'dominant' political thinkers? 2) Pedagogical relevance of the course 3) Why are such courses required? 4) Personal experiences shared by the students 5) Quality of teaching and reading materials provided and, 6) Suggestions to further improve the course.

To the feedback for the query as to how this course is different from the usual political thinkers that are part of the syllabus, the students responded that ideas of Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, Tarabai Shinde, etc., ran counter to what they had believed and it was more radical especially around caste and gender. Referring to the pedagogical relevance of such courses, the students commented that such ideas should be introduced at the secondary school levels to familiarize students with critical thinking. They further observed that science students should be made aware of such ideas. For many girl students, the classroom space provided an opportunity to discuss themes around gender, caste and sexuality which is difficult within the family space. Many girl students shared that it is for the first time they have debated ideas around marriage, chastity, biological determination, etc., about which Periyar spoke about so eloquently. The text, 'Women Enslaved' by Periyar was much discussed by students and as one female student opined, "I realized that there is nothing wrong in asking questions as many social customs can be traced back to religious scriptures." Tarabai Shinde's 'Stri-Purush Tulana' also made an impact on many students. According to a female student, "During my Post Graduate course, I was introduced to radical social thinkers like Ambedkar and Periyar which helped me to understand our society better. I realized how patriarchy worked as I experienced and witnessed emotional and physical violence in my family. My dream was to educate myself and be capable enough to escape from these hurdles". Another student pointed out the course helped them to critique the prevalent knowledge production where only the political ideologies of Gandhi or Nehru are taught in the classroom. A few students gave a very emotional feedback. "After reading the anti-caste debates, I have become more sensitive and more aware about social problems. I wish 'to be the change' and fight social injustices." "We got to know about the marginalized social groups, the reasons for their oppression and how these narratives need to be countered". Debates on nationalism, gendered reforms

and freedom livened up the class. Many socially marginalized students found their life-worlds reflected in the readings as in their opinion, 'upper-caste teachers' would often glorify caste and patriarchy in the classroom. The course proved to be socially engaging and sensitized many students. The major problem was the lack of adequate reading materials in the Hindi language. Only very few original writings of the anti-caste thinkers are available in Hindi.

For the question as to why such courses are required, many students shared their personal experiences of discrimination and how they gradually gained courage to speak about their experiences because of the readings which challenged the preconceived social ideas. It reflected the perspectives of the subaltern people. The readings forced many students to reflect critically about their social location and entitlements. The deep-seated prejudices and everyday practices around food choices/clothing/language were questioned and gradually deconstructed. Some students pointed out that they wished they had such courses at the school level to answer questions on discrimination and marginality.

Conclusion

The courses discussed above also reflect a work in progress as new themes and readings are added based on the students' feedback. There is also continuous tension to negotiate with the various academic bodies which find such courses disrupting their social dominance. In the past decade, the teaching community and classrooms are becoming polarized on political ideologies and debates often turn nasty. Earlier too there were political differences but the discussions were conducted in a civil manner. The scope for dissent has grown narrow. Apart from classroom pedagogy, even the research agenda is sought to be 'nationalised' and themes around caste, social exclusion, marginality, human rights, gender and sexuality studies are considered 'unfit' for research. They challenge the idea of a homogenous cultural universe so essential for the majoritarian worldview.

The students of the universities of Cambridge and Bouremouth had launched a campaign a few years ago, 'Why is my curriculum White'. Whiteness is powerful because it's unmarked and normalised. Whiteness is the dominant framing position, hiding itself behind concepts of universality, rationality or commonsense. Whiteness reproduces itself by appearing natural and unquestionable. To dismantle the white curriculum, the unmarked nature of whiteness must be exposed. The white curriculum (re)produces hierarchies of knowledge, but never in isolation from other structures of power. Whiteness is intrinsically linked to, and therefore reproduces, power and thought which is racialised as white, psychologically/physically fit, wealth-rich and heteropatriarchally/cisgenderly male. The curriculum is white because it reflects the underlying logic of colonialism, which believes the colonised do not own anything— not even their own experiences.[35] On similar lines, in the Indian context if we were

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[35] 8 Reasons the Curriculum is White by the 'Why is my Curriculum White?' collective, UCL March 23,2015, https://novaramedia.com/2015/03/23/8-reasons-the-curriculum-is-

to pose the question—*why is my curriculum brahmanical?* It would lead to a seismic shift in academia. Similar to 'whiteness', Brahmanism is the default paradigm to make sense of the socio-cultural habitus of our society. Brahmanical knowledge produces hierarchies which justifies the regimes of truth and elevates it to the supernatural dimension. These regimes can never be dismantled through human endeavour but only if one is privileged enough to take birth in a particular social order. For aeons, the lived experiences of the Dalit-Bahujans were mediated through their social superiors and were never a part of the classroom. The subversion of knowledge is essential to liberate the mind. Braj Ranjan Mani quotes Savitribai Phule, the first Indian woman teacher and poet, "Arise, awake, educate – smash traditions, liberate". Savitribai further notes, 'Freedom comes from a mental fight, an intense personal struggle as well as a collective one for transformational change. An ignited consciousness—and a freedom struggle based on it—is known by many names; Emancipatory education is one of them. Such education opens our eyes, enables us to understand the world as it is and dream about the one we want to live and work in. It enables us with voice and choice, and paves the way for freedom and reconstruction. A movement from darkness to light, the promise of education is nothing less than remaking the world where justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an overflowing stream'. It is heartwarming to note that gradually Dalit scholars in various institutions have introduced courses dealing with Dalit culture, politics and histories, social systems, the political economy of caste, social exclusion, specialized courses on the intellectual contributions of Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, etc.

In order to end the epistemic isolation of the Dalit-Bahujans, we need to follow John Dewey's ideas. According to Dewey, education stands for the "transmission" of beliefs and language, "expectations" and "occupations," "standards" and "aims," and "habits of doing, thinking, and feeling." Furthermore, education enables the adaptation of social life to changing circumstances: It stands for the "transformation" of beliefs, standards, habits, etc. Hence, for Dewey, social life and education are two sides of the same coin. That is, "Life is a self-renewing process. What nutrition and reproduction are to physiological life, education is to social life".[36] The interrogation of received wisdom is essential for citizenship education. Years ago, Jyotiba Phule while addressing the Education Commission in 1882 at Poona, made a pertinent observation, that state intervention is essential for the middle and lower classes so as to ensure not only monetary investment but also to preserve neutrality as India has multiple creeds and sects.[37] Unfortunately, the present ideology is to privatize education to the detriment of the marginalized communities.

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white/#:~:text=The%20curriculum%20is%20white%20because,not%20even%20their%20 own%20experiences.

[36]John Dewey 1916 (1980). Democracy and education. In J.A. Boydston (Ed.), *John Dewey. The Middle Works, 1899–1922*, Vol. 9. Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

[37]Rohini Mokashi-Punekar (2023).*The third eye and other works: Mahatma Phule's writings on education*. Orient Blackswan, p. 200.

Democratizing Spiritual Sphere: Radical Bhakti Traditions in the Telugu-speaking Region in India

Chandraiah Gopani[*]

Abstract

The modern anti-caste consciousness has deep roots in medieval bhakti traditions in India. The Bhakti saints like Basavanna, Kabir, Ravidas, Vemana, and Pothuluri Veerabrahmam have contributed towards democratizing the spiritual sphere. The radical bhakti traditions shaped new value systems, cultural practices, language, and other art forms and proposed a new egalitarian society. The tendency of locating subaltern saints within the spiritual domain does not capture the radical visions of an egalitarian society which are articulated in their songs, poems, thoughts, and practice. This article is an attempt to document and analyze the radical visions of Vemana and Pothuluri Veerabrahmam and other thinkers in the Telugu-speaking region. The article draws on both published works and fieldwork work which was conducted in the year 2022.

Understanding the Egalitarian Visions of Radical Bhakti Traditions

The modern anti-caste movements can be traced to the historical roots of Buddhism and other radical bhakti saints. The Charuvaka, Lokayauta, and Buddhism were the first philosophical and humanitarian movements against caste hierarchy and brahmanical hegemony. Brahmanism[1] created an unequal spiritual world in which inequalities and

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[1]B.R. Ambedkar defined Brahmanism as *the negation of the spirit of liberty, equality, and fraternity.*

discrimination were legitimized through scriptures. This social order or caste structure hierarchized human beings. Against this inhuman system, there were many struggles which are led by anti-caste thinkers like Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Savitri Bai Phule (Maharashtra), Narayana Guru (Kerala), Periyar (Tamil Nadu), Sahu Maharaj, etc. B.R. Ambedkar argues that caste is not only a division of labor, it is a division of laborers. The sudras[2] and ati-sudra[3] communities are denied basic human dignity and the right to attain knowledge. However, the emergence of bhakti movements by subaltern[4] saints throughout India created a new phase in the socio-cultural history of India. This is more evident in the case of Buddhism, which initiated a sense of democracy, equality, and fraternity into the lives of the people.[5] As Ambedkar stated: "Indian history is the history of conflict between revolution and counter-revolution of Buddhism and Brahmanism".[6] Satish Chandra observed that:

> After the rise and growth of Buddhism in the country between the 6th century BC and 2nd century AD, the medieval Bhakti movement was undoubtedly the most widespread, far-reaching, and many a faceted movement that appeared in India. The Bhakti movement influenced almost the whole country, at different times, and had a definite impact not only on religious doctrines, rituals, values, and popular beliefs but on art and culture as well. In turn, these had an impact on the value structures of the medieval state and the ruling classes. At a certain stage of its development, the Bhakti movement sought to be used as a platform by the forces opposing the centralizing tendencies of the Mughal state. In the cultural field, the growth of regional languages, devotional music, dance, painting, sculptures, etc., became closely related to the Bhakti movement.[7]

Thus, the Bhakti Movement was an important phase in the history of Indian reformist traditions. Roughly this period spanned from the seventh to seventeenth centuries AD.[8] Between these periods, multiple Bhakti movements, both in south and north India emerged. The two streams of reform traditions, that are Veerashaivism, led by Nayanars, and Vaishnavism, led by Alwars in South India, became prominent in the

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[2]Shudra is also spelled sudra. Shudra castes are fourth or lowest within the varna hierarchy. Traditionally they are artisans and labor classes.

[3]Ati-sudra are also known as untouchables. Untouchables are outside the varna hierarchy. However, they are the worst victims of the caste system.

[4]Subalterns are considered to be the lowest rank people in Antonio Gramsci's sense. In India, the sudra and ati-sudra communities are the lowest in the social hierarchy and are discriminated by upper caste communities. Hence the concept is used to refer to the anti-caste thinkers who came from subaltern communities.

[5]Omvedt, Gail. (2005). *Buddhism in India-Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 1–22.

[6]Ambedkar, B.R. (1987). *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*. In Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches. Volume 3, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, p. 275.

[7]Chandra, Satish. (1996). *Historiography, Religion, and State in Medieval India*. Delhi: Har Anand Publications.

[8]Govinda Pillai. P. (2013). *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism*, New Delhi: Aakar Books.

lives of the people. During this period, one could also see various bhakti movements across India. Bhakti radical saints like Basavanna, Madara Chennaiah, Haralayya, Akka Mahadevi in Karnataka, Namdev, and Chokamela, Savata Mali of Maharashtra were among many untouchable saints.[9] Andal and Karaikkal Ammayar in Tamil Nadu, Mirabai in Rajasthan, and Lal Deb in Kashmir, were among the most famous Bhakti poets and mystics of that period.[10] Sects like Kabir Panth and Ravidas sects also flourished in North India.

M.G. Ranade argued that like the Protestant Reformation in Western countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in India, the protest erupted from the lower order of the people. The nature of the protest was against Brahmanical hegemony over spiritual life, temples, priesthood, etc. The saints from subaltern communities asserted spiritual equality and freedom from suffering and negated the division between a pure and impure human life.[11] The radical bhakti saints and their traditions imagined an alternative egalitarian society in which every human being was treated with dignity and equal status. Gail Omvedt pointed out that the alternative visions of bhakti radicals,

> In imagining utopias, they drew (Bhakti radicals) on nonbrahmanic traditions, including Buddhism and certain versions of Shaivism, rejecting the ritualism and the inequalities of traditional, elite thinking. In the early modern period, for the radical bhakti saints, this utopia was not so fully worked out; however, Ravidas envisaged 'Begampura', the city without sorrow, without taxes or toil, where he could wander freely with his friends—something a Dalit could never do in the actual Banaras. Tukaram talked of Pandharpur as the city where even the headman was made to toil, where time and death 'had no entry', and where people went dancing to mingle with each other. Kabir sang of Amarpur, the city of immortality, or of Premnagar, the city of love. These were foreseeings; during the early modern period these subaltern intellectuals had no access to a language of reason and analysis, to a study of history; they were forced to work within and subvert the basically Brahmanic religious framework that was hegemonic. Their 'ecstasy' of utopia was envisaged in some timeless place.[12]

Gail Omvedt rightly pointed out that the subaltern intellectuals' utopias historically negated both Gandhi's Ram Raj and the idea of Hindu majoritarian Hindutva Raj. Bhakti radicals' life and struggles were organically connected with subaltern masses. Scholars like Braj Ranjan Mani (2007), Gail Omvedt (2008) and Govinda Pillai (2013) presented varied arguments on the question of whether the bhakti movement is a revival or renaissance. Revivalism generally does not indicate the new value

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[9]Mani, B.R. (2007). *Debrahmanising history: Dominance and resistance in Indian society.* Delhi: Manohar, p. 136.

[10]Govinda Pillai, P. (2013). *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or revivalism.* New Delhi: Aakar Books Publication, p. 7.

[11]See Zelliot (1996). pp. 8–9.

[12]Omvedt, G. (2008). *Seeking Begumpura: The social vision of Anti-caste Intellectuals.* Delhi: Navayana, p. 18.

framework that radical Bhakti saints proposed and worked on. Rather, it indicates the reviving of brahmanical spiritual culture through various forms. The subaltern saints like Kabir, Ravidas, Basavanna ushered in new imaginations, in the cultural and ethical domains. Hence Brajranjan Mani (2007), G. Aloysius (1998), and Gail Omvedt (2008) interpreted them as Mukti or renaissance traditions.[13] The ideas of Kabir and Ravidas continue to influence people. Zelliot and Mokashi-Punekar (2005) in their book *Untouchable Saints* observed that:

> The differences in the poetry of the Untouchable saints are in some ways more apparent than the similarity in the legends about them. While Tiruppan Alvar has left a long paean to Vishnu, we have no song at all from Nandanar: Tiruppan Alvar does not mention his caste in that song, but the legends about both make it clear that they are from the Untouchable strata of society. Chokhamela and his family, on the other hand, frequently use the caste name Mahar and mourn their low-caste status. An enormous volume of Marathi songs is attributed to this family: one hundred and ninety-two to Chokhamela, sixty-two to his wife, twenty-four to Chokhamela's sister, thirty-nine to his brother-in-law, and twenty -seven to his often-angry son. These songs have survived in the canon of Marathi saint literature, together with a hundred and fifty-seven added to a later collection.[14]

Similarly, saints who are part of Basava's Veerashaiva movement, like Madara Chennaiah and Haralayya still continue to influence Dalits. There are separate mattas[15] for them. The Ravidas tradition strongly helped the Chamar[16] community in north India in their socio-cultural mobility. There are separate Ravidas temples. Wherever the community has migrated like the USA, UK, Canada, etc., they also propagate the message of Ravidas. The popular belief is that Ravidas was inspired by Buddhist tradition, which also explains his popularity amongst the Navayana Buddhists in North India.[17]

Bhakti Radicals and Socio-cultural Assertion in Telugu Region

Buddhism, as a humanistic philosophy and anti-caste movement, had a profound influence on the socio-cultural traditions in the then-Andhra (coastal Andhra) region.

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[13]Braj Ranjan Mani (2019). *Bhakti Radicalism*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

[14]Zelliot, E., & Mokashi-Punekar, R. (2005). *Untouchable saints*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, pp. 11–12.

[15]A place of religious monastery.

[16]Chamar is the largest numerical Scheduled Caste (SC) in North India. In the caste hierarchy, Chamar is treated as untouchables and traditionally dealt with leather working occupations. Ravidas was a sixteenth-century saint born in the Chamar caste. Many Chamars were inspired by Ravidas's ideas and practices as the Ravidasia sect.

[17]Maren Bellwinkel-Schempp (2007). From Bhakti to Buddhism: Ravidas and Ambedkar, *EPW*, June 9. pp 2177 –2183.

According to many historical evidences, Andhra had been a separate region and state under the first dynasty, the Satavahanas around the third century BC.[18] Andhra was a strong base for Buddhism. Emperor Ashoka of the third century BC, who gravitated to Buddhism, noted his connection with Andhra in his rock edict near Gooty. Numerous ancient Buddhist inceptions throughout Andhradesha at Battiprolu, Gantasala, Guntupalli, Amravati, and Nagarjunakonda reveal a well-known Buddhist culture with popular appeal. Because of the deep roots of Buddhism in Andhradesha, a distinctive version of Buddhism singular to the region, called Nagarjuna Buddhism, emerged in due course.[19] The Buddhist roots in Telangana are found in Badankurthi (Adilabad), Kotilingalu, Thambalapally, Pashigam, Munugulagutta (Kareem Nagar), Kondapur (Medak), Geeskonda (Warangal), Panigiri, Thirumalagiri, Vardhamankota (Nalgonda), etc.[20] Both Veerashaivism and Vaishnavism were influenced by the reform tradition whose impact on Andhradesha was great. Basava[21] founded Veerashaivism. His teachings called Vachanas are all in people's language which anybody can easily understand. In a way, the very choice of the local language was in itself a negation of the Sanskrit hegemony. According to Atluri Murali (1994):

> The Virasaivism of Basavesvara was monistic in philosophy and monotheistic in religion. It militates the preceding cultural and religious traditions, especially the ritualized, institutionalised hierarchies' of Hinduism and Jainism, during the tenth and twelfth centuries temples and mathas have become very important religious centers around which revolved the life of people. With increasing land-grants to the temples and with the ideological hegemony of Varna dharma (caste system) the priestly class came to dominate the agrarian and artisanal production and social life. The popular classes resented the revivification and social hierarchy and restrictions on social mobility at a time when material activity was expanding. This was the social religious and material context of the Deccan[22] ideology. As an ideology, Virasaivism sought to change all that was negative in Hindu culture.[23]

[18]Padma and A.W. Barer (Eds.) (2008). *Buddhism-in the Krishna River Valley of Andhra*. United States of America: State University of New York Press, pp. 1–10.

[19]Ratnam, K.Y. (1997). p. 25.

[20]Eemani Shivanagi Reddy (2012). *Telangana Boudham-(Buddhism in Telangana*, 18th Mallepally Rajam Memorial Lecture, published by Mallepally Rajam Memorial Trust, Godavarikhani, pp. 11–14

[21]Basava was born in a Brahman family at Ingaleshwar Bagevadi in the district of Bijapur. During his childhood itself, he rejected the Brahmanical orthodox life and left his home. His followers included: Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadeva, and Siddharama.

[22]Deccan is a historical and socio-political region of the Indian subcontinent.

[23]Murali, A. (1994). *Cultural-ideological traditions and legitimization process in Andhra: Twelfth to Eighteenth Centuries*. Dr. Garigipati Rudrayya Chowdari Endowment Lecture-2, December 15, 1994, Ramachandrapuram, East Godavari district, AP. pp. 6–7.

Further argues:

> Virasaivism propounds that each human should realise Shiva through his /her Kayaka (dedicated labour). Work is worship (Kayakave Kailasa was the sacred dictum for Virasaiva saints. Since Shiva created this world through His inner power, no work is demeaning. Even the meanest labour is 'worship'.[24]

By bringing work to the level of Shiva, Basava undermined the hegemony of priestly castes and challenged the distinction between purity and polluted work. This elevation is also an indication of nothing but making 'dignity of labour' a primary value of production relations thereby recognizing the value of the contribution of sudra and ati-sudra labour. Further, Basava denounced the caste system, the rites of animal sacrifice and the subjugation of women to men. In the social sphere, he encouraged widow remarriage, opposed child marriages, and promoted inter-caste marriages and inter-dining.[25] Many Sudras and untouchables, like Malas and Madigas converted to Veerasaivism. Prominent among them were Katakota (who was a shepherd), Mechayya (a washerman), Gundaiah (a potter). Guddav was a well-known untouchable women devotee.[26] The Palkuriki Somanadha's *Basava Purana* and *Panditaradhya Charitra* are the two major literary works in Telugu which vividly portray the conflict between Brahmanism and Veerasaivism.[27] Veerasaivism and Vaishnavism developed simultaneously in the Deccan region. The teachings and preaching of Ramanuja favoured social equality, while caste becomes an issue in the Andhra region. Velanati Chodas of Vengi and the Haihayas of Palnad patronised Vaishnavism. Brahmanayudu, who was a ruler of Nalagama (1170 AD) of Palnad (Guntur District), was influenced by Vaishnavism. According to V. Ramakrishna:

> Brahmanayudu of Palnad (of the Recharla family of the Velama caste) was a Vaishnavite by faith and introduced certain reforms in social spheres. According to the ballad, Palanati Veeracharitra, Brahmanayudu appears to have discarded caste and custom and encouraged the heterodox practice of inter-dining among people belonging to different castes. Among his followers, Kannama Dasu, an untouchable was made the commander-in-chief of his armies and was looked upon as his favourite. By a fusion of castes, Brahmanaidu created a new 'caste ' 'Padma nayaka kula' - the caste of heroes.[28]

Brahmanayudu encouraged inter-dining, called "Chapakoodu," among all lower castes, and caste Hindus were asked to sit and eat together. Brahmanayudu attempted

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[24]Ibid., pp. 6–7.
[25]Ramakrishna, V. (1983). *Social reform in Andhra*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, pp. 39–41.
[26]Padma Rao, Katti. (1998). *Caste and alternative culture*. Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, p. 112.
[27]Murali, A. (1994). p. 3.
[28]Ramakrishna, V. (1983). p. 41.

to create new social relations, by initiating reform in Vaishnavism. However, there are critics who argue that these reforms were under the influence of the Sanskrit version of Brahmanism. It was felt that the attempt to create composite castes called "warrior caste" was under the influence of the Sanskrit version of the Guna hierarchy ranking which worked internally in the selection.[29] However, the later phase of Veerasaivism and Vaishnvism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries failed to carry the same spirit. Perhaps the entry of Brahmans diluted the Saivite movement. In fact, new castes like Jangamas, Linga Jangam, Nulaka Chandaiah, and Lingayats emerged out of this process. However, it contributed to some social change against orthodox Brahmanical traditions.[30] One of the earliest Hindu saints who spoke against caste prejudice was Annamacharya,[31] who disapproved of caste in his "Sankirtanas".[32] He was identified as a poet in the tradition of the Alwars, and Vaishnava Bhakti poets. He used the language of the common man to state many things worth remembering:

> "The high-level land of the Brahmin and the low flat level of the Chandala (untouchable) are the same". "There is no high and low; Sri Hari is the soul of all". "A Mala (untouchable) who worships the Almighty, but eats beef, is a better Brahmin than an ascetic who does not think of Vishnu, though he is a learned Vedanti". "What does it matter, what caste is a Haridas (devotee of Vishnu)".[33]

The influence of Shaivism had a deep impact on South India, where Vemana and Pothuluri Veerabrahmam were influenced by Shaivite traditions. In the subsequent section, the most influential Bhakti traditions of Vemana and Pothuluri Veerabrahmam, Dunna Iddasu and Yegraguntala Peraiah, among others are discussed.

Vemana: A Rebel against Brahmanical Hegemony and Social Exploitation

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were two important personalities in the Telugu region who became sources for reforms. They were forceful critics of the caste system and oppressive prejudices. Those two rebels were Vemana and Pothuluri Veerabrahmam whose teachings and preachings had a great impact on the common people. Vemana was a rebel poet and philosopher who belonged to the Reddy[34] (Shudra)

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[29]Murali, A. (1994). pp. 5–6.

[30]Ramakrishna, V. (1983). p. 42.

[31]Sri Tallapaka Annamacharya was a mystic Saint composer of the fifteenth century. He was the earliest known musician of South India to compose songs called "Sankeertanas". Annamacharya was born on May 9, 1408 and lived up to February 23, 1503, in Tallapaka, a remote village in day current-day Cuddapah district of Andhra Pradesh, India. It is told that he composed around 32,000 Samkeertanas on lord Venkateshwara and Alivelumanga.

[32]Kirtanas are a kind of devotional songs. Thousands of Kirtanas are available and documented.

[33]Padma Rao, Katti. (1998). *Caste and alternative culture*. Madras: The Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, p. 111.

[34]There is a controversy on the caste of Vemana. However, some argue that he belongs to the Reddy caste. Reddy caste is a Shudra caste within the caste hierarchy, but a landowning and

caste from Rayalseema. He was a wandering, naked poet who critically commented on and exposed the contradictions and hypocrisy of human life. His writings were collected and made available to people by C.P. Brown. According to Kancha Illaiah:

> Vemana's literary construction shows that he was strongly rooted in the sudra productive culture. Unlike Molla, he chooses to write in colloquial Telugu. His productive idiom, his anti-Brahmanical ideology, and deep understanding of the sudra culture is an indication of the tension between the Sankritized Brahmanical notion and the sudra productive notions of life.[35]

Further, adds:

> He constructs morality around atheism, agnosticism, rationalism, feminism, and of course, anti-casteism. His poetic text reflects as many plural cultures as the Dalit Bahujan castes, tribes, and sects that exist in the Telugu country. Hinduism for him was an idol-worshipping negative practice. In several subtle forms, he brushes aside Sankaracharya's philosophy of the soul and body being separate entities.[36]

C.P. Brown documented and engaged with Vemana's writings. Brown's writings on Vemana brought visibility among scholars and activists. Brahmans created many hurdles against C.P. Brown's work. They opposed the discussion and introduction of Vemana's ideas at Madras University in 1827. Brown took the initiative to publish Vemana's verses. University authorities published 500 copies of Vemana verses. 50 copies were given to Brown and the remaining 450 copies were kept stored in a room, only to be dumped in a dustbin later on.[37] This reflects the level of opposition against Vemana's legacy. However, as his ideas were part of the common people's memory and everyday usage, the dominant communities could not root it out. The stanzas given below indicate his views against idol worship.

> What animals ye are who worship stones
> And care not for the God that dwells within
> How can a stone excel the living thing?
> That praise intones?[38]

Brahmanism strongly believed in idol worship. That is why Vemana argued that how can there be so many gods and goddesses. Why can't human beings realize their inner potential? Priests for their benefit propagate idol worship, hence they attribute purity and sacredness to trees, stones, etc., when it benefits the religious orthodoxy. On the question of untouchability, he lamented that,

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  politically influential community throughout the Telugu-speaking region.
[35]Illaiah, Kancha (2010). *The weapon of the other*. Delhi: Pearson, p. 114.
[36]Ibid., p. 119.
[37]Gopi, N. (2017). *Prajakavi Vemana*. Vijayawada: Prajashakti Book House, p. 43.
[38]Narla, V.R. (1969) *Vemana*. New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, p. 72.

When Pariah touches you,
You plunge into water
When you depart to the cremation ground,
The pariah burns your body
The filth that touched you then
Where did it go now?[39]

Vemana considered untouchability as inhuman. How can some groups of people be treated as untouchables? Through his poems, Vemana exposed the hypocrisy of brahmanical practices.

They congregate in thousands
And shout meaningless vedas
Like mad dogs
What fruit but a sore throat?[40]

Vemana was a strong critic of Vedic culture and chanting of Sanskrit slokas. He argued that such meaningless chanting only benefited the brahmans and furthered their hegemony, while the slokas only perpetuate ignorance and exploitation. Therefore, his criticism of religion is based on logic. Even today, many atheist organizations and activists frequently quote Vemana's poems and sayings in public meetings in order to propagate scientific temper.[41] Vemana questioned the caste system:

Why revile the pariah
Again and again
Aren't his flesh and blood
The same as yours?
What is the caste of him
Who moves in him[42]

The above lines clearly indicate Vemana's critique of the caste system. He argued that since everybody is born a human being, their blood and body are the same and there should not be discrimination in the name of caste. The caste system hierarchized the human body and mind. This division goes against the idea of human equality. Vemana used satire and humor in his poetry, which is why common people could understand them easily. The below lines indicate the universal imagination of Vemana.

Serve food to all
All the people of the world
On one plate;
Make them dine together

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[39]K. Srinivasulu, (2017) Vishwadhabhi Rama Vinura Vema: Social and Political Ideas of Vemana, in M.P Singh, Himanshu Roy (ed). *Indian Political Thought*, Delhi: Pearson India, p. 7.
[40]Ibid., p. 7.
[41]https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/promote-scientific-temper/article5137695.ece
[42]Ibid., p. 7.

> Forgetting all their differences:
> And with uplifted hand
> Bless them to live like one.[43]

He imagined universal love and brotherhood between different castes and religions and propagated the idea of eating and living together for a happy and peaceful life. Today many organizations propagate Vemana writings and preachings throughout the Telugu region through books, audio, and videos for kids and regular activities on Vemana thought, etc. Marxist organizations and groups propagated the thoughts of Vemana because of his critique of religion. However, they failed to project him as an anti-caste thinker. The growing anti-caste and Dalit movements recognized Vemana as a strong radical Bhakti thinker of the subaltern communities. Like Vemana, another saint poet, Pothuluri Veerabrahmam also inspired many people in the Telugu region.

Pottuluri Veerabrahmam: A Social Revolutionary

Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swami was called Veerappa and Veerambhadrayya in his childhood days. As he grew up, he was known by many names like Veerabrahmam, Brahmam Garu, Veerabrahmendra Swami, Veerat Pothuluribrahmendra Swamy, etc. In all these names the prefix 'Veer' is added, indicating his ancestors were followers of the Veerashaiva tradition. Veerappa was born in a Vishwakarma (Shudra) community. He learnt his ancestral craft—sculpture. From his childhood, he was interested in spiritual matters and was fond of meditation. He followed his favorite deity Veerabhadra Swami. Later he went to Banaganapalli (Kurnool District) where he grazed the cattle of Garima Reddy, Atchamamba. Oral stories record that he performed many miracles after which people were attracted to him and began to follow him. The sayings of Pothuluri Veerabrahmendra Swami are preserved mostly in the oral tradition as he intended them to be intelligible even to the common man. His compositions comprise three categories.

1. Mystic songs and Govinda padas regularly sung by street minstrels and mendicants
2. Kalajnana[44] Vachanas and padas and some epistles
3. Philosophic preachings

Kancha Illaiah observed that Pothuluri Brahmamgaru created an autonomous movement among subaltern castes in the Telugu region. He says,

> Potuluri Veerabrahmam created an autonomous religious spirituality by synthesizing productive linguistic and cultural aspirations of ironsmiths, goldsmiths, carpenters, weavers and tailors by constructing a text of Kalagnanam (knowledge of time) philosophy. Interestingly enough, this philosophy of Potuluri established a socio-religious nexus among the sudras, the Muslims,

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[43]Narla, V.R. (1969). *Vemana*, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, p. 66.
[44]The ability or quality of knowing the happening of events in the future. It is also an act of making predictions; foretelling.

and the mala and madigas. The lifetime friendship of Potuluri, Siddaiah (a Muslim medicant) and Kakaiah (an SC) constructed a Telugu nationalist ideology to set a trend for future multi-religious anti-caste nationalism.[45]

The Jeeva Samadhi of Pothuluri at Kandimallayapalle is very popular. This samadhi is called Brahmgarimattam. On the day of his samadhi entry, i.e. vaisakha Sudha Dasami in the month of May, his Aradhanotsavam (the act of glorifying) is celebrated on a grand scale. The celebrations continue for a week. These celebrations are done throughout the region, wherever his temples and followers are present. The life and spiritual pursuit of Pothuluri Veerabrahmam is linked with social reforms and change. He started to preach and propagate his teachings in the form of 'Kalagyana Thatvalu'. V. Ramakrishna observes:

> Veerabrahmam condemned the hierarchical system of caste and believed that Vedic knowledge could be gained by one and all. Accordingly, he had among his disciples men from several castes. He pleaded for the discontinuance of idolatry and strongly criticized superstitions. He advocated reforms in marriages and stated that girls should be married only after they had passed the age of puberty. He admitted women into his order and made them eligible for sainthood. Another significant aspect of his philosophy was his trenchant criticism of untouchability and pollution.[46]

In the context of growing anti-caste consciousness and mobilization of marginalized communities, Pothuluri Veerabrahmam achieved iconic status. Many temples were constructed for Veerabrahmam in which shudra castes officiate as priests. His preachings are propagated through films, songs, plays, videos, etc.

Pottuluri Veerabrahmam's Legacy and his Disciples

Many became followers of Pothuluri Brahmamgaru. After he passed away, some of his disciples, Siddaiah, Eshwaramma, Yadla Ramadasu, and Yagantivaru carried his message and teachings to the common people and spread his teachings through songs.[47] In the early nineteenth century in Andhradesha, there were also several non-Hindu alternative semi-religious cults, all of which emerged from lower castes. These sects challenged the caste system. Nasaraiah founded the 'Nasaraiah sect', which is popular among Madigas, in particular, and untouchables, in general. Nasaraiah was influenced by the Islamic principles of egalitarianism.[48] He tried to emulate a model of Islam as an emancipatory doctrine for the untouchables. His main tenets were social equality, good moral conduct, and worship of only one God, discarding idol worship

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[45]Kancha Illaiah (2010). *The weapon of the other*. Delhi: Pearson, p. 120.

[46]Ramakrishna, V. (1983). p. 46.

[47]Ibid., p. 46.

[48]See Kshirasagar, R.K. (1997). *Dalit movement in India and its leaders*. New Delhi: M.D Publications Pvt Ltd.

and spreading unity among the untouchables. Nasaraiah made disciples and sent them out to preach. He made no distinction of either caste or sex. Women, as well as men, passed through the initiatory rites and then went forth to make converts. One of his earliest converts seems to have been a Madiga, who was made a guru and sent out to convert people to this sect. They realized that theism of Nasaraiah was better than the polytheism of their village cults. Belonging to the Nasaraiah sect raised the social status of Madigas in the region.[49] The influence of the sect of Nasaraiah is limited to some areas of coastal Andhra region.

Dunna Iddasu and Achala Thatvam: Preaching Non-Brahman Spiritual Thinking

Edaiah is popularly known as Dunna Iddasu. He was born in a poor Madiga (leatherworking) family in 1811. He belonged to Chintapalli village, Peddaura Mandal, Nalgonda district, Telangana state. Iddasu was an illiterate involved in leatherwork and worked as agricultural labour. When he was working in the landlord's fields, he would observe and follow the Shiva yogis during prayer times. One day the Yogis identified Iddasu and his keen interest in Yoga *asanas* (practice) and Achala traditions. They were impressed by Iddasu's philosophical hymns and later Jangama Devara Poodota Basavaiah presented a shiva linga[50] to Iddasu. Since then, Iddasu took further interest in Rajayoga practice. Rajayoga was preached and practiced by Pothuluri Veerabrahmam and Eshwaramma also. When Iddasu was young, Veerabrahmam and Eshwaramma were popular among the people in the region. Gradually, the people began to believe that Iddasu had superpowers. His preachings and hymns are still popular among people in the region.[51]

His followers increased and he visited many villages to preach his ideas. He moved from Nalgonda to Achampet, Kalwakurthi, Nagarkurnool, Kollapur, etc. In the undivided Mahaboobnagar district, his followers are more. Iddasu's grandson, Dunna Vishwanatham started an Ashram in Ayyavaripalli village in Achampet Taluka. After many hurdles, Dunna Vishwanatham published a book *Madiga Maha Yogi* (2014) to document and propagate Iddasu's message. This book carries 32 thatvas[52] of Iddasu with details of his life and spiritual journey. Iddasu thatvalu continue to inspire many people. His preachings broadly focused on the denial of idol worship and ritual practices. He strongly believed that everyone can attain knowledge through Sadhana/ hard work and preached that God/Goddess is within human beings, there is no need to go to the temple and approach the brahman priest to purify oneself. Human beings purify themselves with right thinking/ path that benefits everyone. In one incident,

[49]Rauschenbusch Clough, Emma. (1899). *While sewing sandals*. London: Asian Educational Service, p. 59.

[50]A lingam generally referred to as linga or shiva linga is an abstract or aniconic representation of the god Shiva in Shaivism. It is primarily a devotional image in Shivaism.

[51]Dunna Vishwanatham (2018) *Madiga Maha Yogi-Dunna Iddasu*. Hyderabad: Telangana Vikasa Samiti, pp. 66–74.

[52]Thatva refers to truth, thought, or philosophical sayings.

he lamented that brahmans think that they are pure but only know how to be clean physically but not with their thoughts. His preaching visibly argues for detachment from a worldly luxurious life in order to realize oneself through critical reflection. Realizing one's inner potential is the way to knowledge.[53]

In Achala Bodha[54] tradition, the guru/teacher is the source of knowledge, therefore believing and following a guru is important. In return, the belief is that the guru shapes the life of his followers or disciples. In this ideology, everyone can attain the status of a guru, unlike the brahmanical tradition. That is why Iddasu had many disciples though he hailed from an untouchable community. He had followers from brahmans, upper shudra castes like Reddy, Velama, and Shudra communities like barbers, goldsmiths, toddy tapers, and other land-owning communities. For an untouchable person to attain the status of a Guru reflects spiritual democracy, compared to the rigid caste hierarchy.

In the twenty-first century also, Iddasu has followers from different castes. On every shivaratri,[55] Iddasu's followers gathered at his birthplace and conduct worship to offer homage to him In Telangana, specially the Madiga community takes inspiration from his teachings for sociocultural mobilization. The Telangana government also recognized his contribution and included his ideas as part of Telugu literature for intermediate students. Basavalingaiah (son) continued Iddasu's legacy and spread the message in villages. A Madiga leader, Puttapaka Mahendranath also encouraged and contributed to Iddasu's legacy. After Basavalingaiah, his son Vishwanatham presided over wearing that Linga and propagating Iddasu's teachings by conducting worship ceremonies at the tombs of his father and grandfather. In the context of the growing Dalit movement and Bahujan politics in the Telugu region, Iddasu became an icon for many people, especially Madigas. Along with these Bhakti traditions, the Dalits' conversion to other religions also created some space for Dalit spiritual life with a sense of equality.

Yerraguntla Peraiah and Christian Missionaries: Dalits Search for Spiritual Equality

During colonial times, many Dalit communities in the region found conversion to Christianity a solace from the caste system. The chief motivation for conversion to Christianity was a search for spiritual equality which was denied to the so-called lower castes in the brahmanical social order. It is essential to trace the historical roots of missionary work in the Telugu region. According to G.A. Oddie, the Church Missionary Society (CMS), one of the earliest Christian missionaries, worked for Christian proselytization in the Telugu region. V. Ramakrishna observes:

> The first signs of missionary activity go back to the year 1597 when two Jesuit fathers and a brother were at the court of Venkateshwarlu in Chandragiri (now in Chittoor district) where they stayed till 1615. Their efforts were not much

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[53]Dunna Vishwanatham (2014) pp. 143–202.
[54]Bodha refers to knowledge, enlightenment, or wisdom.
[55]Shivaratri is a Hindu festival celebrated annually in honour of the god Shiva.

of a success. Fr. Maudnit was the first to convert among the Telugus, the first converts being a widow and her four children in 1701. Punganur became the cradle of the Telugu Christians, from where Christianity gradually spread to Venkatagiri (Nellore district) which became a Christian settlement, and later to Krishnapuram, Hindupur (in Anantapur district) and China Ballapuram (Bellary district).[56]

He further observed:

> After the decline of Jesuism by the 1750s, a new era in Christian endeavour began in the wake of the Evangelical revival which was sweeping the west during the last years of the 18th century… In South India, this new wave of Evangelism was spearheaded by five societies, namely, the Society for the Propagation of Gospel, the London Missionary Society, the Church Missionary Society, Wesleyan Mission, and the Free Church Mission of Scotland.[57]

In the utilitarian or liberal field, the British Government brought several reforms:

> In the fields of revenue administration and judiciary, abolition of slavery, sati and female infanticide, legalizing widow marriages. They launched educational programmes presumably to improve the 'decadent' Indian society. Both evangelical and utilitarian trends got submerged in their attitudes towards education. Wood's Dispatch in 1854 settled all conflicts regarding educational policies conclusively and the state assumed responsibility for educating the masses of its subjects.[58]

Many Dalit families who are previously influenced by Rajayoga (Pothuluri Veerabrahmam sect) and other local sects like Nasaraiah were attracted to Christian missionaries. One important person who played a key role in the mass conversion to Christianity in Andhra is Yerraguntla Peraiah. Peraiah is known as thataiah (grandfather). His search for spiritual equality made a historical impact on Madigas in particular and Dalits in general for mass conversion. His method of evangelization inspired many Christian missionaries at the local level. Peraiah, born in a Madiga family, traded in cattle and leather. One day he received information that towards West Godavari side, the business of leather is more profitable. While going to this area he took shelter at his relative's home, who had converted to Christianity. Peraiah got influenced by his relative and on his return started meeting Christian pastors in the nearby areas.

The Protestant Christian missionary movement continued the spirit of evangelization at the local level. Under the leadership of Peraiah, preachers went from village to village to proselytize and for baptism. Preachers organized individuals from

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[56]Ramakrishna. V. (1983). p. 49.
[57]Ibid., p. 50.
[58]Ibid., p. 56.

Podili, Kanigiri, Cumbum, and Markapur for mass conversion to a new religion. On 3 July 1878, 2222 people were baptized in Gundlakamma River near Vellampalle village, Ongole. Within three days, 3536 people were baptized. This surprised many missionaries and shocked the Hindu Orthodox people. The baptized people began to experience a new religion which was significantly different from their old Hindu life. This journey from Hindu to Christian is not merely an attempt to democratize the spiritual domain but also a protest against caste order. Around 1860-1900, in the Godavari–Krishna districts of Andhra, the CMS opened several English schools, which welcomed caste Hindus and also untouchables into these schools. The number of baptised untouchables steadily rose from 1650 (in 1869) to 3500 (1882), to 9000 (1885), and 22000 (1905).[59]

In the region of Telangana, Christian missionary works influenced the Dalits and other marginalized people toward spiritual equality. In 1874, the Kambal couple started their missionary work after that they moved to Secunderabad in 1875 and established the Telugu Baptist Sangam (TBS) where they worked among the army personnel. Later, the TBS extended its activities to Nalgonda. American Baptist Mission (ABM) worked and established its Sangams in Hanumakonda, Nalgonda, Jangam, Suryapet, Madira in the Telangana region.[60] The Church of England Zenana Missionary Society was launched in 1875 in Khammam and other parts of Andhra. The main objective of the mission was to work among lower castes and Muslim women. In 1939, they started the Mary Vikasa Centre to teach and serve orphaned women.[61]

Revd. Jone Wesley had started the South Asia Methodist Mission in England. People like G. Vinklan and J.E. Robertson worked to spread missionary work while they commenced efforts on building the railways in Secunderabad. In 1872, the 'Methodist Sangam' was started. This Sangam opened Stanley Girls' School (1921) and the School for Bible Training (1909). Through various social services, it extensively worked in Vikarabad, Sirvancha, Jaheerabad, Tandur, etc.[62] (M. Mosses, pp. 40–44). The Veslian Mission also established its missions in Secunderabad, Hyderabad, Karimnagar, Jagital, Siddipeta, Nizamabad, Sangareddy, Aaleru, Medak, etc. The Medak Church was founded by Challes Wakar Pasnet in 1914.[63]

Deccan Foreign Missionaries came to India in the early 1800s. These were: 1) North-Weslians Sangalu[64] 2) Western-Methodist Sangalu 3) South-Mennonite Brother Sangalu 4) East Baptist Sangalu. These missions extensively worked among the untouchables. In fact, the education and health conditions of the untouchables

[59]Shantha Kumari Varikoti- Jetty (2015) Christian Missionaries and the birth of new social consciousness among the depressed castes: A case of the Malas and the Madigas in Colonial Coastal Andhra 1850 1950, Ph.D. thesis submitted to Jamia Milia Islamia University. http:// hdl.handle.net/10603/491459 accessed on 11 August 2023.

[60]Moses, M. (2004). *Andhra Pradesh Christian Sanga Charitra*. (Christian Church History of Andhra Pradesh), Paddisonpet, Christian Truth Press, p. 34.

[61]Ibid., p. 38.

[62]Ibid., pp. 40–44.

[63]Ibid., p. 49.

[64]Sangam is a Telugu word that literally means association. Sangalu is a plural term.

improved and they got a sense spiritual freedom by entering into Christianity from feudal relations and caste oppression.[65]

   The reform initiatives brought some changes to the social relations of the people in particular regions. The Parthana Samaj in Coastal Andhra and Arya Samaj in Telangana contributed to mobilizing and organizing the untouchables, and in the process, helped in the social mobility of the untouchables. The Parthana Samaj was established in 1878 in Rajahmundry and its leaders worked among untouchables. Veereshalingam established schools with the help of Pittapuram Maharaj. He also fought against sati, child marriage, bride price, caste prejudice, etc. Among others who worked for social reform were Chilkamarthi Laxmi Narasimham, Raghupathi Venkat Ratnam Naidu, Narala Setti Devendrudu, Vemula Kurmayya, Guduri Rama Chandra Rao, Vemuri Ramji Rao, Nallapati Hanumantha Rao, and Vellanki Krishna Murthi. Chilkamarthy Narsimham established the Rammohan School for untouchable boys in Rajahmundry in February 1909. Pittapuram Maharaj himself opened many schools and hostels; numerous early untouchable educators and leaders benefited from this initiative. Some of them were Boyee Bhemana, Bojja Appalaswamy, Pamu Rammurthy, and Nadipudi Ganapathi Rao (ex-MLA).[66] However, these reformist initiatives by upper castes failed to address the legitimacy of Hindu shastras in perpetuating inequalities, the caste system, and untouchability, and women's oppression.[67] Hence the Bhakti radicals from subaltern communities and their vision of egalitarian society continue to be great sources of inspiration for modern anti-caste movements.

Conclusion

The Telugu region has produced many anti-caste visionaries who challenged brahmanism and caste inequalities. The radical vision of Vemana, Pothuluri Veerabrahmam, Nasaraiah, Dunna Iddasu, and Yerraguntla Peraiah have deeply influenced the common people at the grassroots level. Their preachings become so popular that they become songs of folklore which are used in everyday usage. Vemana and Pothuluri asserted and envisaged the democratic spiritual sphere in which all human beings are treated equally and with dignity. Further, people like Nasaraiah, Dunna Iddasu, and Yerraguntla Peraiah had a deep influence on the succeeding generations. Their influence is still alive at the grassroots in the Telugu region. They worked as reformers to achieve a society that Kabir and Ravidas imagined in the form of Begumpura. These subaltern bhakti radicals emphasized people's labour, culture, and experience as sources of knowledge which negated the brahmanical view of knowledge production. Their songs, hymns, and sayings are all articulated in people's language and they rejected idol worship. In essence, they challenged the hegemony of brahmanical forces in the spiritual sphere. Hence, democratizing the spiritual

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[65]Ibid., pp. 86–89.
[66]Ramalaxmi, P. (1995). *Reform Movement in Godavari District: (1878-1939) An attempt towards Social Justice.* Dr. Garigipati Rudrayya Chowdari, Endowment Lecture 3, December 15, 1995, pp. 10–12.
[67]Ibid., p. 30.

sphere is the common aim of the subaltern bhakti radical traditions. Their critique against Brahmanism, caste discrimination and inequality, and rejection of Vedic and holy scriptures have created a foundation for the modern anti-caste consciousness of subaltern communities in the Telugu region. The article argued that given the praxis of bhakti radicals, they have to be understood as 'social revolutionaries' who preached and worked for the democratizing of the spiritual sphere not merely for spiritual equality but also the socio, cultural, and material transformation of society.

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The Caste of Campus Habitus: Caste and Gender Encounters of the First-generation Dalit Women Students in Indian Universities

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Abstract

This article critically examines the university academic spaces and the campus culture determined by a particular form of the dominant habitus which is, in effect, actively excluding the first-generation women students belonging to the marginalized sections of Indian society. As this dominant habitus is constantly reproduced on university campuses, with or without contentions, entering the academic spaces of Indian universities for first-generation Dalit women—who are deprived of both cultural and social capital—is invariably becoming a herculean task. Therefore, this article analyses the concealed forms of dominant campus habitus that structurally create a conducive environment for privileged students and a rigid glass ceiling for first-generation Dalit women students in their journey toward higher education. Notwithstanding the limitations associated with their social status of being first-generation learners, the formations of alternative cultural capital and resilience of the Dalit women students have been analysed from a feminist perspective, proving that one could overcome these social challenges through the acquired cultural capital. The analytical concepts and theoretical frameworks of this article have been developed based on empirical/ ethnographic data collected from women research scholars at a prominent university in South India. The narratives were collected in the academic year 2020–2021 through in-depth interviews and focused group discussions.

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Introduction

The concept of habitus and forms of capital proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977) rightly enables us to understand the educational challenges and negotiations the first-generation students confront in their journey toward higher education. Bourdieu (1977) observes that the concept of cultural capital refers to the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, and so forth that one acquires through being part of a particular social class. The habitus is the physical embodiment of cultural capital that refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that we possess due to our life experiences. For Bourdieu, habitus denotes the "internalized structures" and "schemes of perception" in which the dominant social and cultural conditions are established and reproduced (Bourdieu 1977: 86). Hence, the habitus produces relationships of domination through its institutions, and one such social institution is a university campus in which the structural inequalities are recreated and normalized.

Across the globe, university education is seen as a social space that has the theoretical potential to transform the lives of individuals and eventually society towards the egalitarian paradigm by precluding the consequences of categorical inequalities such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity. The purpose of university education is the achievement of a particular expansion of outlook, turn of mind, habit of thought, and capacity for social and civic interaction (Newman 1996: 15). But, dominated by the hegemonic intelligentsia that promotes the praxis of the dominant habitus, certain sections of students are privileged over their counterparts in the universities that are spaces mandated with the responsibility of countering unjust structural practices. Therefore, every social space is characterized by its own expressive culture, and the university as a social institution has its normative ways of being (Puwar 2004: 116). The codes of conduct on university campuses such as curriculum and pedagogy, evaluation of academic performance based on skills and knowledge, academic activities, the symbolic language used, mannerisms, dressing patterns, non-academic amenities, interactions, and so forth are produced/generated on lines of dominant culture, which effectively benefits students from affluent socio-economic backgrounds who merely need to re-conform to those established patterns. Interestingly enough, these social privileges are taken for granted, by those students who are in an advantageous position, as certain sets of social practices are normalized and considered objective in the context of universities. On the other hand, students who do not share similarities with the dominant habitus suffer from limited economic, social, and cultural capital and are perceived as the 'cultural other' in the academic spaces, and are in constant conflict with the dominant habitus on campus. Thus, educational institutions reflect and reproduce wider social patterns of power and sometimes become sites of policing, and regulation of wider social meanings associated with multiple cultural habitus that students bring along with them (Sanjakdar 2011: 10).

In the context of India, as Beteille argues, universities opened new horizons both intellectually and institutionally in a society that had stood still in a conservative

and hierarchical mold for centuries. The universities were among the first open and secular institutions in a society that was governed largely by rules of kinship, caste, and religion (cited by Guha 2007: 564). Though the contribution of universities in promoting the nation towards progress is significant, its exclusionary practices against marginalized students such as allotment of a few admissions into academic programmes, judging their skills based on identity, not recognising their academic performance, negative slurs, smear campaigning, name calling and so forth cannot be ignored. With the established conventional glass- ceilings, the nature of universities in embracing diversity and inclusivity comes under contestation. For Deshpande, the centres of excellence have not opened up their doors to the non-elite until recently and they have been dominated by the monopoly of the minority privileged sections (Deshpande 2006: 140). Owing to the dichotomous nature of both exclusion and inclusion, male students from upper caste social backgrounds are privileged and women, Dalits, and tribes are excluded and systematically marginalized in institutions of higher education. Indian universities, therefore, operate as the 'gatekeepers to the upper caste kingdom in India' as pointed out by Tharu et al. (1998: 2702). Deshpande (2006) observes, that elite higher educational institutions are hampered by caste apartheid, and students from lower caste backgrounds are denoted as deficient with preconceived assumptions, ignoring their inadequate educational training and lack of social and cultural capital. With these exclusionary practices in place, students from historically marginalized sections are systematically barred from attaining a university education. On the other hand, women students carry with them an intense burden of discrimination and exclusion on university spaces as gender relations are intricately woven into a system of hierarchical social relations and prescriptive codes of conduct determined by gender stereotypes.

Despite the deep-rooted, and patriarchal stereotypes and other social challenges, Indian women have succeeded in entering universities in pursuit of higher education in the past six decades or so. Though participation of women in higher education increased numerically compared to previous decades, even today the sex ratio of students on Indian campuses is still unhealthy and lopsided in favour of men. Feminist scholarship in sociology such as Beauvoir (1949), Harding (1986), & Collins (1990) contest the establishment of dominant habitus, the nature of women's subordination to men on the one hand and portray family and educational institutions as an important site of social reproduction which communicates the binary opposition of femininity and masculinity through socialization and gender stereotypes on the other. Spivak's (1988: 28) observation of female as subaltern seems to be still in the shadows in the Indian context as university spaces continue to produce, and reproduce, both conventional and new categories of inequalities. Often, women experience undesirable social encounters in university social spaces that are patriarchally-driven and deepens when their identity intersects with their social status of being first-generation learners. First-generation learners are those in their immediate families to attend college education. The condition of first-generation Dalit women students is even worse, as they lack what Pierre Bourdieu (1986) terms, the three forms of capital, namely, economic, social,

and cultural capital which are necessary for any individual to make a decent living. Dalit women undergo multi-faceted oppression pertaining to their first-generation status as the dominant habitus is not devoid of gender and caste. Sukumar (2022: 12) observed that in the Indian context, caste or other social identities, vernacular medium of education, and rural/urban are determinants of social reproduction in university spaces. When it comes to the context of first-generation Dalit women students, on one side they are subjected to gender oppression from all men in general and men of their caste in particular. Additionally, they undergo indifferent treatment from upper castes, as well as second-generation Dalit women students. As rightly pointed out by B.R. Ambedkar, "Dalit woman is a most Dalit among Dalits." (cited by Swaroopa 1998). Experiences of Dalit women in higher educational institutions can be understood by the lived experiences of Dalit women in Rege's (2006) writing caste/writing gender, reading Dalit women's testimonies. Shantabai Dhanaji Dani who is a known woman leader of the Ambedkarite movement in 'Ratrandin Amcha...' (For Us- These Nights and Days (1990) explains her experiences in higher education coming from a rural background, bearing a village stamp on her appearance, eventually leading to humiliations on campus (Rege 2006). Kumud Pawade, a Dalit woman professor in Sanskrit explains the lived experiences of Dalit women in Brahmanical academic spaces and disciplines through her book *Antasphot* (*Thoughtful Outburst* 1981), 'where women and Dalits have been denied the right to study Sanskrit, the fact that a Shudra woman learning *Sanskrit* challenged the Brahmanical caste ideology on campuses. This resulted in humiliation from her own faculty colleagues taunting and branding her as 'government-sponsored Brahman.'' Correspondingly, first-generation Dalit women students experience unwelcoming attitudes and are subjected to humiliation and discrimination in Indian higher educational institutions. The self-worth of students from underprivileged backgrounds gets negatively affected due to their caste status (Chadha 1997: 791–792).

Hence, this article is an attempt to unravel the lived experiences of contestations and negotiations of first-generation Dalit women students while navigating the university campus spaces, determined by the dominant habitus where caste acts as the strong cultural capital to certain individuals and marginalizes the other. The educational trajectory of first-generation Dalit women students, the unique challenges they confront in the process of learning, the significant role of non-academic spaces in reinforcing inclusion and exclusion, survival strategies of negotiations, and social agencies in contesting the conventional glass ceilings through the acquired cultural capital are significant lines of inquiries which this article aims to cover in the following sections.

Encounters in Mounting the Educational Ladder

The unique challenges experienced by first-generation students are not only influenced by their social status as first-generation learners, but also by other social factors such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, and region (Arch & Gilman 2019: 997).

First-generation Dalit learners face structural challenges as caste identity influences their representation in schools (Nambissan 2006: 259). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the social dimensions of their school education. In our present context, the educational journey of the first-generation Dalit women students has been explored which has a greater impact on their academic opportunities and psychological well-being as they advance on the educational ladder. As a respondent from the field says:

> There was a primary school, meant for 1-5 grades, near the Dalit hamlet. There is no school for secondary education in our locality, so I went to the upper primary high school (UPHS) located in the colonies of upper castes. Going to school every day was the biggest hurdle, as the distance was almost one kilometer and we had to go by walk. As the washrooms were not available nearby open fields were used for nature calls which I feel embarrassed about. There is no availability of teachers for science subjects hence clearing board exams was a tough job. Due to the mid-day meals scheme attending classes in the afternoon was possible. After returning from school in the evening, being a girlchild I was obliged to do the household chores and often help my parents with the agriculture work. I hated Sundays in my childhood as we were taken to the agricultural fields and made to work the whole day with no time to study at home. Hence, until the time of intermediate (10+2), merely clearing the examinations was a major objective in my mind instead of focusing on scoring high.

It is evident that the families of the poor status group are not able to provide improved home conditions and atmosphere for their children for better education, in comparison to others. The discriminatory practices and humiliation based on their social status in the educational spaces and among their peer group are part of the Dalit women students' everyday life from childhood, which has a major toll on their self-confidence and mental health. As one of the respondents says:

> Our school is towards the upper castes' households. As we pass by each lane drastic differences between our houses which are made of mud and their big houses with modern infrastructure can be noticed. My friends used to pass comments saying, 'These people are low in status as they consume beef in their houses. I used to feel embarrassed and almost left eating beef. When I visited their homes occasionally, their parents asked me to stand outside. These things got imprinted on my mind from childhood and [I] used to consider myself and my community inferior to others. I became quite cautious from then to stop being friends with people belonging to upper castes let alone visiting their houses.

Hostile experiences and humiliation based on their caste status as 'Dalits' are exhibited which eventually haunts the Dalit students right from an early age where they do not even know what caste is. Hence, first-generation status accompanied by

the intersection of gender and caste stands out as a double-layered barricade for first-generation Dalit women students aspiring to pursue higher education. Despite lacking parental guidance, and low economic and cultural capital, they manage to navigate their way into university spaces. But, being the minority among the majority-driven mainstream students hailing from affluent families, they come across undesirable experiences in higher educational institutions which need to be scrutinized & analyzed. The following section describes the phenomena.

Institutional Inequalities and Lived Realities

The manner in which first-generation women learners position themselves as women and Dalit women in particular, along with analyzing how the intersection of class, caste, and space determine their access to educational opportunities and adaptation to the university campus are issues of grave concern. This unravels the layered forms of discrimination encountered by first-generation students when converged with the social identity of gender and caste in university settings, where a particular form of caste habitus is institutionalized and broadly viewed as normal.

The ingrained exclusionary practices of universities hinder the emancipation and social agility of first-generation Dalit women students at every level of the university hierarchy. The proportion of first-generation women research scholars at this university to the general population on campus is 42.86 per cent and the first-generation Dalit women research scholars is merely at 3.57 per cent. The ratio of second-generation women research scholars in the general population is 57.14 per cent, and 25 per cent is the proportion of second-generation Dalit women research scholars. Hence, it is evident that the presence of women research scholars from privileged caste backgrounds is almost equal in both first and second generations. However, a very small proportion of Dalit women research scholars are first-generation learners, which display their absence in urban-centric educational institutions with minimal representation. The chronicles of the first-generation Dalit women learners who stand out as marginalised groups in university academic spaces with no cultural and social capital are explained further which visualizes their impediments in the process of registering a certain degree of creating achieved status.

Denied Cultural and Social Capital

For the first-generation Dalit women students, availability of institutional assistance from the administration and faculty members is the major source of dependence. With no cultural capital, inadequate communication skills, and an English language barrier they tend to have less social capital, specifically, engagement and social connections with administrative staff, faculty, seniors, and fellow students. Additionally, non-institutional support such as recognizing their constraints and assisting them to overcome them by motivating faculty members, seniors, and colleagues, seems to be very minimal and almost absent. Therefore, their attempt towards 'fitting in' into

higher educational institutions like universities is nothing short of a miracle. One of the field respondents highlights the same point:

> My parents know nothing about universities and higher education degrees like Ph.D. I must take the whole responsibility for my studies and explore the available opportunities. Doing a Ph.D. in Chemistry from a university is not a small thing and I have no idea about the admission process, selecting semester courses. The sight of a well-speaking administrative staff, faculty, and seniors was very intimidating for me to ask questions in English as I lacked proficiency. Also, they were not ready to talk to me which was quite evident in their hostile gazes. Due to a lack of awareness regarding financial fellowships availability on campus, I missed a one-semester fellowship too. So, in the initial days of my stay at the university, I struggled a lot to adjust and get my things done as I felt uncomfortable with my language skills and seeking help from strangers.

Academic Space and Double Burden of Identity

Indian universities are dominated by upper castes who act as gatekeepers for academic spaces through their exclusionary practices and discrimination. Caste identity often becomes a source of rebuke and insult. Such caste-based insults and rebukes combined with poor economic and social capital, tend to push the first-generation Dalit women scholars beyond the boundaries of their tolerance. This is explicated by one of the respondents from the field:

> Most of my fellow researchers refer to Dalit scholars like me as *'reservation batch'*. I feel ignored by both my supervisor and seniors. My thesis supervisor once stated, 'I committed some sin earlier may be due to which am teaching Dalit students, who are equal to beggars'. He never spoke except to comment on the doctoral committee report. My seniors also consider me incapable and judge my subject knowledge irrespective of my academic excellence. I feel irritated when the male scholars from the Dalit community also try to dominate and pass orders taking the advantage of same caste identity. Women scholars from the upper castes and those who are financially better off tend to form their own groups and do not interact with people like me.

The preconceived assumptions of faculty members and seniors that first-generation Dalit women scholars are deficient because of their caste identity persist in Indian universities. Dalit women scholars endure oppression not only from men of other castes but also from their own castes. Accordingly, women scholars from a privileged backdrop exclude Dalit women scholars based on their poor socio-economic background. This scenario contests the patriarchal practices of men in general and Dalit men in particular. First-generation Dalit women scholars, therefore, undergo a double burden due to the non-egalitarian practices of the university system.

Campus Culture and Retrieving Non-academic Spaces

The unexplored accounts of first-generation students from marginalized communities provide us insights into the structural inequalities of Indian universities. Coming from a minority background and unequipped with sufficient knowledge and skills of the dominant habitus, the first-generation Dalit women students converse with unfamiliar and impertinent environments upon their arrival at universities. This is because the dominant group can exercise their dominance merely by conforming to the status quo, while the marginalised must engage in rupture with their own habitus itself. The first-generation Dalit women students undergo a transition in their social environment, which is to deal with stereotypes and stigmatizations accompanied by pressures of family expectations which together negatively impact their academic potential.

Cultural Conflict

Upon entering the universities, first-generation Dalit women scholars encounter a cultural shock, which is an experience a person may have when one moves to a new cultural environment that is different from one's own (Jhon et al., 2010: 54). With the transition in their life from traditional educational institutions to that of new university environments, the first-generation Dalit women learners experience isolation and 'feel out of place.' This phase of adaptation to the new social environments of the university campus has the potential to bring out new social agencies of first-generation learners, which in turn paves the means for an inclusive environment on campus. One of the respondents of the study from the field stated as below:

> Getting admission into a prominent university in Hyderabad was the first independent decision in my life. I came to Hyderabad alone for the first time without even knowing the public bus numbers in the city. I kept staring at the tall and concrete buildings and the crowded busy bus stops. With the help of my relative in the city, I reached the university. The first sight of the university campus made me feel, 'Am I going to study on such a big campus with a wide area, all greenery around, and well-built departments and hostel.' I clearly remember my first day in our department which made my enthusiasm disappear in no time. I had the appearance of a village girl and everybody in the laboratory were well dressed and speaking in good English. The hostile gazes of people around me made me feel inferior and that made me isolate myself. Though I liked the campus, the unwelcoming attitudes of people around me made me feel displaced. In hostels too I was shocked to hear about girls drinking alcohol, as I never encountered such things before back in my village.

The habitus of first-generation learners is mismatched with the socio-cultural life at university, as they belong to ''the social strata that are far away from academic culture and who are condemned to experience that culture as unreal'' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 922). Therefore, first-generation Dalit women are at risk for limited educational

attainment with less social engagement in the campus culture and delayed adaptation. Non-academic spaces like hostels, shopping complexes, cafeterias, annual university fests, and so forth are vital in opening possibilities for the socialization of the campus culture. One of the respondents narrates her experience, as below:

> Since the hostel rooms accommodated one person it was comfortable and [I] could stay as I wished. In the initial days, going to canteens and shopping complexes in the university was utterly uncomfortable. Fellow students used to sit there for hours and be involved in discussions, on the contrary, walking on campus roads also was scary for me. Therefore, accessing the facilities such as the gym and sports complex was far beyond my thoughts. For the first annual university festival, my sister paid a visit to the campus. On the third day, which will be the last, we both went to the open ground where students were dancing. We were shocked to see girls wearing short dresses and all boys and girls dancing together freely. After that, I never went to the fest again.

These experiences display the concealed forms of how the dominant habitus operates on the university campus. With the deepening cultural mismatch, assimilating into the campus ambience is challenging for first-generation Dalit women scholars, as it demands delinking oneself from pre-existing habitus and obliging the new lifestyle. Along with these confrontations of first-generation status, insolences based on their intersectional identity, such as stereotypes based on appearance, dressing patterns, skin complexion, food habits, give an insight into the Dalit women scholars' minority-ness in university settings.

Nexus of Physical Attributes & Cultural Stereotypes on University Campus

The antagonistic aesthetic notions of dominant culture tend to marginalize Dalit women based on the intersectional identity of women first, and Dalit women additionally. Judith Butler (1990, 1993, 2004) argued the performativity of gender, which is a stylized repetition of acts as an imitation or miming of the dominant conventions of gender. The intersectional theorists have argued that they also are co-constituted with class, race, and ethnicity. Accordingly, Dalit women students are stigmatized based on their appearance, skin color, and dietary practices such as the consumption of beef on the hostel premises. One of the respondents from the field says:

> Beauty plays a vital role in the way people treat us in academic spaces too. Based on my appearance and less sophisticated dressing style I was always considered an average student and disrespected by people who have no idea about my academic performance. There is a common understanding in society that if a person is dark in color, she/he belongs to the Dalit community, often seen in surprise if they are fair in their skin color, which is always linked to Dalit identity. Additionally, I was looked down upon by my colleagues for eating beef and following other cultural practices of Dalits.

Thus, in academic environments, young Dalit women struggle with an inferiority complex due to the narrow definitions of beauty. There is a preconceived assumption in society that Dalits are dark in color and people will be surprised to see a Dalit with fair skin. These conditions throw light on the relation attached to caste and skin complexion, where it is assumed that all Dalits are racially black, and if any Dalit individual is of light skin tone, they are detached from their Dalit identity and are seen as the mismatch of their caste. Hence, the first-generation students are negatively stereotyped resulting in unfavorable university experiences that obstruct their academic performance. Additionally, the pressure of family expectations places a double burden on first-generation Dalit women scholars.

Dalit Women as 'Most Dalits': Daughters as Passing Birds

With the existing patterns of academic stress and hostile workplace environments, first-generation Dalit women scholars also endure marriage pressure differently. Traditionally, getting married is considered a higher ideal for a woman than attaining a higher education and getting employment, due to the existing patrilineal practices. For Dalit women, the pressure of marriage is increased due to their poor economic backgrounds. Marriage proposals begin at the early age of 14 years, and Dalit women learners are obliged to negotiate with families in every phase of their journey in higher education. This shows how the authoritarian and patriarchal social structures do not allow any free space for adolescent girls, particularly in certain sections that assign different reasons for the continuation of the practice of early marriages (Ghosh 2011: 307–326). In terms of the pressure of marriage experienced by Dalit women scholars, one of the respondents states:

> In the case of male children, parents beg them to study well, and, in our case, we must beg our parents to let us study. I felt my educational achievements were not valued when my parents were not happy regarding my Ph.D. studies and kept worrying about the delay of marriage. Their concern remains that, I was the only girl in our locality to attain higher education and remained unmarried until the age of 25 years. Also, if I have higher educational qualifications, they must search for a groom more than my qualification which in turn may cost them more dowry.

Hence, the first-generation Dalit women research scholars are the most Dalits among Dalits as stated by Dr. Ambedkar compared to their Dalit male counterparts who are considered as the breadwinners of the family, contrarily female as 'passing birds.' They do not often enjoy readily available parental consent to the continuation of higher education and are considered deviant from family expectations. Dalit women students always have to put in extra effort to convince parents before pursuing their higher education. Withstanding the systemic oppression based on their interactional identity of gender, caste, and family pressure, how they adapt and negotiate with university spaces will be discussed further in the following section.

From Excluded to Exceptional: Acquired Cultural Capital

Though the navigation of the first-generation Dalit women learners into hierarchical university academic spaces is extremely tough, it is their agency in adapting to those settings through the possible contestation and negotiations that makes their untold stories exceptional. First-generation Dalit women learners have developed their survival strategies to cope with the patriarchal and casteist exclusionary practices experienced in the university. The responses are non-homogenous with both confrontational and strategies of ignorance. How they adapt themselves to the university and the students who partake in caste politics is noteworthy. As stated by one of the respondents:

> It was hard for me in the initial days to be on campus without anyone to guide and support me. I ended up isolating myself for months. By the end of the first semester, I got habituated to the surroundings and academic culture. Though I was discouraged and looked down upon by my supervisor and seniors, our poor family conditions were the major pushing factor to be strong. Financial support in the form of university fellowship gave me some hope and I had some friends from the social sciences who used to discuss the issues of gender and caste discrimination in the university. This gave me awareness and exposure to the ideas regarding the marginalization of the oppressed and the anti-caste movements led by leaders like Dr. Ambedkar and Periyar. So, I started accepting the fact that I was capable enough and that the narrow-minded attitudes of other students should be ignored. Though there are students' unions organized on lines of political ideologies, due to less availability of time and work pressure I was not an active participant.

Though the social environments of the first-generation Dalit women scholars are different from the university, they constantly contested the conventional regressive notions and adopted acquired cultural capital in the university settings. In university social spaces the first-generation learners are exposed to new social assets such as education, intellect, style of speech, style of dress, and so forth, which also enhance social interactions that eventually lead to acquiring cultural capital. This process depicts the potential of universities as an efficient social institution of reform in transforming the lives of individuals and society eventually towards the framework of sustainable equality. The transitional phase of the first-generation Dalit women scholars from the excluded to the exceptions involves certain negotiations and contestation. The resilient covert forms of questioning the casteist slurs undertake certain costs that are striking and must be analyzed. One of the respondents says:

> I was advised to hide my caste identity to be free from ill-treatment and discrimination in the department. When my colleague asked about the certificates that needed to be submitted for fellowship, I sent my certificates through the mail, which included my caste certificate. Another colleague of mine stopped me and told me, 'Do not send your caste certificate, they will get

> to know your caste and you will be looked down upon. In my lab other girls who belong to the Brahman community used to discuss among themselves, 'Why reservation is there, people must be given opportunities based on 'merit'?' When I argued with them, they stopped talking to me. So, to avoid such instances, I used to keep earphones and ignore such comments.

The negotiations of the first-generation Dalit women learners can be tacit, whereas, for the privileged sections of students, their caste is a strong cultural capital and shields them from the vulnerabilities of the first-generation status. On the contrary, first-generation Dalit women students are advised to conceal their identity as Dalits to escape from the exclusionary practices and discrimination based on their social identity being a 'Dalit woman.' Therefore, the habitus of caste in university is quite evident and it makes the lower caste women experience the university spaces as hostile ones. These hostile spaces needed to be contested and those modes of contestation acquired cultural capital to survive on campus.

The multiplicity of voices of first-generation Dalit women scholars in the process of challenging the institutional discernments and countering their structural inequalities are insightful terrains to examine. In a confrontational manner one of the respondents from the field says, I quote:

> The first thing Dalit students need to learn is, 'they are not inferior to anybody' if the other caste people talk to us, then we must talk otherwise avoid them, if we are respected, then we should respect, if not, we should repeat the same. First thing, I will not feel inferior based on my caste identity and if someone tries to discriminate against me through words or actions, I will respond to them with a counterargument, 'why should Dalits be scared always?'

These instances arguably have their roots in the self-respect movement (1952) led by Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy to allow people to live a life of freedom from slavery. The perception that first-generation learners are not merely passive recipients of institutional inequalities but are also active agents in challenging them and carving out channels of social mobility. Therefore, as stated by Phule and Ambedkar, education has been the major social agency in bringing change and giving a sense of self-respect in the lives of these first-generation Dalit women research scholars in the hegemonic structures of educational institutions such as universities. Education is considered the only hope for the Dalit community to redeem themselves from the clutches of caste-based discrimination and exclusionary practices. Therefore, as stated by Deshpande & Zacharias (2013: 16), higher education is the most legitimate means for sustaining or justifying the existing social order, as well as changing or overthrowing it. With the lived experiences of the first-generation Dalit women scholars in Indian university spaces, it is observed that gender is a significant aspect in countering the mainstream casteist paradigms in contemporary times.

Conclusion

First-generation learners can accomplish a positive and intergenerational change by overcoming educational deprivation in the academic space The journey of first-generation students highlights a unique trajectory of contestations and struggle from elementary education to the university level with poor economic and socio-cultural capital. Breaking the glass ceiling by way of reaching universities, Dalit women scholars of the first generation are subjected to institutional inequalities leading to undesirable university experiences of systematic exclusion. Being a minority among the university, the dominant campus habitus which is a new phenomenon to the first-generation Dalit women learners, poses an additional burden on their coping methods and capabilities. This vividly depicted the social phenomenon of the 'invisibilisation' of the privilege to the students belonging to the upper castes and the marginalization of the students from Dalit and other marginalized communities deepens with their intersectional identity of gender and caste. Besides, the first-generation Dalit women students undergo a transition in their social environment which is substantially radical to make themselves fit into university spaces. This process of coping and adjusting to the campus dominant habitus negatively impacts their academic performance, as the process takes time and a toll on them. On the other hand, irrespective of all the barriers, first-generation learners are exposed to new social assets such as education, intellect, style of speech, style of dress, and so forth, and also enhanced social interactions that eventually lead to acquired cultural capital, which sometimes helps them succeed in their academic endeavors. It is to be noted that campus habitus is not devoid of caste and gender structures and the formations of alternative cultural capital that facilitates inclusive university campus experiences and just social relations for first-generation learners.

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Notes

i   Being a first-generation Dalit scholar from a rural area, Renuka who is 25-years-old from the Mahbubnagar region of Telangana state narrates her experiences of schooling. The unavailability of schools in and around her neighbourhood, poor quality of teaching, lack of basic facilities, and caste-based discrimination which is an everyday reality in rural India have been a part and parcel of her childhood. The cultural shocks experienced and the constant efforts to adapt herself to the new social environments of higher educational institutions are the central focus of her narrations. An in-depth interview was conducted from 7.00 p.m. to 9.00 p.m. on February 17, 2022. (ii, vi, vii, xi, ibid.)

iii   The respondents of the study include female research scholars from the 2nd year of their PhD to 5th year scholars in basic sciences from a central university in south India. The quantitative data was collected through questionnaires in February 2020. The names and charaters of these narrations have been anonymised to protect the privacy of respondants and to maintain professional ethics.

iv   Treating the Dalit women scholars as people of less worth in the academic field and the intensification of their victimization is vividly explained by Ramya, a 27-year-old Dalit women scholar from a university at Hyderabad, while conducting her interview on January 20, 2022, from 10.00 am to 11.30 am. This shows the double oppression of Dalit women students in universities. (viii, xi, ibid.)

v   Vani who is 28-years-old, explained diverse forms of stigmatizations based on the intersectional identity of gender and caste. The differential treatment received by them from faculty members, seniors, and classmates based on their gender and caste identities is highlighted by Vani. This interview was held on January 04, 2022, from 4.00 p.m. to 5.35 pm in Hyderabad. (x, xii, ibid.)

Dalits and Discourses of Anti-caste Movements in Kerala, India

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Abstract

This article locates various historical discourses of anti-caste imaginaries and articulations that are imprinted in the historical past of Kerala society. Unravelling historical and social theoretical trends, it examines broadly an anti-caste imaginary articulating notions of equality and addressing various events, personnel interventions, policies and ideologies made discursive politics in Kerala. As ideologies and its consequent effects upon society are political, the article substantially makes comments and interprets the Dalit-Bahujan world grounded on the lived experiences of Dalits in Kerala. The article brings forth discourses of social movements, production of Dalit icons, critical narratives on untouchability and communist positions about caste. But, a new imagination, academic and aesthetical engagements of Dalit-Bahujans in the form of the production of Dalit art and literature informs new articulation of Dalit politics in Kerala.

Keywords

Social movements, discourses and Dalit politics

Introduction

A particular socio-economic and cultural system in sub-continental India has developed a systemic social world of distinctive lives based on life activities and social division of labourers. These everyday social divisions in the historical past have been caste-based structural inequalities that led to the complex social formation process and emergence of multiple forms of political structure. This explicates that forms of power relations were conditioned by ranking social groups in a hierarchical order. The top of the ladder is always endowed with reverence and all the layers below have been placed according

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to the volume of contempt attributed to them. Consequently, it has resulted in those at the top of the socio-cultural hierarchy to be endowed with the accumulation of differential forms of capitals—social, cultural, economic and symbolic[2]—to establish a hegemonic power over lower castes. This status of dominance leads them to extend systemic violence and contempt for the people who are deployed at the lower strata as castes of perpetual debasement.[3] It provides aesthetically pleasing affluent and ascribed values to privileged castes. These distinctions between castes and communities have been a defining dimension of systemic humiliation and discrimination of caste as an institutional mechanism of structured dispositions and instituted process of dominance and subordination. Subsequently, it produces a society and people with embodied experiences of deprivation and disadvantages. This has resulted in the alienation of people in the historical margins structured by socio-spatial hierarchies. In these processes, it is not just material conditions that limit the people of the margins, but it also works as a block to their intellectual advancement.

This system of historical process of social exclusion in specific ways mostly in terms of hereditary and endogamous relations of material and mental existence reproduce the system of domination.[4] This has been a social system of power and order of everyday lives that construct an identity of the people of social margins as people of broken historical experiences having ghettoized spatial segregations. The cultural systems of Brahmanical order and its *thrivarnika* dispositions, hegemonically appropriated material and mental resources of the people of wrecked lineages.[5] The people of wretched and broken-down cultural existence in the historical past have been represented in the Brahmanical order of domination and literary narratives of Vedic –*sanskritic - itihasa-purana* tradition as the inferiorised cultural 'Other', i.e., Dalit-Bahujan castes and communities.[6]

The historical roots of the Dalit movement in Kerala reveals a fact that the formation of Dalit identity in Kerala was never a linear process. It was defined and redefined in the discourses of colonial modernity. The transforming political economy in late nineteenth and early twentieth century had also brought about new initiatives for imagining equality and selfhood among the communities of inferior grades. It formulated new vocabularies for social action and imagination for a

[2]Bourdieu, Pierre and Wacquant, Loc, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Polity Press, 1992.

[3]Babasaheb B.R. Ambedkar (1987). The Triumph of Brahmanism: Regicide or the Birth of Counter Revolution, Vasant Moon, [Compiled], *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol.III, Education Department Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai. 267–331.

[4]Sukhadeo Thorat and Narender Kumar (Eds.) (2014). *B.R. Ambedkar: Perspectives on Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policies*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–55; Paramjit S Judge (Ed.) (2014). *Mapping Social Exclusion in India*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–23.

[5]G.P. Deshpande (Ed.) (2002). *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*. New Delhi: Left World, pp. 25–99.

[6]Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (2010). *Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*. New Delhi: OUP.

society on equality, freedom, and civil rights. The ideas and articulations that had been evolved in the creative and organic intellectual culture of the social margins that provided the basic tenets and dictums of the process of social modernization called 'renaissance' modernity. New forms of critical engagement of caste hierarchies had been deconstructed and redefined in the critical social imageries, literary vocabularies and imaginative cultural geographies of the marginalized in the context of historic modernity.[7] It was this momentous rupture in terms of anti-caste ideology and social justice activism that formulated the realms of imagining equality and freedom among the slave castes and broken people that also formulated a writing culture for them reflecting their historical lived experiences and identity of their political present. It discovered new realms of self-identification that their identity had not been developed from the caste Hindu *thrivarnika* cultural lineage but from a wounded historical past of broken lineages that defined the identity of *Dalithood* as a political vocabulary.[8]

The term Dalit signifies not simply a statistical category of the marginalized people but a generic and collective vocabulary of high sounding political meaning reflecting consciousness of the oppressed in terms of caste discrimination and cultural marginality that kept them aloof from accumulating varied forms of resources that can be converted into capital.[9] It was in tune with the Dalit subaltern political visualization of nation and the *swaraj* for sub-continental India as a whole encompassing the social and political democracy in representative terms.[10] Dalit identity and its manifold articulations in different domains of everyday life and academic practices that made possible an assertive appearance in critiquing dominant political systems in favour of social democracy.[11] Thus the term Dalit has become an anchoring mark of identity that is used to define the multiple and mosaic nature of national culture and inclusive democratic political representation for different social groups who had historical disadvantages. It was in the context of reform and nationalism that the Dalit assertion in Kerala had been developed, formulating social imageries of anti-caste activism and notions of equality along with social modernization that created a critical rupture from the pre-modern social world.

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[7]Gail Omvedt (1976). *Cultural Revolt in Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India, 1873- 1930*, Scientific Socialist Education Trust Bombay; G.P. Deshpande (Ed.) (2002); Gail Omvedt (1996). *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 15–36.

[8]Anand Teltumbde (2016). *Mahad: The Making of the First Dalit Revolt*. Delhi: Aakar Books, pp. 1–18. Gail Omvedt (2016). *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, pp. 39–47.

[9]Neera Chandhoke [2009]2012. Equality for What? Or the troublesome Relation between Egalitarianism and Respect. *Humiliation: Claims and Context*. (Ed.) Gopal Guru. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 140–160.

[10]G. Aloysius [1997]2017. *Nationalism Without a Nation in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

[11]G. Aloysius (2016). *Contextualizing Backward Classes Discourse*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–50; K.M. Panikkar (2004). *Caste and Democracy*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–27.

Discourses of Movements and Dalit Icons

The notions of *sadhujanam* by Ayyankal,[12]*adimavishayam* by Poyikayil Appachan/ Yohannan,[13] *dharmam* of Narayana Guru[14] defined the early trajectory of the social reform movements in colonial Kerala. It was these intellectual movements and radical social activism that developed the communities of untouchables and outcaste groups like Ezhavas, Pulayas, Parayas, Kuravas, and Sidhanar as agencies of socio-historical change and imagining equality.[15] The initiatives and efforts predicated on the radical movement of breaking caste orders and occupying the attributed social spaces of dominant caste groups defined the reform activism as a movement of social protest of politics of social justice.[16] Ayyankali, Poyikayil Appachan, Pampadi John Joseph and many others who were located at the base of social hierarchy intervened in the public domain in the princely state of Travancore that made the spaces of human interaction into arenas of breaking hegemonic social notions of caste hierarchy.[17] Dalit experience with missionary activism provided vistas of dignified human life, soul and body that provided them new notions of emotions, feelings, everyday existence in familial life and the spiritual world.[18] Dalit mobilization under colonial modernity was aimed at consolidation of different individual caste groups into a single community. The bonded historical past of these social groups was recovered and a repository of their historical experiences was constructed either as *adima* [slave] i.e., people of historical un-freedom with the genealogy of slave experiences and broken cultural lineages. This imagination provided an alternative historical understanding and creative historical formulation in defining the Dalit experiences and selfhood not only in historical past but in radical initiatives in their political present.[19] One can also see the co-optional

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[12]T.H.P. Chentharassery (2017). *Ayyankali*. Thiruvananthapuram: Mythri Books. 10–34; N.K. Jose (1989). *Ayyankali*. Vaikkam: Hobby Publishers. 106–167; N.K. Jose (1994) *Sadhujanaparipalana Sangam*. Vaikkam: Hobby Publishers.

[13]V.V. Swami and E.V. Anil [Eds.] (2010). *Prathyksha Raksha Daiva Sabha, Orma Pattu, Charithra Rekhakal*, Eraviperur: Adiyar Deepam Publication, pp. 18–75. Society of PRDS Studies, Vyavasthayute Nadappathakal, Slate Publication, Kottayam, 2017, pp. 55–98.

[14]Sunny M. Kapikkadu (2017). *Janathayum Janadhipathyavum*. Kozhikode: Vidhyarthi Publications, pp. 239–249. K.K. Kochu (2016) Srinarayana Prasthanathinte Keezhala Paksham. Pradeepan Pamparikunnu [Ed.] *Narayana Guru Punarvayanakal*. Kozhikode: Progress Publishers, pp. 32–42.

[15]P. Sanal Mohan (2015) *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles Against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 116–126.

[16]P. Sanal Mohan (2015) pp. 126–146. Pradeepan Pamparikunnu (2016*) Adhunika Keralam Arute Bhavanayanu*. Pradeepan Pamparikunnu (Ed.) *Narayana Guru Punarvayanakal*. Kozhikode: Progress Publishers, pp. 119–130.

[17]Sunny M Kapikkadu (2017) *Janathayum Janadhipathyavum*. Kozhikode: Vidhyarthi Publications, pp. 209–238. M Nizar and Meena Kandasamy (2007) *Ayyankali: Dalit Leader of Organic Protest*. Calicut: Other Books, pp. 28–92.

[18]P Sanal Mohan (2015). *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles Against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 26–34.

[19]K.S. Madhavan (2012). Formation of Dalit identity in Kerala, in Symposia on Dalits: Life and Culture of the Marginalised, The Post graduate Department of History, Nehru Arts and Science College, Kanhangad, pp. 28–33.

patronage of the nationalist engagements of the caste Hindus as spiritual ethical politics of anti-untouchability activism[20] that stood in tune with the dominant and mainstream political initiatives of the nationalist roots.

The historical trajectory of Kerala's Dalit movement reveals the fact that the early movements were predicated on the sociality of the Dalit body that was articulated as negotiating radical political signifiers in breaking caste and structures of systemic caste subordination. The notion of social labour and the embedded labouring body was negotiated and used as a reflexive site of protest as an instrument of reform activism for civil rights. This was also used as social vocabularies of rights for accumulating economic and social capital in the context of the social modernizing process under colonial modernity. The Princely states in Thiruvithamkur and Cochi provided its representative institutional mechanism to the oppressed caste groups and their members were nominated to the state Legislative Councils which enabled the depressed class groups to demand and register their civic rights and represent their everyday social sufferings. Subsequently Dalit-Bahujan imageries of reform activism had used political space to lead struggles for inclusive human and civil rights. This was started as radical activism made by the Dalit communities in the wake of social reform movements. The attempts to represent Dalits for themselves in representative governance like popular assemblies called *Prajasabha* in Travancore was the logical culmination of these initiatives. The demands and representations made by the depressed class members in the Legislative Council also reveal the ways in which the argumentative public concern was made possible in their efforts that had been articulated for an early form of democratic political activism through the representative bodies. This domain of political communication was met with the reform activism that necessarily imagined the notions of equality and an anti-caste democratic public. This was practiced as radical public engagements by leaders like Ayyankali, Poyikayil Appachan and Pampadi John Joseph who were also members of Travancore Legislative Council popularly known as *Srimoolam Prajasabha*. The primary demands raised by these leaders in the Assembly were allotment of sufficient land and free public education for depressed class which was considered as important socio-economic capitals to attain material resources ensuring dignity and equality. Attempts were also made by the depressed class leaders in the Legislative Assembly not only for entitlement to material resources, land for settlement and livelihood, and public education as cultural capital but also protests of anti-caste activism outside the representative body for public negotiation for social justice. This was, in fact, a turning point in determining the nature of Dalit initiatives in colonial Kerala.[21] This shows that the Dalit movement in its early momentous initiatives had also contributed to the formation of a responsible common Malayali public and the making of colonial civil society in Kerala. The movement for equal citizenship rights and equal opportunity in society for Dalits was made possible by acquiring material resources and social respect

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[20]Gail Omvedt (1995). *Dalit Vision*. New Delhi: Orient Longman
[21]Sunny M Kapikkadu (2017). *Janathayum Janadhipathyavum*. Kozhikode: Vidhyarthi Publications, pp. 209–238.

and dignity. The political trajectory and cultural itinerary of Dalits had developed a set of discursive vocabularies as part of a multi-vocal movement of self-respect that made a critical departure in the intellectual history of the Dalit movement in colonial Kerala.

The Dalit life worlds and the wretched lived experiences were recovered and made available as texts and reports by missionaries in their activist proselytizing engagements in Kerala. The missionaries portrayed the Dalit life world and their everyday suffering in vivid manner in reports and pamphlets. These reports were also used to represent the lived experiences of the Dalits in a new literary genre called Novel in colonial Travancore. Mrs. Collins' Novels 'The Slayer Slain' [*Ghathakavadham*] deals with the question of slavery and the need for conversion for emancipation of slave castes.[22] In Malabar, the missionary emancipatory education had become a form of struggle against caste inequality and social change. This was also a theme of literary imagination by the educated lower classes. The *Saraswathivijayam*, a novel, written by Potheru Kunhambu [1892] also addressed issues of caste and modernity in which modern education through missionary intervention became a vantage point for anti-caste social change.[23] The lower caste engagement in literary production attacking caste inequality and upper caste literary sensibilities was represented in the works of poets like Pandit K.P. Karuppan and Muloor S. Padmanabha Panikkar.[24]

Discourses of Untouchability and Making of Dalit Politics

The anti-untouchability campaign and the so-called temple entry movements were projected to engage the civil rights for the untouchables to come in touch with the public arena of Malayali social life. However, it was operationalised as a consequential deployment of incorporating untouchables into the temple religious idol-worshiping Hindu-fold. The pre-colonial non-Hindu identity of Dalit castes and their historical identity as a broken people of untouchable past was selectively appropriated by the nationalist discourses to reform Hindu society by eradicating untouchability. Untouchability as a nationalist meta-narrative can also be seen in Kerala's reform process and the question of caste inequality and oppression of various fields was set aside. The nationalist discourses of caste in Kerala failed to address the caste inequality in terms of its political vocabulary and instead it projected an ethical programme of eradication of untouchability as a political rhetoric. In the nationalist efforts, eradication of untouchability revolved around a nationalist activism of ethical

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[22]'The Slayer Slain' was written by Mrs. Collins during 1859-1862. After her death in 1862, the unpublished manuscript was completed by Richard Collins, her husband, and published serially in *Vidhyasamgraham*. [July 1864-April 1866], Ancy Bay (2015). *Translating Modernity: Conversion and Caste in Early South Indian Novel*. Kozhikode: Olive Publication, pp. 44–47.

[23]Asokan Mundon (Ed.) (2016). *Religion, Community, Identity: Reform and Change in Kerala*. Thiruvanadapuram: ISDA Publication, p. 164. Ancy Bay (2015). pp. 66–84.

[24]Pandit K.P. Karuppan, Jathikummi, originally written in 1911and published in 1912. Kerala Sahithya Academy Thrisure, 2012. *Kaviramayanam* was an important critical engagement in the field of literary production made by the Muloor Padmanabhapanikkar. M.R. Sahruthayan Thambi [2013] *Muloor: Kaviyum Vyakthiyum,* State Institute of Languages, Thiruvanadapuram.

predicament of the upper caste nationalist Savarna Hindu.[25] This ethical politics of Gandhian turn was used to incorporate the Dalit as Harijan, a pejorative identification and nationalist politics of naming into the dominant patronage politics of the Congress that subjugated the Dalits as objects of nationalist narratives of reform. The temple entry movement and the Vaikkam Sathyagraha of 1924 in Kerala also reveals the problematic entanglements and the predicament of the anti-untouchable campaign and the trajectory of the civil rights movement in the Gandhian anti-untouchability programme. This was a time when the Phule-Ambedkarian philosophy and political imaginaries[26] formed within the national movement. It recovered a new political imagination and critical theoretical sensibility for understanding caste and graded inequality and also the Dalit-Bahujan world of political presence.[27] The making of an ontological turn of lived experiences and epistemological validation for the Dalit historical past can also be seen in the history of Dalit movements in Kerala as well.[28]

The discourses on caste and equality developed by Sahodaran Ayyappan, a rationalist and anti-caste thinker who is known for his campaign for inter-caste dining or *panthibhojanam* and inter caste marriage as a practice of anti-caste ideology, who had developed the strategies of anti-caste everydayness in the political contemporaneous of modernity in Kerala which is popularly known as *sahodarya prasthanam* that aimed at breaking caste barriers in its customary social everyday life, accomplished in the form of inter-dining and inter-caste marriage tools of breaking the subjective experience of caste divisions. Sahodharan Ayyappan could visualize the larger political imagination of the non-Brahman movement and the Ambedkarian notion of reconstruction of society in the notions of equality, liberty and fraternity. Ayyappan's view was in favor of adequate political representation, proportionate share in national wealth and equal social opportunities. It was in this context that there emerged in Kerala's anti-caste reform movement a larger question of anti-caste contestation and political negotiation for equality and representation, the ideological standpoint of which was negotiated with the political strategy of conversion of untouchable castes to other religions. This was one of the primary reasons that made Savarna upper caste Hindus to engage with the anti-untouchability movement incorporating Dalits and lower castes in the nationalist reform of Hindu religion.[29]

[25]Dilip M. Menon (1994). *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 89–118.

[26]Gail Omvedt (1976)

[27]Gopal Guru (2004). The Language of Dalit Bahujan Political Discourse. *Class, Caste and Gender*. (Ed.) Manoranjan Mohanty, New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 256–267. Bharat Patankar (2015). *Contemporary Caste system*. New Delhi: Critical Quest. 1–29; Lal Mani Joshi (2007). *Brahmanism, Buddhism and Hinduism*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–40.

[28]Uma Chakravarti (2014). *Panditha Ramabai*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–32. G. Aloysius (2010). *Dalit–Subaltern Self-Identifications: Iyothee Thassar and Tamizhan*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–64; B.D. Khane (2006). *Chhatrapati Shahu's Crusade Against Untouchability.*, New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–36; G. Aloysius (2006). *Dalit Subaltern Emergence in Religio-Cultural Subjectivity*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–36; Nandini Gopu (2006). *Swami Acchutanand and the Adi Hindu Movement*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–40; M.C. Raja (2005). *The Oppressed Hindus*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–40.

[29]K.K. Kochu (2017). *Idathupakshamillatha Kalam*. Kottayam: D C Books, pp. 89–93.

Communists in Caste-ridden Social Structure

The communist engagement with the caste question and the emancipation of Dalit-Bahujan communities in Kerala as elsewhere was problematic as communists did not have any specific attention to the caste question in its uniqueness as a system of inequality and exploitation of oppressed castes. Rather, the Marxist position on the caste question was predicated on the notion of a feudal social order and caste was treated as a form of extra economic coercion of Indian feudal relations in a pre-capitalistic society of the Asiatic mode of economic production. Economic interpretation to the Indian social system of graded inequality does not make sense of the complex relations between caste and class. The intersectionality of caste, class and gender had not been taken in to the political point of view and strategies of class struggles among the Indian socialists and communist groups. Communists thought that the caste system was a feudal vestige and castes would be done away with or would be evaporated when capitalist forces develop within India. This deterministic position and inadequacy of a Marxist understanding of the caste question and Indian [Brahmanical] social order failed to address the issues related to caste and graded inequality. Inequality in the Marxist sense of the term encompasses an economic base where the material production takes place and the ideological superstructure in which non-economic relations are embedded.[30] This position is also represented in Marxist writings on the culture of Kerala as well. The notion of *jati-janmi-naduvazhi* (caste-landlord and political authority) system had been postulated to explain caste as a system of division of labour. Land reform and redistribution of landed resources among the so-called peasant communities i.e., 'land to the tiller', the notion on which Marxists romanticized land reform has, in fact, not benefited the Dalit communities giving them land in Kerala. Dalit communities were not the subject peasant or tenant at will but they were attached to the landed wealth of upper castes as untouchable forced labouring groups. Dalits lived in hut settlements as various *kuti*s of occupational groups of unfree nature and conditions of slavery made them attached to the land as primary producers devoid of any rights to settlement and entitlement to land. The Marxist positions did not problematize the condition of untouchables and refused to consider Dalits as the most exploitative groups in the social world of caste violence and deprivation. Dalits were, in Marxist narratives and political standpoints, treated as agricultural laboures to be settled without farmland as *kudikidappukar* or as landless labourers in settlement colonies.[31] These *kudikidappu* settlements had become the settlement colonies of Dalit ghettos.[32]While Marxist-backed governments were in power and implemented the land reform in Kerala, the land did not go to the Dalits

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[30]K.S. Madhavan (2015). *Jatiyum Varghavum: Marx, Ambedkar Kosamby.* Marx Vayanakal. (Ed.) T.V. Madhu. Kozhikode: Raspberry Books, pp. 331–369.

[31]T.T. Srikumar (2011). *Navasamuhikatha: Saasthram, Charithram Raashtriyam.* Calicut: Pratheeksha Books, pp. 66–78.

[32]There are as many as 23,000 Dalit settlement colonies in Kerala. To get a sense of the lived world of these Ghettos, see Maya Pramod (2020). As A Dalit Women: My Life in a Caste Ghetto in Kerala, *Caste /A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, Vol. I, No. I, pp. 111–124.

or other marginalized groups but they were given only the legal provision to protect their settlement, right to settle as *kudikidappukar* without entitling land to cultivation and livelihood. Settlement right of the Dalits as *kudikidappukar* was protected in four to ten cent land habitats. The land was subsequently concentrated among the middle and upper castes and other religious groups. The identity of a national community of non-Hindu culture was denied to Dalits in Kerala Marxist discourses. Dalits have a long historical past as broken groups under the brahmanical social order that has become a historical absence in the Indian Marxist narratives.[33] Indian Marxists do not seem to have made any substantial contribution to interrogate the castes and graded inequality in its proper historical context. This in turn diverted the real issue of the Dalits while allowing for Marxist imaginations and a utopia of class conflict and consequent changes.

Discourses of Dalit-Bahujan Narratives

The term Dalit, as encompassing wide connotations in the political and cultural dynamics began to be used in Kerala only in the 1970s in response to the nationalist patronage politics that imposed the denigrated and token category of 'Harijan' on the identity of the former outcaste (s) and untouchable groups.[34] The term has a genealogy of its own, making sense of a radical transformation from being untouchable to the Dalithood.[35] Rejecting state-centric and nationalist juxtaposition of nomenclatures like depressed class and untouchables, the notion of Dalit has become an inclusive category to encompass all marginal groups who are persecuted under Brahmanic social order. The condition of existence under Brahmanic order was the immediate existential reality of Dalits. Therefore, de-brahmanising dominant narratives and writing culture was an ethical and political necessity for Dalit aesthetics and emancipatory epistemology.[36] The literature and aesthetic production in art and performances made Dalit a category of political articulation of lived experiences of caste discrimination and varied forms of humiliations. The Dalit literature could, in fact, offer a saga of resistance culture and realm of repudiation of cultural and social dominance. As Saran Kumar Limbale has rightly been pointed out that Dalit literature is an attempt to artistically portray the sorrow, tribulations, slavery, degradation endured by the Dalits.[37] This must have

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[33]K.K. Kochu (2017).

[34]Gail Omvedt (2004), pp. 413–430. Gail Omvedt (2016). pp. 74–82.

[35]Eleanor Zelliot (2001). *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi: Manohar.

[36]Gail Omvedt (2016). pp. 97–104. Jyothi and M.C. Raja (2005). *Cosmosity: A Cultural Discourse of the Unbroken People*. Ambedkar Resource Center Rural Education for Development Society, Tumkur.

[37]Sharankumar Limbale (2003). *The Outcaste/ Akkarmashi*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Omprakash Valmiki (2003). *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Kolkata: Samya. J. Mohan (2001). *History of Dalit Struggle for Freedom: Dravidian Parties and Dalit Upraise in Tamil Natu*. Pondicherry: Dhamma Institute of Social Sciences. K.A. Gunasekaran (2009). *The Scar*. Chennai: Orient Blackswan. Paul Chirakkarodu [1993] 2014. *Ambedkar: Boudhikavikshobhathinte Agnijwala*. Kottayam: Sahithya Pravarthaka Co-Operative Society [SPCS]. K.K.S. Das (2011) *Dalit Prathyayasasthram: Charithram Sahithyam Saundaryasasthram*. Thiruvanandapuram: State

resonated in the remembrance of the Dalit slave historical past and rememorialization of the slave experience in the oral renderings made by Poyikayil Appachan in the context of the historical modernity of Kerala.

Dalit literature has created a particular form of writing culture, a creative and radical literary production with emancipatory aesthetic taste and a standpoint epistemology of identity and selfhood. It created a critical tradition and reflexive interrogation to the social and cultural system based on graded inequality in which the ascending order of power and privileges were reserved for the caste Hindus and descending order of contempt for the marginalized groups. It is because this system of graded inequality that maintained and reproduced a social order of caste-based oppression and social exclusion along with cultural and intellectual dominance predicated on systemic violence of the Brahminical social order. It was this social order that had been reflexively engaged with critical postulations and protest imageries in the reform modernity of Kerala.

The term Dalit has been derivatively posited to critically engage with the system of dominance and subordination. This social order had become a matter of contestation for Dalits and marginalized groups in the post reform period in Kerala at large. It is through literature that the Dalit communities of Kerala could develop a critical attitude of protest as oppositional consciousness to the upper caste-centric aesthetics. The rebellious articulation and contentious potential of this reflexive interrogation has been narrated in different literary genres of oral traditions and textual imagination of Dalits. The lived social experiences and individual social memory of systems of exclusion, humiliation embedded with unparalleled cruelties of caste violence, its pain, agony and destitution were depicted in an un-archived historical genealogy of the oral memory of the Dalits. The memories of social experiences are woven in terms of lived emplotment of rememorizing caste subordination experiences of social exclusion. It is through these literary genres, artistic expressions, aesthetic intonations and creative performances that the Dalit subaltern groups could have repudiated the dominance of the caste hierarchy and imagine equality and visualize a world of freedom.[38]

The availability of Writings and Speeches of B R Ambedkar in Malayalam has opened up new possibilities for a critical reading of Kerala society and cultural and political establishment through the post-colonial and Dalit-subaltern intellectual imageries, though a section of Dalits had attracted the radical left or Naxal movement in Kerala, the Dalit sensibility of engagement of Ambedkar intellectuality and critical scholarship provided new understandings of caste and Dalit questions. There were debates and polemic factionalism in the radical lefts regarding the question of caste and class relation and also for amicable political praxis in annihilating caste. However,

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Institute of Language. M.B. Manoj (2008). *Aadarsham, Ezhuthavastha: Dalith Sahithya Padanangal,* Pranatha Books, Cochin; Sarankumar Limbale (2004). *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, pp. 23–39.

[38]Paul Chirakkarodu [1993] 2014. *Ambedkar: Boudhikavikshobhathinte Agnijwala*, Sahithya Pravarthaka Co-Operative Society [SPCS], Kottayam, K.K.S. Das (2011). Dalit Prathyayasasthram: Charithram Sahithyam Saundaryasasthram, State Institute of Language, Thiruvanandapuram.

Dalits who detached from the radical left romanticism and took to Ambedkar and Dalit politics helped create robust intellectual activities and community activism based on Ambedkarian politics incorporating the historical past of a radical stream of social reform led by Ayyankali, Poyikayil Appachan and Sahodaran Ayyappan in Kerala. This resulted in the formation of independent Dalit organizations and public intellectual activities. This provided new possibilities to engage with the Dalit historical past and the lived experiences with the politics of democratic equality of Ambedkar in the Kerala Dalit movement.

The literary expression in the forms of novels and short stories also came up with alternative aesthetical expressions and literary sensibility in Kerala.[39] Amateur historians from Dalit communities have emerged looking beyond the conventional frames and notions of the history of Kerala who critically engaged with the dominant historiography in the case of caste and culture of Kerala. The Dalit students' movement was formed in various colleges interrogating the Dalit students' life in mainstream campuses and to make sense of Ambedkar thought and non-Brahmin and Dalit-Bahujan politics.[40] The vicious circle of models of development has created underdevelopment and conditions of perpetual marginality of Dalits and Adivasis in Kerala. The failure of land reform to entitle Dalits to landed property and the token politics of mainstream political parties including the left parties towards Dalits were important issues of concern of new initiatives of Dalit leadership. It created a new sensibility and community identity that paved the way for new literary criticism and Dalit aesthetics. A radical initiative called SEEDIAN [Socially Educationally and Economically Depressed Indian Ancient Natives] was an important turning point in the intellectual history of the Dalit movement in Kerala. This intellectual and cultural initiative engaged with art and literature, history and cultural studies that made possible new Dalit critical engagements and artistic and aesthetical expressions.[41] The growing incidents of atrocities against Dalits, public torture and humiliations, institutional violence and discrimination, police atrocities and governmental negligence were taken into public domain for live debates. In the post 1990 period the activities of Dalit women society and Dalit Students Forum[42] appeared in the public domain. The printing and publication of books and pamphlets developed among the movement which gathered wider attention in intellectual communication and public activism. SEEDIAN Magazine, *Dalithakam*, *Suchakam* and a number of other publications were important in this venture. The Dalit Christian movement started functioning

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[39] T.M. Yesudasan (2011). Towards A Prologue to Dalit Studies. *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India*. (Ed.) K Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu. Penguin, pp. 611–630.

[40] The empirical reality of Dalit students' life in campuses was deeply alienated in terms of their caste identity. P Sanal Mohan (1993). Kalalayangalile Dalithar, Kerala Padanangal, October-December, Cochi: Chithira Printers, pp. 295–301.

[41] Rajesh Komath and Sudheesh CP (2022). Making Sense of Dalit History: Locating SEEDAIN as an Archive. *Journal of Human Sciences*, Vol. 1, Issue 2. pp. 46–66.

[42] Dalit Student Movement [DSM] mobilised a large number of students in various universities and colleges on Ambedkar politics and radical Dalit thought. A.K. Vasu, M.B. Manoj, A V Murukaraj, P.K. Prakash were some of the organic leaders of this movement.

from the 1960s and Dalit Christians protested against discrimination of upper caste Christian Churches of various Christian denominations which were well articulated in popular imaginaries through print.[43] Dalit Christian groups propagated liberation theology and emancipatory protest faith forms among Dalit Christians that created far-reaching repercussions problematizing caste and religious discrimination in Kerala's Christian communities and Churches.[44]

The new literary turn in Dalit articulations and community mobilization in Kerala was a turning point in the history of Dalit communities in modern Kerala. This had been manifested in the form of powerful writings in creative literary genres like short stories, novels and poems. The Dalit literature that developed by and large tried to posit textures of imagination, literary idioms, representational emplotments and linguistic tropes reflecting the lived experiences and life worlds of the Dalit communities. It reflected upon the world of un-freedom and the dissent and protest that the Dalit communities had been experiencing through the ruptured genealogies of their historical past and their everyday life of subordination and subjugation. It dealt with atrocities and trauma, violence and humiliation, prejudice and public torture, subordination and dominant forms of oppression, sexual violence and discrimination, labour and gendered body and embodied experiences of subjugation and forms of distancing practices on account of inequalities in terms of the graded position in the caste system and the world of untouchability.[45] Literary criticism and linguistic imagination developed among the Dalit writing culture and esthetical production made path-breaking interventions not only in the field of dominant literary culture but also in the domain of Dalit mobilization resonating a genuine and creative social movement heralding the birth of an alternative Dalit intellectual public.[46] The rediscovery of the Kerala Reform movement in terms of anti-caste democracy and politics of proportionate representation in political power

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[43]Janakeeya Vimochana Visvasaprasthanam and Dynamic Action are important initiatives among Dalit Christians of Kerala.

[44]John C.B. Webster (2012). *Historiography of Christianity in India*. New Delhi: OUP, pp. 182–218.

[45]Historical evolution of Dalit literature in Kerala has been narrated by the late Pradeepan Pamirikunnu, Dr. Pradeepan Pampirikunnu [2007] 2017. *Dalit Padanam: Svathvam, Samskaram, Sahithyam*. Thiruvanadapuram: The State Institute of Languages Pradeepan Pampirikunnu (2011). Nationalism, Modernity, Keralanes: A Subaltern Critique, in K Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu [Eds], *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing From South India*, Penguin, pp. 556–569. Narration of the historical evolution of Dalit literature can be seen in the works of late Kaviyoor Murali—Kaviyoor Murali (2001). *Dalit Sahithyam*, Kottayam: Current Books. K.K. Kochu [2015]2017. *Idathupakshamillatha Kaalam*. Kottayam: DC Books, pp. 133–138.

[46]The making of a Dalit public in various regions in the colonial context is important as the civil right movements in India from the part of the Dalit communities in the form of anti-caste struggles had created civil society ethos in region-specific public arenas. The notion of 'movement public' can be used to understand the appearance of Dalit intellectual activities and the initiatives in the process of widening the domain of the common public, Eva-Maria Hardtmann [2009], 2015. *The Dalit Movement in India*. New Delhi: OUP, pp. 87–90. Ramesh Kamble (2016), Understanding Dalit Movement: Trajectories and Concern. *Caste Based Exclusion* (Ed.) Jagan Karade. New Delhi: Rawat Publication, pp. 15–44.

and the material and cultural resources taking into account the principles of India's constitutional morality on social justice was the ideological base of this new turn in Dalit initiatives of political articulations. The critique of mainstream nationalist imagination of India's cultural past and the legacy of critical intervention of the Phule–Ambedkar tradition within the national movement was also radically revisited in the intellectual activism and everyday mobilization of Dalit initiatives in Kerala. Kerala's Dalit literary and intellectual engagements was also influenced by the writing world of the Black Atlantic along with the radical Caribbean, Latin American, Black literature and liberation theology. In the literature and art, post-structuralist deconstruction of language, literary criticism and discourse analysis were also imprinted in the narrative vocabularies and critical writing culture of the Dalit intellectual arena of Kerala. The Brahmanic and upper caste notions of literary production, writing culture, aesthetic imaginative representation in art forms and popular culture have been interrogated with new critical sensibilities and reflexive aesthetical interrogations in Dalit writings in Kerala.[47]

The issues that have been taken up by the Dalit movement in Kerala in the beginning of the twenty-first century are SC and ST reservation in the aided education sector and the need for land and livelihood. This is a new turn in setting the agenda of the Dalit movement. This was influenced by the Muthanga Adivasi Struggle for land and Chengara and Arippa land struggles made by the Dalit and Adivasi communities in Kerala. Social exclusion and marginalization of Dalits in the public arena in various forms also took place in the prerogatives and planned moves of dominant communities, case in point as far as the alienation of Dalit lands and their traditional ritual spaces are concerned. Vadayambadi in Puthankurishu in Ernakulam district and the struggle for regaining usurped public or Dalit landed property is one of the new phases in the ongoing Dalit struggle in Kerala. This has taken place in the context of co-option and incorporation of Dalit communities and organizations into mainstream electoral politics. This can also be noted in tune with the increasing assimilation of Dalits into the brahmanical values and Hinduisation of traditional Dalit ritual spaces like *kaavu*, *kottam*, *thara*, and *madams*. This has been instrumentally used to spread anti-Dalit values in ritual idioms and every day forms of faith practices. Public surveillance and vigilantalism on Dalit body in Kerala society has been developing as a brutal form of violence. This is a form of caste prejudice and intolerance to the Dalit bodies that has been manifested in torturing Dalits in public spaces and institutional torture like police atrocities. Vinayakan, a Dalit youth who lived in Engandiyur near Vadanapilly in Thrissur district, was tortured in police custody and later committed suicide. The murder of Jisha in Perumbavur can be cited as an important example of caste violence towards Dalit women and social insecurity of the Dalit community at large. The caste and economic status and the question of social privilege is also manifested in

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[47]K.K. Kochu [2015] 2017. pp. 133–138. Pradeepan Pamirikunnu [2007] 2017. Dr. Pradeepan Pampirikunnu, *Dalit Padanam: Svathvam, Samskaram, Sahithyam*, Thiruvanadapuram: The State Institute of Languages, S Anand [Ed.] (2003). *Touchable Tales*. Pondicherry: Navayana, pp. 1–42.

the murder of Kevin Joseph, a Dalit Christian youth, whose death indicates that the perpetrators of violence planned the crime with the support of the police. Growing violence against Dalits when they enter into inter-caste or inter-religious marriages indicate the extent of public contempt that operates towards Dalits. The caste-based matrimonial advertisements in newspapers seeking brides and bridegrooms from different communities seem to have deliberately excluded Dalits and Adivasis in the title called 'Caste-No-Bar'.

Conclusion

The historical trajectory of the Dalit movement in Kerala shows that caste was a contested institution and its distinctions and anti-caste reform initiatives fought against it in manifold ways. It was in the form of social movements by Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan, Pambadi Joseph and Sahadaran Ayyappan and shifted to a critique of the Marxist orientation of class-based equality. Articulations and ideological translations developed since Kerala modernity and social reform formulated anti-caste activism for democratic equality, public discourses and imaginations of an egalitarian society. New assertions taking identities as serious concerns portrays modern issues and concern for contemporary Dalit lives taking into account new imaginations and articulations of movements and aesthetical production of Dalit literature. However, the larger political projects of imagining social justice in a democratic order are yet to be realized.

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Periyar: Forging a Gendered Utopia

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Abstract

The category of gender has perennially found itself at the margins because of its social location across South Asia. Albeit heterogeneous by nature, women have borne the burden of history, community, tradition and even geography being violently mapped across their bodies. No wonder that the past two centuries has witnessed heated debates on the women's question in the region ranging from the Altekarian paradigm to the valorized mother figure who is ever nurturing and generous. Many social reformers both male and female sought to battle orthodoxy, religious chauvinism and caste-based status-quoism widening the contours of gender justice in the process. The tropes revolved around consent and coercion, public battles over scriptural legitimacy and contentious traditions. The reformers were treading on delicate grounds as the sacred domain of the 'home' had to be kept immune from any polluting winds of 'western' ideology. This article is an attempt to tease out E.V. Ramasamy Naicker's (Periyar) radical understanding of the gender question and his efforts to create an alternate epistemology to question existing socio-cultural realities. It concludes by arguing that this gendered utopia is also a work in progress.

Keywords

Caste, self-respect movement, gendered utopia, Periyar

Mapping Utopias

Utopias have generated ecstasy and fear in equal measure and human history has witnessed multiple ideas and discourses which promised to usher in a utopian age. In the Indian context, the most radical version of utopia was formulated by Sant Ravidas (c. 1450-1520) in his song 'Begumpura'- a city without sorrow. He envisaged it as a casteless, classless urban society in contrast to Gandhi's idyllic village of 'Ram

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Rajya'. 'Begumpura' described a land with no taxes, toil or harassment, where there is no hierarchy but all are equal. Finally, calling himself a 'tanner now set free', he proclaims that he wanders freely with his friends: the right to walk anywhere in a settlement, city or village, is a unique matter for Dalits.[2]

However, it was with the publication of Thomas More's 'The Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia' between 1516 and 1518, which provided a label for the imagination of an ideal society. His utopian vision included the humanism of the Renaissance, balancing it with reason, a 'New World', a geographical space lying to the west of Europe which would help the latter to overcome corruption and greed, warfare and inequalities and help to usher in collective ownership of resources. This would enable Europe to create a just society. This space was not yet sullied or plundered by European ravenousness.

An important intervention in the understanding of utopias was made by Karl Mannheim in his 'Ideology and Utopia'. He pointed out that while both ideologies and utopias had emerged from a political struggle of different social groups, the difference was that where ideologies reflect the interests of the ruling groups and so obscure realities in order to stabilize society, certain oppressed groups are intellectually so strongly interested in the destruction and transformation of a given condition of society that they unwittingly see only those elements in the society which tend to negate it.[3]

Gail Omvedt observed that utopian imaginings are found at a lower level of society. Thomas More composed his work in Latin which is an exception. In the Indian context, utopian visions were seldom in Sanskrit but rather in the language of the masses.[4] This also explains the lack of proper documentation as writing as a skill was not permissible to the common people in India. Many of these visions were in the form of poems, ballads and songs which were orally transmitted through generations. Often utopias were envisaged on religious lines, a heavenly city for the chosen few who remained faithful to all the sacraments. In the brahmanical vision of the 'golden age', humans need to pass through numerous cycles of birth and death to attain salvation. A Boddhisatta imagined 'Sukkavati', a land of joy in which all would find liberation. Likewise, Tukaram talked of Pandharpur and Kabir composed verses dreaming of Premnagar—a city of love or Amrapur where people will attain immortality.

Thus, the imagination of utopias located in the uncertain future carried within kernels of an alternative reality and a possibility of social transformation. Very often they inspired ordinary people to strive to create a better life for themselves. These musings transcended binaries of gender/language/geographies and social locations. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein imagined 'Ladyland' wherein women were well versed in science and technology, including armed conflict and their knowledge enabled them to control natural resources. Her evocative portrayal of a feminist utopia in 'Sultana's

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[2]Gail Omvedt (2008). *Seeking Begumpura: The social vision of anti-caste intellectuals.* Navayana Publications, p. 7.

[3]Karl Mannheim (1936). *Ideology and utopia: An introduction to the sociology of knowledge.* (Trans.) Louis Wirth and Edward Shils, New York: Harvest Books, p. 40.

[4]Omvedt, op. cit., p. 15.

Dream' countered the fetters on women's access to public space during her lifetime. Similarly, Pandita Ramabai sought to create a community of women in her 'Mukti Sadan' or the abode of freedom wherein widows would farm the land, harvest crops, get educated and publish various writings. These autonomous spaces sought to re-imagine womanhood and their agentiality when the only resolution was to re-integrate them into patriarchal structures.

The above mentioned imaginations can be located within the prism of colonial encounter wherein Indian traditions and customs fell afoul of the Western notions of liberty and equality, especially on the question of gender. The debate followed a familiar terrain of scriptural injunctions on women and their hallowed role in society. Rarely did the structural understanding of gender relations conditioned by the socio-cultural environment find mention. Hence, Partha Chatterjee's familiar trope of the home and the world which he argued was the means through which the nationalist resolution of the women's question was arrived at, dominated the gendered reading of colonial history.[5] In Chatterjee's theoretical framework of the self/other, he introduces a new binary opposition—between home/world, public and private domains and argues that the nationalist counter-ideology separated the domain of culture into the material and spiritual. The colonised had to learn the techniques of Western civilisation in the material sphere while retaining the distinctive spiritual essence of the material. These new dichotomies, it is argued matched with the identity of social roles by gender; and during this period the 'new woman' came to be defined within this frame and therefore as distinct from the common lower class female, further he argues that in the nineteenth century, the woman's question had been a central issue but by the early twentieth century this question disappeared from the public domain. This is not because political issues take over but because nationalism refused to make women's question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state. Chatterjee argues that the changes in middle class women's lives were outside the arena of political agitation and the home became the principal site of struggle through which nationalist patriarchy came to be normalised. Thus Chatterjee concludes that the nationalists had in the early decades of the century 'resolved' the woman's question, all subsequent reworkings of the women's question by Dalit and working class women, thus come to be precluded. The period marked by Chatterjee as the period of the 'resolution of women's question'; as we shall note later—is the very period in which women's participation in the Ambedkarite movement was at its peak. But in Chatterjee's framework, such movements would be dismissed as Western-inspired, orientalist, for they utilised aspects of colonial policies and Western ideologies as resources.[6]

Feminist historiography made radical breakthroughs in teasing out the redefinitions of gender and patriarchies, i.e., to say in 'pulling out the hidden history swept under the liberal carpet of reforms'.[7] Feminist renderings of history have been ever since

[5] P. Chatterjee (1989). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Bombay: Oxford University Press.

[6] S. Sarkar (1997). *Writing social history*. Oxford Uuniversity Press.

[7] S. Vaid and K. Sangari (eds.) (1989). *Recasting women*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

concerned with comprehending the linkages between reforms and the realignments of patriarchies with hierarchies of caste, class, ethnicity, etc. Vaid and Sangari make a significant distinction between the 'modernising of patriarchal modes of regulating women' and the 'democratizing of gender relations' both at home and the workplace.[8] They underline both the revolutionary potential and inherent contradictions that the democratising movements constituted for peasant and working class women. While these democratising movements are seen as heralding 'class rights for women' as 'against and over' simply familial or caste-related identities; the histories of the non-brahmin democratic movements, ever so crucial to the emancipatory discourse on caste and gender come to be overlooked. This is true of most of the renderings of feminist history of modern India; though there are notable exceptions.[9]

The anti-caste movement of the nineteenth and twentieth society produced trenchant critiques of the socio-religious and political ethos of Indian society and also provided a radical epistemology to create a new world. Scholars who have reflected on the gendered politics of the non-brahmin movements have pointed out "limitations in theory itself in dealing with diversities and subalternity" and argue that in a scenario where gender intersects with caste and class, the theory and methods used "should generate knowledge from the margins".[10] As part of the Self-Respect Movement, which was a counter to the Brahmin-dominated Congress party in Madras Presidency, Periyar deliberated deeply on the gender and caste issues of his time and sought to forge a new semantics for the same. His speeches and writings worked to create a discursive context which enabled women to be part of the public domain and express their politics in various forms. In 1935, the Self-Respect Movement sought to set up a women's centre at Erode and Periyar reflected as to how from 1929 onwards, informally women would visit his house to discuss their social and personal lives. Periyar also articulated on sexuality, masculinity, the need for a new aesthetics which would prove to be more liberative for women. His writings and active social interventions through political movements worked towards visualizing a gendered utopia. The journals and newspapers published as a part of the movement helped to give voice to many ordinary men and women to express their concerns through letters, articles, prose and poetry. Gradually, as argued by V. Geetha, women Self-Respecters turned into active historical agents, making and remaking their everyday lives and hence history.[11]

The engagement with Periyarist politics delineates paradigmatic shifts in understanding subaltern perspectives on gender. S Anandhi observed that: "According to Periyar, while marriage and chastity were key patriarchal institutions, patriarchy as such was ubiquitous, pervading spheres like language, literature and gender-based

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[8]Ibid.

[9]Sharmila Rege (2019). *Debating Dalit difference*. (Eds.) Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore, Routledge Publications, pp. 158–159.

[10]S. Anandhi and Meera Velayutham. (2010). Rethinking feminist methodologies. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 45, No. 44/45. p. 40.

[11]V. Geetha (1991). Gender and political discourse. *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 16, p. 388.

socialization".[12] For V. Geetha, "experiences of the Self-Respect Movement help in theorising the position of those feminists who are critical of and do not wish to ground identity in family and community, and who look to a comradeship to root a new and radical female subjectivity".[13] Sarah Hodges furthers the argument that "the Self Respect movement also based its campaign for transforming society at a key site of its production: the family and its domestic spaces".[14] For Periyar, reforms within the family spaces were crucial to create an egalitarian society, unlike social reformers of the dominant communities who sought to 'protect' the sanctity of the home from any reformatory influences. He deconstructed the secular and sacral power of the priestly community and conversed in the idiom of social justice. He was convinced that, "just as how Brahmanism condemns a very large portion of the working population to shudrahood so it has condemned women to the servitude of marriage…To the extent that a woman lives up to the norms of a chaste and ideal wife to that extent she accepts and revels in her slavery".[15] If women are to be truly liberated, this gender-biased and enforced practice of chastity need to be abolished and in its place, gender-neutral, egalitarian and voluntary practice of chastity need to be established. Forms of marriage which in the name of chastity force the partners to continue and endure a loveless life, should be abolished. Religion and law which prescribe patience to women in the face of husband's brutalities should go. The social dictatorship which forces women to suppress their true love and affection for the sake of chastity compels them to continue living with someone should be abolished.[16]

A New Conjugality

In response to the colonial critique of Indian social customs, especially on the practices of sati and enforced widowhood, efforts were made by the social reformers to construct a new companionate marriage wherein the wife would be educated enough to be part of her husband's life-world. The women, especially from the upper class and upper caste required to be recasted into new behavioral norms. The Brahmo Samaj attempted to negotiate with the marriage rituals, do away with the priestly monopoly and the burden of dowry while retaining the 'saptapadi' (ceremonial turns around the sacred fire by both the bride and groom which solemnizes the marriage and gives it religious sanctity). But the Samaj was unwilling to desert Hinduism, but willing to become liberal and respond to the impact of western faiths.[17] The Arya Samaj too facilitated inter-caste marriages but the orthodoxy of the Hindu priest is not challenged and

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[12]S. Anandhi. (1991). Women's question in the Dravidian movement, c. 1925–1948. *Social Scientist*, Vol. 19, No. 5/6. p. 26.

[13]V. Geetha (1998). Periyar, women and an ethic of citizenship. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 17. p. WS15.

[14]Sarah Hodges (2005). Revolutionary family life and the Self Respect movement in Tamil south India, 1926–49. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 39, p. 257.

[15]Anaimuthu (1974). *Thoughts of Periyar*. Trichy, p. 178.

[16]Kudi Arasu, 18 November, 1928.

[17]http://freemarriage.com/articles/brahmo_samaj_wedding.php, accessed 10th January, 2022.

they did not seek to provide alternative, humanist marriage practices.[18] However, the prevalent idea was to retain the structure of caste endogamy to ensure the honour of the family and the society. The idea of 'consent' was nonexistent and considered alien among many Hindu communities as marriages were endogamous and child marriages were the norm. In 1885, 22-year-old Rukhmabai refused to cohabit and solemnise her marriage with her husband Dadaji Bhikaji that had taken place when she was just 11 years old.[19] In 1889, Phulmoni Devi, a ten-year-old child bride bled to death after her husband (who was twice her age) forcibly consummated their marriage. The case, Queen-Empress vs Hurree Mohun Mythee on 26 July, 1890[20] in the Calcutta High Court generated debates around the vexatious issue of consent, the travails of child brides, and the agency of women.

Periyar questioned the practice of referring to traditions to validate marriage rituals among the Tamils which were very utopian for his times. He was not bothered about the gods, customs or habits of the ancient Tamils as these ideas could not be considered rational. "Were not the people of the Stone Age better than those of the barbaric age? Similarly don't you think that the people of the 20th century have better knowledge and experience than those people who lived 4000, 5000 years ago? Are not people of the modern age put to the necessity of changing their ancient ways of life? So it has become absolutely necessary for us, social reformers, to keep away from the talk of ancient Tamils. Moreover in the present day human society, we the rationalists do not depend on any old, antiquated, obsolete information about the ancient Tamils".[21] The Self-Respect movement also conceived of marriages free from priestly control, the chanting of Sanskrit mantras which the majority did not understand, and to do away with the tying of the 'mangalsutra', the sacred thread which symbolizes the sanctity of the marriage tie. But this was not considered as the sole sacrament of the marriage knot. The practice of 'kanyadaan' or gifting of the bride was also critiqued. Personally, Periyar was vehemently opposed to the tying of the knot or 'thali'. Delivering a speech at a Self-Respect Marriage, he said pointed out, "It is said that the thali is tied around a woman's neck so that others are alerted to the fact that she is married and that in fact, she is the possession of so and so (thus establishing beyond doubt, the question of ownership). The thali has the function of ensuring that no other man desires her. Should not a man's marital status be made equally obvious? Is it not necessary for us to know to which woman he belongs so that we do not wrongly desire him? Therefore, the thali ought to be tied around the necks of men as well. To single women out for such a deceptive ritual practice should invite our condemnation. It should be stopped

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[18]Meena Dhanda (2012). Runaway marriages: A silent revolution. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 47, No. 43, p. 105.

[19]Apurva Vishwanath, As SC looks again at conjugal rights, recalling Rukhmabai, https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/as-sc-looks-again-at-conjugal-rights-recalling-rukhmabai-7409834/, *The Indian Express*, July 18, 2021.

[20]https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1410526/, accessed September 16, 2021.

[21]Periyar: E.V.Ramaswami, SelfRespect Marriages; The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, translated by A.S. Venu, 2021, pp. 8, 9.

at all costs."[22] Further, the 'thali' served to limit the mobility of married women and police their sexual desires. Such traditions continue to be practiced in many parts of India in various forms. To cite a contemporary illustration, the film Bulbbul,[23] recounts the story of a child bride in Bengal. On the day of her wedding, she is being dressed up as a bride and made to wear rings on her feet. Upon asking why she should do so, she is told, "to prevent you from flying away". Such metaphors testify to the arguments espoused by Periyar.

On the contrary, for Periyar, the idea of consent was more important and he argued that the groom and bride should agree for the marriage rather than the families/parents, thus giving them some autonomy over their lives. The open defiance of the orthodox marriage norms drew social ire and ridicule. An incident where a woman left her husband to marry another person who was from the movement led to a public scandal. Periyar's biographer, Sitambaranar married a widow and the following vow was proclaimed, "Today our conjugal life that is based on love begins. From today I accept you my dear and beloved comrade as my spouse, so that I may consecrate my love and cooperation for the cause of social progress in such a manner as would not contradict your desires."[24]

Such a revolutionary vow refashioned the family with the novel vocabulary of conjugality. Terms like 'love' or 'comrade' were never used for intimate relationships which used to be based on hierarchy. Unlike marriages among other religious groups, Hindus considered marriages as not based on contract but a sacrament, without any possibility of a divorce. So, for Periyar to frame the institution of marriage within the contours of consent and desire was indeed a herculean task. He strived for a new terminology to promote female selfhood by negating the scriptural authority which devalued women. In the process, he critiqued the socialization process which laid stress on educating girls to be good wives and mothers, to emulate Sita, Savitri and other mythological figures known for their selfless piety. Instead, one should valorize and imitate women as role models who were good in sports, the arts and sciences and highly educated. Thus a new female subjectivity would emerge. For couples who were part of the Self-Respect movement, domesticity was no longer a virtue to be aspired for as they endured multiple hardships of travel, economic crisis and family displacements because of their commitment to the movement. For many women (Kunjitham, Neelavathi, Annapoorani, Minakshi) wifehood or motherhood was never a dominant narrative in their lives which as a long legion of even the most radical reformers have argued is the basis for women's existence. Gradually, the distinctions between the private and the public realms were erased as the women activists started to reflect and articulate on wide-ranging social and personal concerns.[25]

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[22]Kudi Arasu, 11 May, 1930.

[23]Bulbul, June 24, 2020, directed by Anvita Dutt.

[24]Kudi Arasu, 11 May 1929.

[25]For details refer, V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai (2008). *Towards a non-Brahmin millennium, From Iyothee Thass to Periyar*, Saamya, p. 369.

Periyar's transgressive women interrogated the intimate spaces of the family and society. No wonder that this articulation of conjugality would lead to social tensions. The familiar bogey of women's uncontrolled sexuality and its repercussions were raised and how the movement was undermining the honorable ideas of chastity and feminity. The entire edifice of society would collapse if women preferred getting married based on their own choice. Surely, this went against the very notion of feminine modesty/ shame. Feminine desire had to be appropriately policed so that it is channeled through motherhood. This was also in accordance with religious scriptures. As observed by Periyar, "to discipline love and desire and direct it along particular channels and orient them towards particular persons does not seem to us to have any justification. To desire is human. To control it is to practice a kind of slavery".[26] In a letter to the newspaper *Desabandhu*, a reader argued that if women were given property rights, she would not hesitate to leave her husband if he failed to give her children.[27] The transition of marriage from a sacrament to a social contract would deliver a deathblow to a caste conscious society. Such women would cause a moral panic in society.

Biology is not Destiny

The idea of sexuality is determined by socio-cultural mores and is experienced primarily as a manifestation of the norms and morals of a specific community.[28] Hence, sexuality is not simply an autonomous realm of the senses but is embedded in a social world structured and saturated by relations of power.[29] Such nuanced understanding on sexuality also critiqued the perspectives about biological determinism especially from the 1970s onwards for perpetuating stereotypes and prejudices in society. However, Periyar had his own understanding of gendered identities in society. He did not shy away from voicing opinions on subjects which were considered taboo. On the question of women's sexuality, the dominant discourse of reforms was to view them as asexual beings that were required to sublimate their desires to lead a virtuous life. There existed a sharp distinction between motherhood and female sexuality with the latter being channelized only into legitimate motherhood within a tightly controlled structure of reproduction which ensured caste purity (by mating only with prescribed partners) and patrilineal succession (by restricting mating only with one man).[30] Hence, the only legitimate expression of desire was through motherhood thereby criminalizing any other agential appearance of desire. In a poignant narrative, a Self-Respecter-Kamalakshi speaks for her own existence (What is in Store for Us) devoid

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[26]Anaimuthu, op. cit., p. 153.

[27]V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, op. cit., p. 368.

[28]Meenakshi Thapan (1997). Introduction: Gender and Embodiment in Everyday Life. (Ed.) Meenakshi Thapan, *Embodiment: Essays on gender and identity*, New Delhi: OUP, pp. 1–34.

[29]Margeret Jolly and Lenore Manderson (1997). Introduction: Sites of desire/economies of pleasure in Asia and the Pacific. (Ed.) Manderson and Jolly, *Sites of desire: Economies of pleasure in Asia and the Pacific*, University of Chicago Press, p. 26.

[30]Uma Chakravarti (1993). Conceptualizing Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and state. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, No. 14, April 3, p. 581.

of love, desire and companionship. A child bride, her family did not have the money to complete the rituals to consummate the marriage once she came of age. She is languishing as a domestic slave whereas the person to whom she is married returned the symbolic offerings and is seeking remarriage. She cannot even contemplate remarriage. Kamalakshi questions as to which honorific would suit her—'Mrs' or 'Miss' as her life is in an indeterminate state.[31]

Periyar wrote a scathing critique of the hegemonic ideal of chastity which was constructed to keep women under bondage. He pointed out that if women had written the Dharmasastras or religious scriptures perhaps things would have been different. He noted that the depressed communities and women were systematically denied access to any forms of knowledge and were forced to lead a life of servitude. He did not accept that there were separate rights for men and women as their inherent natures were different. For Periyar, notions of feminity and masculinity were constructed socially and culturally. "Though women get pregnant and carry children in their wombs for ten months this does not make them different from men. With respect to qualities such as courage, anger, the power to command and the will to violence, women are like men. On the other hand, just because men do not bear children it cannot be said they differ from women in respect of love, peace and the ability to nurture.[32] "To make strength, anger and ruling ability solely male attributes and calm, patience and the ability to nurture life female ones is to say that bravery, strength and ruling prowess are characteristic of the tiger while the ability to care characterizes the lamb".[33] In an explicit article, Periyar argued that masculinity degraded women. He was equally critical of the prevailing notions of feminity which made women subservient. To be truly emancipated, women needed to get rid of the onus of reproduction which renders them more vulnerable. In addition, the conventional idea of bodily aesthetics, decorum and morality only served to make women willing accomplices in their own subservience. He encouraged women to prove that they were also capable of taking on familial responsibilities and earning money.[34] Again, this was a discernible departure from the prevalent ideas, reinforced by scriptural authority which considered women as fickle-minded and susceptible to passions.

The moral universe constructed by the Self-Respect movement was highly gendered. Many women publicly spoke and wrote as to how men needed to 'imagine' the misery and torture inflicted upon women. One woman spoke as to how men should be ritually tonsured, veiled and consigned to the kitchen and lead the life of a widow. Another observed that women should question religious practices which discipline women's conduct. There were many stories and poems written in the press questioning

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[31]Kamalakshi (2003). *What is in store for us, The other half of the coconut: Women writing self-respect history: An anthology of self-respect literature (1928-1936)*. Ed. and Trans. K. Srilata, Kali for Women, pp. 28–31.

[32]Kudi Arasu, 12 February 1928.

[33]V. Anaimuthu (1974). *Thoughts of Periyar*. Trichy, p. 121.

[34]Kudi Arasu, 8 February 1931.

the gendered conventions. This was evident during the debates on the Sarda Act and the Hindu Religious Endowment Act (popularly known as the Devadasi Abolition Bill) when the movement condemned the hereditary practice of sexual slavery. Interestingly Periyar pointed out that the binary of wife and whore exists for women but there is no word in the Tamil vocabulary for a male who lead a very licentious life. Indeed morality was never a part of masculinity. He considered chastity and depravity as constituting a peculiar kind of sexual code and signified the patriarchal control of women's bodies. Chastity insisted a woman could be possessed by only one man while the other sought to make a woman an object of public lust.[35]

The public debates by the movement both in the press and Periyar's speeches obviously did not endear them to other nationalists who wanted to effect social changes while keeping the strictures of varnashrama or the caste order intact. In the process they devised their own epistemology of Brahmanical patriarchy and the gendered nature of caste practices. During his visit to the Soviet Union in 1931-32, Periyar witnessed novel changes in the institution of family and the emerging discussions on birth control.

From Motherhood to Parenthood

Needless to mention, motherhood is glorified both at the scriptural realm and also in popular culture wherein motherhood is the sole reason for a woman's existence. However, for Periyar motherhood and masculinity were social categories which need to be interrogated and if there exists true love between man and woman, then all responsibilities, except that of bearing a child should be equally borne by both. He lamented the fact that women were expected to desire jewellery and other adornment but never asked to exercise their mind power and value their intellect. Such cultural valorization of beauty and feminity were internalized by women who were then only praised for their physical fertility.[36] Motherhood was devised as a safe zone to harness women's desire. He linked the emphasis on motherhood to the emergence of private property and debunked the idea that motherhood was 'natural' for women. As the legality of the heir is crucial, it is vital to control women's bodies and hence women were forced into monogamous marriages. The triad of caste, private property and sexuality is the basis for the surveillance on women. Periyar argued that the biggest hindrance for women's autonomy was reproduction which made her dependent on men. The birth of the heir was essential not only to safeguard private property but also ensure a safe passage to heaven. Motherhood came under increasing pressure, for now it was significant for the reproduction of the patriarchal caste order in this world and also for its existence in the next as well.[37] His was one of the earliest formulations of conceptualizing brahmanical patriarchy. Further, he exhorted women to not depend on men for their own liberation. In his words, "Men's endeavour for the emancipation

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[35]V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, op. cit., p. 378.
[36]Kudi Arasu, 21 September 1946.
[37]V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, op. cit.

of women only perpetuates women's slavery and hampers their emancipation. The pretence of men that they respect women and that they strive for their freedom is only a ruse to deceive women. Have you ever seen anywhere a jackal freeing the hen of the lamb or the cat freeing the rats, or the capitalists freeing the workers?"[38] He was also self-reflexive and admitted candidly while writing the obituary of his first wife, Nagammai; he has not followed with Nagammai even 'one hundredeth' of the ideas on women's liberation that he put forward.[39]

It is essential to juxtapose Periyar's radical understanding of gender against the nationalist position which sought to make women more intelligent such that she will conduct her domestic affairs more skillfully. He rubbished Brahmanical notions of *kanyadan* (the gifting of the girl-child), which turned them into mere objects thus nullifying their subjectivity. The entire patriarchal edifice has reduced her self-worth to the servitude of marriage and the ideal of chastity. He was also aware of Malthusian arguments on population growth and urged women to learn about contraception which would help them to control their own bodies. Interestingly, Kudi Arasu carried the report of a survey conducted by an American University[40] and the translator argued that the university women were aware about birth control which is essential to plan one's life. Periyar wrote about the work of the Marie Stopes clinics and observed that childbirth should not be coerced and a condition to be endured rather, it's a matter of choice. He was adamant that childbirth led to women being enslaved to masculine social norms and frequently bearing children was detrimental for both men and women.[41]

Gradually, the movement fostered a new configuration of the marital world wherein the partners could formulate their marriage vows which spoke of respecting one another, which enabled women as equal partners with rights to property and power within the household, in short—an equivalent relationship. Women were free to leave abusive unions without the fear of any stigma. The caste prescriptions were ignored as also brahmanical rituals to consecrate marriages. The Self-Respect marriages could be dissolved and re-marriage was advocated for spouses, should they wish to separate or should one of them die. Further, these marriages were meant to free women from domestic tyrannies and the burden of unwanted and multiple pregnancies.[42] After Independence, when C.N. Annadurai became the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in 1967, he legalized the Self-Respect Marriages (Suyamariyathai) in 1968. It did away with the 'saptapadi', seven steps around the fire and brahmanical rituals. Simple ceremonies conducted in the presence of friends and families with the exchange of

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[38]Quoted in Sarah Hodges (2008). *Contraception, colonialism and commerce: Birth control in South India 1920-1940*, London: Routledge, p. 117.

[39]Meena Kandawamy (Tr.) (2019). *Why were women enslaved*. Chennai: The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, p. 14.

[40]Kudi Arasu, 18 January 1931.

[41]Periyar (2012). *Women Enslaved*. (Tr) G. Aloysious, Critical Quest Publishers p. 7.

[42]Viramani (2019). *Self-Respect marriage: Concept and history*, p. 45.

garlands and rings would be considered a valid marriage. In 2015, a Public Interest Litigation was filed before the Madras High Court to declare such marriages illegal. The Court dismissed the petition stating that Hindu rituals have been pluralist in nature and differs according to regional and cultural norms. The Self-Respect Marriages are not unconstitutional.[43]

A Space of Her Own

One of the significant tropes of gendered utopias is the imagination of sheltered spaces wherein women can reflect and seek out new horizons. Pandita Ramabai conceived 'Mukti Sadan' and Begum Rokeyya dreamt of 'Ladyland', zones where women could be free from the shackles of domesticity and fear of violence and exercise their agency. As the women of the Self-Respect movement travelled, became mobile and visible, they felt the need of their own space. As they debated on issues of caste, relevance of religion, etc., they felt a need to have an autonomous women's forum within the movement. There arose a demand to set up a centre where women of all communities would find space to follow their choices, even shelter them from unhappy marriages. They would learn to be economically independent. Many women were reluctant to work in mixed company and hesitant about the public domain. Such spaces would nurture women and provide a more enabling environment to them.

For a decade (1928-37) Kudi Arasu was a platform for men and women to espouse their radical views. There were critical commentaries on the veiling of women and whether it had any religious sanction. A sustained debate occurred on women's property rights, devadasi system, women's right to re-marriage, inter-caste marriages. There were translations from other journals describing the life of women in other countries. To illustrate: Socialism and Women;[44] one article argued that women are the original proletariat. Another author had apparently paid attention to the cooking tasks of women for the article wished for cooking chores to be made simpler. This would lighten women's burdens and they would have enough time and energy to educate their minds. The activist Neelavathi, who wrote the remarkable text, 'Women and Work' argued that women's work has been diminished by reducing it to merely reproduction. There is nothing about work that would make it essentially masculine. She also noted the dual nature of women's work, both in the domestic sphere and her work outside the home in various capacities. She wished that women also would be granted the dignity of labour thus questioning the very category of 'work' itself by arguing that it is not essentially male. Further she pointed out that women's workload has increased as they work beside men in all spheres—in factories, hospitals, tailoring, weaving, construction, vending and trading. Women were also doctors, teachers and journalists.[45] In yet another article, Neelavathi wrote eloquently on the horrors of

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[43]A. Subramani, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/self-respect-marriages-in-tamil-nadu-cant-be-declared-illegal-rules-madras-hc/articleshow/49725552.cms, November 9, 2015. Accessed September 15, 2021.

[44]Kudi Arasu, 15 November 1931.

[45]V Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, op. cit., pp. 398-399.

untouchability and exhorted educated women to pick up the cudgels of reform and not live like frogs in the well. Women should never take the backseat when it concerns their own betterment.[46]

The Self Respect women became adept in appropriating the vocabulary of the nationalist discourse. To illustrate: During the women's conference held under the aegis of the movement, Lakshmi Ammal gave an overpowering speech, "If men were to persist thus in not giving into women's demands for freedom and if they were to persist in their belief that women were their playthings' women will have no choice but to practice a policy of 'Non–cooperation' with respect to the men in their lives."[47] They cleverly linked the social with the political. Another activist, Minakshi tweaked the Gandhian technique of picketing liquor shops and those which sold foreign cloth. She exhorted women to ponder whether social or political freedom is more important for them. Women should offer satyagraha and picket the homes of the orthodox men who prevent any kind of reforms to better the lot of women.[48] It is indeed remarkable that the Self-Respect women could delineate the nuances of freedom and seek to create a gendered political domain.

Fissures in Utopia

Hence the Self-Respect movement sought to devalue the binaries of the inner and outer worlds. Many critiques had sought to fashion an utopia based on gender equality— Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Savitribai Phule, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, to name a few. Periyar sought to construct a radical epistemology to enable women to forge their subject-hood by articulating a novel universe based not on the myth of a glorious past but on a rational hermeneutics. However, certain policy initiatives from the 1930s onwards brought forth the latent patriarchal impulses of the movement and relegated women to a secondary position.

The gendered articulations of the Self-Respect movement encountered a huge challenge during the anti-Hindi agitations of the late 1930s. The Congress government in Madras Presidency decided to make the study of Hindi compulsory in the secondary schools under its jurisdiction in April 1938. This led to widespread protests and the emergence of language as the significant marker of identity. It also marked the beginning of Tamil nationalism as a mass movement. As argued by Sumathi Ramaswamy, language devotion in its pious, filial and erotic forms as an entry point into the study of Tamil linguistic nationalism, one that better explains why language (Tamil) was able to mobilize people from differing social, political, and religious and ideological locations in its cause.[49]

Women also participated in the anti-Hindi agitation in large numbers through picketing, rallies, conferences and even going to prison but gradually a significant

[46]K. Srilatha, op. cit., pp. 84-86.
[47]Kudi Arasu, 11 May 1930.
[48]Ibid.
[49]Sumathi Ramaswamy (1997). *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 4–9.

transformation occurred. They were essentialized as mothers yoked to the service of Tamil nationalism, which was a masculine project.[50] Language itself was feminized as goddess, mother and maiden, with the motherhood image eventually becoming dominant with the 'mother' pleading, commanding, cajoling and appealing to her 'sons' to fight for 'her' honour.[51] Thus, women's individuality was subsumed under a larger narrative of Tamil devotion which privileged the maternal.[52] Similar tropes were used during the Bengal Partition in 1905 and later during the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 wherein the body of Mother India was being vivisected and she was desperately begging her sons to rise and unite in her defence. The gradual shift from caste to language as the sole signifier of identity during the Self-Respect movement meant that men were envisioned as discrete subjects and agents while women and their bodies became invested with a non-differentiated, universal meaning of motherhood.[53] A few decades earlier, women in the movement had actively engaged with the questions of caste-based inequalities and patriarchy and sought to create new epistemic regimes to create a counter narrative. Thus, the movement which sought to free women and their bodies from bearing witness to the integrity of the community, nation and race and to unsettle the naturalness of motherhood for women[54] began to marginalize their concerns. Women protestors were glorified as "mothers of the war against Hindi" while men were glorified as "heroes of the war against Hindi".[55] The existing socioeconomic inequalities were glossed over under the overarching umbrella of Tamil nationalism which needed to confront the imposition of a hegemonic language.

The co-option of the movement within the patriarchal discourse of the anti-Hindi agitation has been explained by Anandhi S as the failure of the movement to instil a new anti-patriarchal consciousness among its followers as well as the uneven spread of anti-patriarchal consciousness within it.[56] Thus, the dormant patriarchal values reasserted itself when the suitable opportunity presented itself. The moral universe of the movement could not withstand the challenges posed by electoral politics. Periyar held very distinctive ideas on the notion of love and matrimony as left to the individual's choice. He spoke on the concept of 'free love' which he observed during his visit to Russia. He pointed out that men and women living together without getting formally married was prevalent in Russia because the idea of private property was absent. Due to property and the worry of inheritance, we have laws related to legal heirs and inheritance in our society and families are forced to play this game.[57] One cannot help acquiescing with Urvashi Butalia when she pointed out that "the

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[50]V. Geetha. The story of a marriage: Being a tale of self-respect unions and what happened to them. www.academia.edu, accessed 15 January 2020.

[51]Sumathi Ramaswamy, op. cit., pp. 110–112.

[52]Ibid., p. 188.

[53]Uma Ganesan (2011). Gender and caste: Self-respect movement in the Madras Presidency, 1925-1950, Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Cincinnati, p. 187.

[54]Refer V. Geetha, The story of marriage, op. cit.

[55]Ganesan, op. cit., p. 185.

[56]Anandhi S, op. cit., p. 38.

[57]Periyar, op. cit., p. 12.

same motherland which came to signify 'home' and 'country' for men had a different meaning for women. For Indian women, the process of nation-making was not one of finding an identity; rather it was simply one where old, existing patriarchies, old models of hierarchy and control, found new expression. Women were left very much where they were before-and perhaps even worse off.[58]

In both public and private domains, Periyar foreground equality and mutual self-respect. However, today his persona has been reduced to an atheist and a smasher of idols and his radical ideas on women's subjectivity have been sidelined. It is imperative that Periyar's ideas on gender be widely debated in the public as there has been an increasing backlash on gendered freedoms. Despite the fact that political parties owing allegiance to the ideals of Periyar and the Self-Respect movement have been at the helm of affairs in Tamil Nadu for many decades, the annihilation of caste and patriarchy as an ideological project has been shelved. The Self-Respect Movement was renamed the Dravida Kazhagam in 1944. In 1949, some of his closest aides formed the Dravida Munetra Kazhagam as they wanted to enter the electoral fray. Though various welfare measures were passed for women, politics remained largely masculinised and women were relegated to the familiar tropes of mothers, wives and sisters. The actual political representation of women in politics is actually very less.[59] The brahmanical value system against which Periyar protested has gained ascendance. To illustrate, in 2005, during an interview to a Tamil magazine, an actor had commented that 'no educated man should expect his wife to be a virgin...'. This lead to vociferous protests that reference to live-in relationships as a norm was unacceptable, derogatory to women and against Tamil culture.[60] This underlines the moral panic female agency would invoke and the ideological bankruptcy of the political parties that claim to follow Periyar's ideals as the latter failed to contest such narratives.

The state has also witnessed many honour killings,[61] when young couples belonging to different caste groups have been killed by families for daring to break caste endogamy. The father of the young girl who was killed to redeem the family's

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[58]Urvashi Butalia, "Mother India", http://www.newint.org/features/1996/03/05/mother/ Accessed 15 February 2020.

[59]The rival alliances led by the DMK and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam both fielded considerably fewer female candidates compared to the last state elections. The AIADMK went from 30 to 17 female candidates (nine of whom contested seats reserved for Scheduled Castes), and the DMK from 18 to 11 (six of whom contested in SC constituencies). The total number of women elected also fell—only three secured seats for the AIADMK and six for the DMK, in the 234-member assembly. Vignesh Karthik Kr and Pulari Meera Baskar, Towards Equal Terms: The way forward for the Dravidian parties is through increased women's representation, https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/women-dmk-aiadmk-tamil-nadu-election,

[60]A. Vaidyanathan, Khushboo pre-marital sex comments: All cases dismissed, April 29, 2010, https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/khushboo-pre-marital-sex-comments-all-cases-dismissed-416539

[61]Priya Ramani, 'Evidence' Kathir: making Dalit politics inclusive, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/evidence-kathir-making-dalit-politics-inclusive/article66329565.ece, January 7, 2023.

honour observed that 'his caste is more important than god'.[62] When Dalits seek to make use of constitutional provisions and ameliorate their conditions, they have been systematically targeted.[63] The state has remained a mute spectator to such heinous crimes. Ironically, Dalits have also adhered to such obnoxious customs. There was also a report of a kangaroo court being run in Thogarapalli panchayat wherein the community head of the Scheduled Caste village, who is also a DMK[64] union secretary levies fines on couples who marry for love.[65] Unfortunately, such discourses are becoming the norm elsewhere in the country also. About 40 students of a women's college in Maharashtra's Amravati district pledged to desist from "love marriage" on the eve of Valentine's Day. They also pledged against giving or receiving dowry during marriage. The last line of the oath reads, "I am taking this oath for a strong and healthy India."[66]

Such statements circulating in the public domain reflect not only a sense of moral panic but also the gradual churning of a counter-revolution to counteract gendered equalities which visionaries like Periyar had envisaged. Unfortunately, the novel framework of the self-respect marriages are also limited to those who identify themselves as Hindu and not popular amongst other communities. For inter-faith couples, there is no legal recognition if they wish to marry in the self-respect fashion. The radical imagination and vocabulary of Periyar's movement, especially where gender politics was concerned has diminished into a narrative wherein women are considered as unequal citizens. The humanist envisioning of Periyar for an egalitarian society is still a work in progress.

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[62]Ibid.

[63]Kavitha Muralidharan, Across Tamil Nadu, Caste Violence Has Increased During the Lockdown, Say Activists, https://thewire.in/caste/tamil-nadu-caste-atrocities-lockdown, 3rd May 2020, Accessed 15 June 2020.

[64]Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, a political party which is based on Periyar's values and thoughts

[65]P.V. Srividya, "Kangaroo Court puts Price on Union of Love", *The Hindu*, New Delhi, 7 December 2022.

[66]Vivek Deshpande, Day before Valentine's Day: 40 college girls administered oath against love marriage, *The Indian Express*, February 15, 2020, https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/wont-do-love-marriage-amravati-students-made-to-take-oath-on-valentines-day-eve-6268226/#:~:text=About%2040%20students%20of%20a,or%20receiving%20dowry%20during%20marriage.

Raving with Equality? On Protean Forms of Caste and Gender in the Women's/Gender Studies Departments in India

Smita M. Patil[1]

Abstract

Women's and gender studies in the twenty-first century have transformed the question of theory and praxis across the globe. As a discipline, it is waging its struggle against diverse forms of power and patriarchy. Women's studies in India started its own unique trajectory from the 1970s onwards. However, Dalit feminism critiqued the metanarrative of Indian feminism in the 1990s. Dalit feminists argued that they are oppressed on the basis of caste, class and gender. Dalit feminism subverted the internal and external patriarchy through its own powerful methodology and tropes. It debunked the partial, Brahminic, Indian feminism and its conspicuous silence on the relations of caste, gender, class and patriarchy. Dominant feminists included Dalit feminist discourse in the curriculum in a patronising fashion. Paradoxically, the social composition of those academicians was confined to the upper caste/class locations. This article engages with the experiences of Dalit women academicians who teach in the department of women's and gender studies in India. It explores forms and practices of caste, class, and gender discrimination in such departments. These forms of domination and subordination show the contradiction between practice and theory. It reflects on the moral and ethical positioning to unpack the everyday caste violence that operates in the educational institutions. It maps the politics of women's and gender studies in India. This article analyses the possibilities and impossibilities related to Dalit feminist engagement with capabilities and intersectional approaches in women's and gender studies in India. The main thrust is to examine the real and utopian dimensions of the assertions of Dalit women academicians.

Keywords

Women's and gender studies, caste, Dalit, patriarchy, feminism

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Introduction

The Social and political context of the disciplines and transfer of those ideas demonstrate the relations of power, knowledge and academia across the globe. Societal control and its subversion through modern politics and knowledge related practices have unleashed new trajectory of reason. Debates around reformation, renaissance, enlightenment and counter enlightenment embody the conflicts and consensus around the trajectory of (un) reason. However, global thought is critiqued for its patriarchal approaches. It opened new ways for articulating resistance. Assertions that determine the foregrounding of counter thought to the oppressive ideas have to be situated to grapple with the history of ideas. There are ways in which the epistemological foundation of a discipline is analyzed. Struggles that led to the establishment of a particular discipline resulted in the epistemological foundation like that in the case of ethnic studies (Shih & Lionnet 2011: 18). The epistemological foundation of hegemonic women's and gender studies in general and Dalit feminist perspectives in particular have to be revisited in order to understand the character of domination and oppression.

Social and political awakening related to the votes and education of women to that of the larger questions of body and sexuality departed from the erstwhile patriarchal thought and practices. Nineteenth and early twentieth century first wave feminism to that of second wave feminism from the 1970s onwards led to the emergence of unique thought and praxis. The advent of women's studies and gender studies needs to be understood in the backdrop of the aforementioned epistemic and political transformations. There are various readings related to the emergence of women's and gender studies. These disciplines are considered as broadly embedded in the Marxist framework and postmodern approaches (Eagleton 2003). Alain Badiou explored whether feminist philosophy raised any serious challenge to the anti-philosophy in theory (Badiou 1999). On the other hand, Frederic Jameson categorized the new subjects of history in the post-1960s such as women and Blacks that challenged the class approach. Balkanization of class-based approaches in the context of the formation of ethnic studies and women studies were untainted by the theory (Jameson, cited in Shih & Lionnet 2011:13). As Anna Donadey observed, "...When the civil rights, feminist and decolonization struggles of the 1950s to 1970s began to infiltrate the academic curricula in the 1970s, and when works of writers of color became integrated into the curriculum in the 1990s, this new configuration unsettled the centrality of the "dead white male" canon resulting in the bitter so-called culture war of the 1990s" (Donadey 2011: 62). Thus, Shui-mei Shih and Francois Lionnett stated that the theory generated the cult of the other like that of ethnic studies and women's studies (Shui & Lionnet 2011: 8). One of the central questions related to any discipline or sub-discipline is that whether it has acquired the status of a theory within the field of social sciences and humanities. Irrespective of the nature and the conceptual rigor of the ethnic and Francophone studies, it could not attain the status of theory (Shih & Lionnet 2011: 14). However, structuralism and post-structuralism need to be questioned in order to understand the space of women's and gender studies. Post

structuralist -high claims related to the death of the subjectivity have demonstrated its approach to new subjectivities in a patronising manner. Women and minorities thus were incorporated into a post structuralist pantheon in superficial manner (Shih & Lionnet 2011: 11). The geopolitics of theory also reflect the history of erasures and denials grounded in the whims and interests of a hegemonic scholastic community. For instance, Francophone studies differed from the depoliticized versions of theory in United States. Paradoxically, it has not acknowledged the political and intellectual personalities such as that of Giles Deluze to Frantz Fanon and Aime Cesaire while creating space for the dialogue across feminism, gender, sexuality and ethnic studies (Shih & Lionnet 2011: 19). Eurocentric, patriarchal conceptual realms consequently established its reign through conscious exclusions of insurgent thoughts from the margins. Oppressed sections in India also had to challenge the dominant religious order and its dictates related to knowledge. Anti-caste movements in India fought for the rights related to education. Organic intellectuals from the subjugated castes had to tackle the Brahmanic readings of colonialism and nationalism as well.

Dalit studies, for Ramnarayan Rawat and K. Satyanarayana, as a critical space read Dalits as sidelined subjects. It is also studied as a field that re-reads the Indian society and history. Dalit studies is evaluated through the popularization of the category of 'Dalit' through the Dalit Panther movement in the 1970s in Maharashtra. It unleashed the critique to the Gandhian term, Harijan. Academic discourse from 1970s started following the term, Dalit that emerged through the vernacular debates. Questions of humiliation and dignity that emerged through the Dalit vernacular narratives in the twentieth century became part of the South Asian academic realm through the entry of Dalit academicians in the 1990s (Rawat & Satyanarayana 2016: 1–30). Nevertheless, women's studies became part of the academia in the same period.

Emergence of Women's and Gender Studies in India

Women's studies in India have been generating distinct, conceptual categories and forms of praxis. The trajectory of women's studies in India signifies its vibrant and diverse theoretical and action-oriented perspectives. The entry of the discipline also needs to be examined in its historical context. Women's movements in the developing countries have been challenging the status quo. Some among them have radically differed from the initial anti-status quo groups. It is also noted that initial forms of women's movement were caught in the societal order. For instance, it could not discuss how to annihilate inherent caste hierarchy within the women's movement. New forms of such assertions happened in chaotic manner (Freeman 1973: 792–811). It lacked cohesive approaches that link the various streams of women's political articulations. At the global level, different ideological strands within feminism have also created its own wilderness as well as strength (Showalter 1981: 179–205). Thus, caste in the Indian context of the women's studies and women's movement remains unexplored. Gender relations in pre-colonial India were observed as that of religious sanctions and oppressive practices (Chakravarti 2018; Ketkar 1979; Kumar 1997). During the

colonial era, public and private realms of the women's questions evolved through the contentions of colonial authorities, British feminists, and Indian elites (Chitnis & Wright 2007). The women's assertions in the 1950s and 1960s were silent when compared to the later phases. Still, politics against neoliberalism emerged through the women's organizations in India (Armstrong 2018). Nationalist groups, social reform, and leftist streams were the vibrant ideological streams within the Indian women's movement (Kasturi & Majumdar 2016, Kumar 1997; Sarkar & Sarkar 2008). Therefore, one has to investigate the fields of the social and political forces that changed the direction of the women's movement in India.

Towards Equality Report (1974) paved the fundamental ground for the birth of women's studies in India (Bagchi 2013). The idea of the 'Indian Association of Women's Studies' emerged at the First National Conference on Women's Studies in India in the year 1981 (Howe 1981). Women's studies is conceptualised as "the intellectual arm of the women's movement" (Majumdar cited in Bagchi 2013). Mary John argues that women's studies, along with other political movements in the 1970s and 1980s engaged with modernity in distinct fashion (John 2005: 47–48). It probed the nature of oppressive traditions. Patriarchy in the Indian context was challenged through the rare, political awakening of the women's studies. However, it is being questioned whether women's studies can move out of its status as an elitist discipline. In addition to it, whether women's studies in India have really been able to come out of its Eurocentric and Brahmanic ideological-paradigms or not. Social composition of the academicians in the domain of women's and gender studies in India reflects the dominant caste-based Indian society. Feminist groups and women's movement thus have been limited to the exclusive epistemic domain of upper castes-class in India. According to M.S. Sreerekha, "women's studies" in India are being studied through its representation in the dominant academic institutions (Sreerekha 2016: 64–68). In addition to its ideological and historical background, it is quite often asked whether it is a dominant discipline or a marooned discipline due to the patriarchal nature of the disciplinary space. It is observed that women's studies and Dalit studies are marginalized due to their epistemic challenges to orthodox Indian society. The radical nature of women studies is being depoliticized due to civil society organizations and patriarchal consensus within educational structures (Sreerekha 2016: 64). Feminist struggles are forced to limit its politics of change and reform in the time of fundamentalism and orthodox politics (Majumdar 1999: 36). Scholars have been critiquing the potential and challenges of women's studies. There are critiques that study the superior nature of women's studies and its impossibilities linked to the caste-class allied prerogatives of women's studies. There were apprehensions regarding its elitist nature. Women's studies, for Vidyut Bhagwat, can reach the people through distance education in addition to the dominant forms of education. The homogenous and isolated nature of earlier debates in women's studies constrained its popularity across people from varied social strata. Women's studies and its engagement with different streams within the social sciences and humanities have to capture the nuances of the social and political lives of women (Bhagwat 2002: 235–243). Critiques within

and outside the women's studies movement led to the articulations around caste and gender relations in the 1990s onwards. However, the entry of globalization, politics of international actors, funding agencies and so on brought drastic changes in the nature of women's studies that move beyond the category of women's studies to that of gender' studies. Eventually the naming of the department from women's to gender studies also changed the pedagogy and curriculum. Vibhuti Patel has observed that, "In the 21st century, a move from Women's Studies to Gender Studies is gaining ground in the mainstream academia" (Patel 2023: 33). However, it is important to explore the Dalit feminist take on women's and gender studies.

Dalit Feminist Critique to Women's and Gender Studies

Current issues of Dalit women academicians show the complex nature of caste-class, gender and patriarchy. Dalit women academicians have to confront patriarchal misogynistic forces within the academic power structures. Language of oppression is central to the academic spaces as well. The sexist language of the upper caste peers create psychological repercussions among Dalit girl students (Kumar cited in Rathod 2023). Dalit women faculty members face similar experiences on an every day basis. As part of caste discrimination, an associate professor from Delhi University was slapped by an upper caste colleague (Shankar 2021) Her right to marry outside her caste is also questioned by the male faculty. This incident shows the ways in which the privacy and dignity of Dalit women academicians is questioned by the caste and patriarchy equations at the larger societal level (*The Wire* 2022). The patronising language of the educational discourse carries sophisticated forms of patriarchy and casteist approaches against Dalit women. This incident demonstrates a miniscule form of the larger oppression.

Dalit feminists started a distinct discourse on caste and gender in the post-independence period (Guru 1995 & Rege 1998). The category of Dalit feminism emerged in the State of Maharashtra in the 1990s. Further it was established at the national level through National Federation of Dalit Women on 11 August 1995 at New Delhi. Dalit feminists questioned the mainstream feminists' uncritical approach towards caste. They positioned mainstream women's movement as Brahmanic in nature and dominated by upper caste women. They critiqued the state, mainstream feminism, and forms of inequality through the framework of Dalit women's experiences. Dalit women analyzed their oppression outside their caste as central to their articulation. They also talked about their lower status due to their subjugation outside their community by larger society and within their own caste-community. Gopal Guru analyzed the ways in which "external", and "internal" patriarchy structure the oppression of Dalit women. They realized that their issues are not addressed in the conceptual terrain of Brahmanic feminism. Recognition on these lines prompted them to articulate their own issues as different from that of the hegemonic Indian feminism. It also impacted the vernacular Dalit assertions. Ironically, Dalit feminist knowledge production was gradually coopted by the upper caste academicians due to their social

and cultural capital. They were able to translate those vernacular Dalit debates around caste and gender and related themes due to their proficiency in English language and networks within the dominant academic system.

Emergence of Dalit feminist assertions needs to be viewed as a succinct academic response to these rare, historical interventions of intellectuals from the oppressed castes. Based on the anti-caste conceptualization and annihilation of caste practices from Jotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, *Chhatrapati* Shahu Maharaj, B.R. Ambedkar, Mukta Salve, Tarabai Shinde, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, Ayyankali and others, Dalit feminists theorized the caste, gender and patriarchy linked gendered oppression. Dalit women scholars have to undergo hardships while pursuing higher education to create their own spaces in Brahminic research institutes and organizations (Neelakandan 2022). Hence, the struggle of Dalit women in academia needs to be documented. Dalit studies in general and Dalit feminism in particular can delineate the contradictions of the 'social' and the 'political' in the context of caste, gender, and democracy. Similarly, scholars who have studied the contours of race and gender too assert the conscious denial of race and gender in the towering space of global women's studies. Therefore, it is asserted that the existence of race and gender as a discipline in educational institutions needs to be studied in its specific context. What are the modes through which marginalized social stratifications like that of Dalits are received in the hegemonic academic space of majoritarian-dominant /upper caste and class communities? Subjugated identities in the realm of academics are perceived by the dominant caste and academics-policy groups often in an indifferent fashion. Such writings have different ideological takes on the social and political questions of hegemonic academics and knowledge production. Race/ racism-related questions in education, for instance, are suppressed through the interests of dominant races' ideology (Gillborn 2008). One can argue that racist ideology and practice operate through its systematic and sophisticated modes. The psychological stages of the teachers from oppressed communities are hampered by the power equations of the dominant communities. Irrespective of the legacy of black women's political activism, they are unacknowledged in political spaces (Simien 2004: 82). There is a dearth of studies that explore the relations between caste, lower castes, and the teaching profession. Though, this article tries to explore the experiential complexities of Dalit women academicians in the departments of women's and gender studies.

Methodology

Extensive qualitative interviews of twenty Dalit women academicians from Central and State universities across India were conducted to engage with the multifaceted and specific form of their discrimination within the women's and gender studies departments. Their age group was twenty-five to fifty years. Some of them were permanent and others were on the basis of contract. As a Dalit feminist, who teaches women's and gender studies debates, I conducted in-depth interviews to interact with Dalit women scholars. While narrating it, I use the terms, women's/gender studies.

These interviews thus depart from the separation between the subject and the object (Oakley 1981 and Cook & Fonow 2008). The contradiction and power relations between the researcher and the researched are addressed in this article. In addition to these facets of this article, Dalit women have a better understanding of their own standpoint. The emphasis on the experiences of Dalit women academicians thus obliterates partiality.

Hence, the method here is to be more objective and focused on experiences. At the same time, research on these academic travails of Dalit women academicians is non-essentialist because it has larger goals of liberating feminist studies from Brahmanical patriarchy. It directs us towards the emancipatory politics based on idea of justice, equality, and liberty. In Smithian manner, it reflects on academic women and their exclusion through the ideological structure (Smith 2008). It attempts to capture vexed, existential questions of those Dalit women scholars in the hegemonic, Brahminic women's/gender studies departments in India. The anonymity of the respondents is maintained to consider the ethical standards that are essential in research related to marginalized communities.

The following questions were asked to the respondents: (i) How do you look at your entry to higher education and women's /gender studies department as an academician? (ii) Do you think your social location has impacted your presence in the women's/gender studies department which in general is monopolized by upper caste academicians? (iii) What are your experiences on the caste equations that operate in the women's/gender studies department in particular? (iv) Do you think that Dalit women scholars in women's /gender studies are able to transform their experiences into critiques of Brahminic women's/gender studies? (v) Is it possible to forge solidarity across the women's /gender studies scholars from marginalized communities across the globe? (vi) What do you think about postcolonial, diasporic women's /gender studies, academicians who deal with caste and gender questions? (vii) Do they identify with scholars from the oppressed section scholars from India? (viii) Do you think that the intersectionality approach has the potential to address the existential and disciplinary contradictions of the women's /gender studies scholars from the margins of caste-based Indian society?

The next section attempts to thematically present the arguments drawn from their interviews. It will register the voices of Dalit women faculty members in the departments of women's and gender studies. Their responses are complex and even challenge the possibilities and limits of the questions. Articulations of the respondent are mixed in a peculiar fashion and few aspects can be spelt out.

Puzzles of Caste, Gender and Academic Mobility

Have Dalit women been able to enter the public sphere or not? Their journey is tedious due to various factors. A majority of Dalit women academicians belong to poor, lower middle class and middle-class backgrounds. Their experiences related to their higher education and social mobility varies in eastern, western, northern and southern parts of

India. First generation-Dalit women from northern and eastern India struggled hard to secure higher education. They had to face poverty and patriarchal bias from their home and relatives. Family believed that if the boy /their brother pursued higher education, then it would benefit the family. Patriarchal approach towards the education of girls is gradually changing as well. On the contrary, second and third generation Dalit women from western and southern India are able to attain higher education and jobs. Instead of dire financial status, Dalit women are able to convince their parents regarding the importance of higher education. Babasaheb Ambedkar and anti-caste icons from respective regions influence their educational aspirations. Mothers of Dalit women from south and western India think that higher education provides dignity and financial autonomy for their daughters. Some of the Dalit women resisted early marriage and migrated from their village to urban areas in search of higher education and jobs. Most of these Dalit women were influenced by groups of anti-caste activists who introduced them to radical, anti-caste literature during their student days in urban areas. Financial insecurity affected their higher education. Some of them had to drop out and were forced to work for one or two years. Some among them did part-time/informal jobs in addition to their regular education. However, they recognized that theory is essential for praxis. It made them actively become part of democratic forms that engaged with the social and political articulations of women. Despite their inhibition they articulated their issues in front of a public audience. The political interventions of Dalit women became problematic for their upper caste women colleagues in the department of women's and gender studies.

Upper caste women faculty members in such departments opined that Dalit women academicians are getting academic jobs only due to reservation policy. Dalit women academicians who work as contractual faculty also expressed the professional insecurity. They are not shortlisted for regular jobs for the unreserved-academic teaching jobs. They also said that special recruitment for scheduled caste-academic positions is also not taking place in many universities. Therefore, they are forced to undergo certain forms of precarity due to caste-driven educational systems. Those who work as contractual faculty have to undergo awkward catsteist behaviour from the permanent/regular-upper caste women faculty members. Dalit faculty members position women's and gender studies as an epistemic space that strengthens praxeology (Bourdieu 1996: 139). They also pointed out that one should not detach theory from practice and further argued that these women's and gender studies departments depart from the usual literary, social sciences and humanities approaches that are obsessed with the high forms of theory. Focus on one particular discipline cannot initiate larger social and political transformation. It is also noted that faculty members who are from the discipline of English language and literature reduce the women's and gender studies to that of debates related to literature. Moreover, their approaches towards women's studies resonate some of the rare voices that emerged in the context of the interlinkages between English literature and women's studies in India (Rajan 2008: 66–71). However, women's studies and gender studies have the potential to challenge the ascribed identities. It can challenge the dictates of a patriarchal social

system. A majority of Dalit women academicians therefore argue that interdisciplinary approaches can engage with the changing social, political and economic realities. At the same time, they critiqued the ironical nature of the gap between the theoretical dimensions and praxis inherent in the women's/gender studies discourse in India. They are skeptical about the so-called radical claims of the women's movement in India. The egalitarian nature of the social sciences in the midst of the arguments for theory against empirical approaches is already contested in India (Guru 2002: 5003– 5009). It led to debates on the necessity of doing theory and engaging with praxis in the backdrop to the Dalits and social sciences in India. Dalit women academicians thus examine the disciplinary and institutional nuances of the field of Brahminic women's and gender studies.

Work Space in the Midst of Caste

Most Dalit women academicians agreed that they face caste discrimination on day-to-day basis from their upper caste women colleagues. Upper caste colleagues usually make caustic comments related to lower caste location, lack of merit, physical appearance, body language, complexion of Dalit women. They also maintain norms of purity and pollution by avoiding Dalit women colleagues during lunch hours. Dalit women expressed this as a heinous extension of commensality in the so-called, modern higher educational institutions. Consequently, their colleagues often say that Dalit women academicians challenge the stereotypes of Dalits. Dalit women academicians consider this oppressive attitude of their upper caste colleagues as anti-constitutional in nature. They observed that Dalit faculty members from other departments only support them to fight against a caste-based educational order. Through the experiences of the Dalit women academicians from the northern-eastern region, it can be noted that acute caste-based discrimination is central to the educational spaces of those regions in comparison to that of the southern and western regions. They further noted that Dalit women academicians who are renowned for their academic achievement have to face severe forms of caste discrimination. Upper caste faculty members cannot even tolerate their physical presence. Dalit women faculty also share about their limitations. They said that newly joined faculty cannot fight against the caste discrimination due to their period of probation. Their assertion thus is curtailed in various ways. Sarah Jane Aiston and Chee Kent Fo argued that academic women are forced to undergo certain forms of silence due to the complex links between the social, political and institutional, oppressive structures (Aiston & Chee 2020). Caste-based discrimination has been acquiring new forms and twists in their academic life. Upper caste colleagues maintain constant surveillance over those Dalit women academicians who publish in reputed academic journals/books and receive fellowships, awards and so on. Dalit women academicians also described how upper caste women faculty members from women's and gender studies write on Dalit studies, Dalit feminism and related debates at the national/international level and simultaneously exploit and discriminate the labor and perspectives of the Dalit women academicians. They even harass junior Dalit women

academicians rather than encouraging their educational pursuits. Caste thus recurs and haunts the life opportunities of Dalit women academicians. It is exhausting for them to explain the subtle and varied nature of such discrimination. Sarah Jane Aiston and Chee Kent Fo theorized that such a stage of inexplicable dilemma is an extension of micro-inequities. These are the moments of silencing or inequities that operate at the higher level of inequity in the academic-work place. It is posited as something that cannot be proved and tangible in its expositions (Aiston & Chee 2020).

Caste thus has engulfed departments and educational spaces in multiple ways. Among twenty interviews, one Dalit faculty member shared her experience of caste. It occurred around 11'o clock, August 2014 when she had to go to an upper caste faculty member's room for official work. The senior upper caste faculty who was present there remarked to another junior upper caste faculty, "Oh these *chuda chamars* (an abusive term used for the lower castes in North India) are entering into academic jobs". That incident shocked her. She waited for the head of the department, a lady from an upper/dominant caste-class location to inform her about the behavior of the colleague. After narrating her experience to the head of the department, hardly any disciplinary action was taken against them and neither was any effort made to make them understand that they should behave in a civilized manner. The head of the department requested the Dalit academician to forgive them rather than lodging a complaint against them. The Dalit academician cited Ambedkar's pioneering work, *Annihilation of Caste* in which Ambedkar argues that, "Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind. The destruction of caste does not mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change" (Ambedkar 1979: 68).

Administration in Upper Caste Ways

Dalit women academicians criticized the dearth of proper mechanisms through which they can register their grievances. They said that complaints related to caste-based discrimination and harassment had to go through the head of the department in many departments and forwarded to further divisions. A vicious nexus of administration division based mostly on upper caste are able to manipulate various bodies and committees. In order to support the faculty members who indulge in caste-based discrimination, they include a Dalit faculty member who is not bothered about the Dalit question as head of the committee. Thus, they force the Dalit academicians to withdraw the complaint. A majority of departments are dominated by upper caste-classes women and men with cultural and social capital. Therefore, upper castes are able to flaunt their vested interests at the curricular and administrative levels. In case of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, faculty members are appointed only due to affirmative action in India (Neelakandan 2022). Neelakandan analyzed that inclusion of Dalits through reservation policies/affirmative action coexists with the exclusion-discrimination based on caste in higher education. Caste-based academic networks of upper caste academicians thus reaffirm the primitive caste ideology and related practices. However, Dalit women academicians from Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and

Kerala actively engage with the politics around institutions and disciplines, issues of discrimination, justice and so on. Some have sought legal assistance. They also mentioned the delayed justice associated with cases of caste discrimination. The institutional cultures of othering, forces them to reflexively engage with their own social location and larger community. Dalit women academicians also acknowledged that some intellectuals from their communities shaped their worldviews and prepared them to fight any form of injustice. They provoked the Dalit women academicians to challenge academic caste-class privileges. Dalit women academicians compare them with the highly articulate, academicians from privileged caste-class backgrounds. They argue that such dominant academicians are the epitome of academic double standards. The dissonance between the public and private interventions of the upper-dominant caste-class academics functions through their denial of caste in the public space and practicing/believing the caste at their personal level. They are able to position themselves as progressive in the public space. They gain such authority through the figure of "public intellectuals". The public is contaminated with the ideology of caste and they are able to maintain their caste-based power and hierarchy with the academicians from lower castes. Further, some of the casteist, conservative faculty members claim themselves as socialist and Marxist feminists. They also claim their expertise to teach and research on Dalit politics, Dalit studies, and gender studies. Dalit women academicians consider it as their choice. But they opine that one must be inquisitive about their political predicaments. Therefore, Dalit women academicians need to question the nature of their politics. Aren't they just portraying themselves as progressive academicians by claiming their expertise in women's/ gender studies and Dalit studies? Why are these upper/dominant caste faculties not able to come out of their casteist and patriarchal mentalities? How does a so-called politically conscious academic operate in a complex, caste-ridden Indian academic scenario? How do they dilute the legacy of feminist politics and struggles? Dalit women academicians thus constantly question the opportunist tendencies of the upper caste academicians.

Classroom Conspiracies

The upper caste colleagues usually question the writings that challenge the relations of caste, gender and knowledge. The head of the department usually tease Dalit women academicians by saying that courses lack quality and comment that students are unhappy with their courses. Often, they instigate students from their own (upper) caste against the Dalit faculty members. Faculty members and students from upper caste backgrounds consider such courses based on the issues and experiences of marginalized sections as threatening to their dominant-caste based identity/existence. Upper caste academicians also use upper caste students as spies to monitor the activities of Dalit academicians. Upper caste students are provoked by the debates on Mahatma Jotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar. Brahmin students thus stopped attending such courses and argued that the department of women's studies promotes an anti-caste ideology. The

radical potential of women's and gender studies are subverted through the casteist ideology and practices of both upper caste academicians and students.

Dalit women academicians, in the earlier phase of their careers hoped that women's and gender studies departments may challenge caste and gender related power structures. They critiqued that such departments are in fact Brahmanic in their social composition and ideology. Upper caste academicians who specialise on Dalit questions block the entry of the Dalit women candidates to teaching positions. They shared their fear about the solidarity and intellectual interventions of Dalit women academicians. A Dalit woman academician recalled how she was badly treated by an upper caste colleague for raising the issues of Dalit women at a conference organized by Indian Association of Women's studies. They are alienated from such forums and argue that Dalit women should initiate separate academic platforms. They asserted the need to create a network with established scholars from the Dalit community and the mere assertion of upper caste academicians on the basis of their postcolonial and marginalized status in the developed countries' academic arenas will not transform the discipline without annihilating the caste educational culture in India. Therefore, they believe that women's and gender studies should move beyond such conceptual ghettoization. Dalit women academicians also said that upper caste colleagues are least bothered about atrocities against Dalit women.

Many faculty remembers faced stiff opposition from their colleagues during the introduction of the course designed by them on several themes and as part of including Dalit studies. The Dalit teachers have a different and critical approach towards the syllabus designed by the upper caste faculty members. Ethical dimensions of such a radical project by Dalit women academics impact the nature of pedagogy as well. It leads to critical thought of such projects. Such pedagogy should have the pedagogical and philosophical practices that are critical to the intersections of caste and gender. The divide between theory and practice can be a misapprehension (Villaverde 2008: 121). Whether Dalit women academicians are able to initiate political discussion about gender and caste remains a major challenge in the so-called world of objective scholarship. They believe that it should also withdraw from anti-intellectualism through critical perspectives.

Personal is Political

Dalit women academicians also exposed the rhetoric of sisterly politics used by upper caste academicians in women's and gender studies department. Many of them said that upper caste women academicians make personal remarks and intrude into personal lives. One of the interviewees described how she has chosen to remain childless. As a result, an upper caste woman academician taunted her that women who do not produce children cannot understand motherhood, care and affection. This incident shows the persistence of Brahmanic-oriented heterosexual approach that mocks the Dalit woman academician's choice to be childless. Reiterating that upper castes are not going to transform their oppressive behavior, they should not preach ethics and morality to

Dalits. An upper caste academician's writings on Dalits are tailored according to the interests of market. Dalit women academicians are aware of such intellectual pretensions. Thus, Dalit women academicians reflect on the Ambedkarian premise that debunk the lack of ethics in a caste-based society. They reflect on the future of Dalit feminism through its conceptual innovations and larger networks across the oppressed communities. They also visualise that reflexivity is essential to rearticulate the postcolonial, diasporic, intersectionality approaches. They are conscious of a circulation of caste-based logic that constantly challenges the competency of Dalit women academicians. Dalit women academicians unveil the manner in which upper caste academicians suppress the distinct voices of Dalit women academicians. They argued that the language of civil society has appropriated the language of women's and gender studies. Research on India probed how civil societal discourse has culminated in depoliticizing the real social and political struggles (Harris 2002). Dalit women academicians critiqued the functioning of women's and gender studies departments in particular and social science departments in general according to the ideology of global economic and developmental organizations. Further, they observed that funding has impacted the critical edge of women's and gender studies. Upper caste women's and gender studies scholars exhibit certain othering and patronising approaches towards the Dalits. Such dominant caste scholars typecast Dalit women as individuals who don't know feminism. Dalit feminists lampooned such upper caste scholars who violate the spirit of feminist ideas and principles. They further said that a majority of upper caste scholars consider themselves as having expertise on all social and political issues. They opined that the university as an institution protects the interests of upper/dominant castes. In addition to the harassment of Dalit women academicians, they hamper the academic potential of Dalit students. Hegemonic academic culture thus reproduces diverse patterns of discrimination. It is noted that, "…despite all the regulatory mechanisms, SC/ST students are coerced to kill themselves on various campuses with unfailing regularity. The pristine imagination of the socially dominant communities exhibits a blind spot when it comes to Dalit-Bahujans co-inhabiting their elite habitus. These gatekeepers are adept at extinguishing any tremors in their spotless spaces and the transgressors are often shown the door in many subtle ways" (Sukumar 2023: 171). Therefore, one can argue that the retrogressive ideology of upper caste women negates the presence of Dalit woman in seemingly theoretically radical spaces of women's and gender studies.

Dalit women academicians also show that upper caste academicians are against the entry of Dalit candidates to doctoral studies. Upper caste teachers who select Dalit doctoral candidates also discriminate against them throughout their research. It further destroys the academic growth of Dalit women doctoral students. Upper caste teachers thus obstruct the Dalit women students and their teaching career. Dalit academicians argued that conceptual transformations in the field of postcolonial, diasporic, intersectionality approaches should overcome the logic of victimization. Dalit women academicians admit their constraints related to their personal spaces. They expressed how they learnt the keywords related to women's and gender studies

through their shift from their non-academic spaces to that of academic spaces. They further commented that upper caste women academicians consider Dalit women's articulations as ingrained in identity politics. Thus, Dalit women academicians argue that upper caste academicians deny the existence of caste to oppress Dalit women. Such a position enables them to justify their caste dominance. Upper caste colleagues harass them by allocating extra teaching hours and tedious administrative work. They create problems for the promotion of Dalit women teachers by not allowing them to attend refresher and orientation courses. Some Dalit women academicians recollected how the head of the department would shout at them in the presence of other faculty members. Non-Dalit academic staff are recruited to teach women's studies courses. At the same time, Dalit women visiting faculty members receive insults from regular/visiting upper caste faculty members. Relations of social location within academic space have to be examined in relation to the continuities and discontinuities of academic communities and disciplines.

Theoretical Possibilities and Challenges

Epistemic priority of Dalit feminist critique demonstrates that Dalit feminists can produce authentic perspectives of the Dalit women's realities. Questions of the Dalit women-women's/gender studies academicians can be looked at in the light of capabilities approach and intersectionality. These critical theoretical approaches probed to explicate the existential and epistemic specificities of Dalit women academicians. The capabilities approach is studied as one that espouses gender equality in the Western context. Capabilities can be deployed to scrutinize inequalities and therefore the wellbeing of women from the oppressed castes has to be read against the cultural and social capital of upper/dominant caste women. The capability approach, for Robeyns, challenged the conventional social science readings that impact the lives of the people. It is observed that Amartya Sen's approach could shift meaningfully away from the reductionist understanding of consumption and social mobility. A Feminist is analyzed as one who has the potential to understand the women/gender question beyond financial welfare and there as one who can initiate a dialogue with capabilities approach. Robeyns delineates how gendered inequality can be interpreted via the capability approach. Based on capabilities approach, it can be argued that unfreedom and gender inequality embedded in caste enslave the Dalit women academicians. Amartya Sen regards freedom as a central idea of capability to analyze gender inequality (Sen, cited in Robeyns 2003: 62).

The category of capability is also critiqued by arguing that Amartya Sen has not enlisted the capability which is essential to judge inequality (Robeyns 2003: 62). Wellbeing and inequality can be assessed through the ethically individualistic and non-individualistic essence of the capability approach (Ingrid, cited in Robeyns 2003: 65). Ethics is absent in a caste-based society. Caste-based atrocities prove that caste-based order does not give any space and scope to ethics. However, Amartya Sen has criticized readings on inequality that underestimate diverse people with the same

utility functions. Those approaches therefore underestimate the social differences as well (Sen, cited in Robeyns 2003: 66). Indeed, the social differences-based reading of capabilities approach has to take cognizance of the specificity of Dalit women's social worlds. Robeyns analysed (Dalit) women as individuals who need to be studied in the backdrop of the peculiar forms of capability and impending inequality (Robeyns 2003: 62). Along the lines of the capability approach, one can argue that Dalit women academicians face diverse problems in the market and non-market spaces (Robeyns 2003: 66). Robeyns calls for a feminist capability approach that does not ignore the interlinked nature of the gendered dimensions of society. Such reading departs from Nussbaum's perspectives that invite a definite list of capabilities. Martha Nussbaum's reading imagines a universal theory of good that unanswered the question of culture and context (Robeyns 2003: 68). It discusses the colonizing undercurrents of universalizing the language of justice (Nussbaum 1999: 229). Thus, the universal approach in the capabilities approach is helpful to evaluate the capabilities and inequality of Dalit women.

The idea of liberty should have access to the material realm to articulate the rights. What happens to the rights of the Dalit women in the social and political worlds of caste and democracy? Economic empowerment has the role of providing liberty to different sections of people (Nussbaum 1999: 230). Caste determines the capital formation and caste-class equations shun the possibility of the economic mobility of the Dalit women in particular and Dalits in general. Combined capabilities, for Nussbaum, have to be achieved through securing institutional and material spaces. Human choice and freedom have the potential to guard traditional rights and liberties. Wellbeing is nourished through political rights (Nussbaum 1999: 238). As discussed earlier, Dalit women's assertions are being monitored in caste-based, patriarchal, superior worlds. Women have to confront unequal levels of capability that threaten their justice (Nussbaum 1999: 243). Justice for Dalit women is negated at different levels. Dalit women academicians thus have different social and political trajectories that are ideologically different from the overall, homogenous dominant caste women located women's/gender studies theoretical project. Their assertions therefore carry a distinct theoretical character. In addition, to the questions of capabilities, the social spaces of Dalit women academicians in women's/gender studies also asserts the necessity to articulate the intersections that determine their social and political worlds.

Dalit feminists restate the relations of caste, class, gender, and patriarchy. The intersections of subjugated social location and identities within the dominant ideological frameworks demonstrate the complexities of oppressed lives. Intersectionality can be invoked here to rethink the academic pursuits of Dalit women academics. Race and gender linked to inequality have become central to the global research on race. It is analyzed that black women cannot isolate themselves and they have to fight at multiple levels (Simien 2004: 84). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) argues that social power that explains difference may empower the oppressed categories. It is emphasized that the tensions between identity politics and dominant conceptions of social justice led to the marginalization of race and gender. The problem with identity politics is that it is not

able to map the nuances of intersecting multiple identities. It is perceived that feminist and anti-racist assertions could not grapple with the intersectional social locations ingrained in the lives of women of color. It is opined that the "black community must move away from the position of singular activism for the good of the movement" (Robinson, cited in Simien 2004: 85). Black feminism fights against sexism, racism, gendered oppression, and heterosexism as part of the project of social justice rather than polarizing the movement (Ransby, cited in Simien 2004: 85). Crenshaw demonstrates the nature of structural intersectionality and probes how the identity of women about race and gender determines the experiences of black women and argues that feminist and antiracist groups have sidelined the issues of violence connected to women of color through political intersectionality. The construction of culture in the lives of black women is explored through the category of representational intersectionality. She stated that these identities intersect and offer possibilities to question internal and external hierarchies. Thus, it helps us move beyond the identity of the community (Crenshaw 1991: 1241–1299). Praxis in this direction should reflect on the life situations and life chances of the marginalized sections (Crenshaw 1989: 168) Critiques to intersectional theory have found their place in conceptions and praxis related to mental health. Intersectional wellbeing and theoretical takes on social justice are being explored through an assemblage of conceptual realms and decolonial intersectionality (Warner, Kuritis & Adya 2020: 1–16). Critiques are also pointed out as the politics of violence, interpretive violence, and hermeneutic marginalization (May 2014: 94–112). Black feminists have studied racism and sexism but paid little attention to a Marxist understanding of oppression and exploitation (Smith 2013-2014). Dalit women's questions cannot be equated with the political struggles of Black women. Black feminists are far advanced in their theoretical and politic approaches. Dalit feminists have to engage with theoretical positions of intersectionality to foreground the peculiar nature of the social and the political spaces that decide the mobility of Dalit women. If subjugation happens through the intersections in the context of caste and gender like that of race and gender, it is possible to have such comparative readings related to caste, race and gender questions. Intersectional theorists have addressed the question of caste and Dalits in India. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, particularly in writings of Mahatma Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, Savitribai Phule, Mukta Salve and Tarabai Shinde show the intersections of caste, class and gender. Moreover, the critique on intersectionality needs to be recognized as well. For instance, Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge critiqued the reductionist approach towards intersectional approaches. It is investigated that there is a tendency to reduce the intersectional approach to nations of North America and Europe. They argue that how scholars from India are using the intersectional approaches while explaining the anti-caste activism of Savitribai Phule. They also mapped the intersections of the global, social movements among Dalits and other oppressed sections. Intersectional approach is researched in the context of the intersectional positions on the assertions of Dalit women (Kannabiran, cited in Collins & Bilge 2020: 159). Social reproduction of labor and its precarious nature of day-to-day livelihood can be traced to the intersections

of caste and gender in the context of Dalit women laborers (Raman 2020). Besides, Dalit women academicians revitalise the big questions of capabilities and intersections related to caste and gender in the Indian context. Dalit feminist approaches have to return to the narratives of the Dalit women academicians to grapple with their epistemic-existential predicaments.

Conclusion

Dalit women academicians' accounts debunk how women's and gender studies in India are reproducing the ideology of caste. It delves into the rhetorical space of upper caste women scholars who use the educational institutions to maintain their caste-based power. Dalit women scholars thus interrogate the women's and gender studies' embedded realm within the larger space of Brahminic academic patriarchy and consequential erosion of sisterly politics. They theorise how their life chances are being curtailed through systemic caste-perpetuating, public institutions. The contemporary educational policy regime leverages the privatized educational monopoly and its consequential erosion of reservation policies. They also have to challenge the ideology and power structures related to socially regulated economic-educational orders. Economic and cultural injustices are analyzed in the context of social politics of redistribution and cultural politics of recognition (Fraser 2008: 43). The political economy of contemporary education and caste-gender conflicts in the context of the shift from the public to private educational institutions also constrict the epistemic and political assertions of Dalit women academics.

The right to education and social mobility of lower caste women academicians in a caste-based, patriarchal world strangely coexists with the changing forms of state and law. Therefore, accumulation of cultural and social capital by these academicians is being obstructed in multiple ways. The agency of such minor sections of Dalit women academicians in the larger context of the legacy of anti-caste movements offer a certain utopia to scuttle the caste, gender and patriarchy within the discipline and academic spaces. At the same time, the remnants of caste-based patriarchy prompt them to remain as cynics. Dalit women academicians thus initiate dialectical engagement with social reproduction through public-privatized educational spaces.

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Narratives from the Margin: Sexual Harassment and Strategies of Resistance

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Abstract

In India, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013 completed its ten years in April 2023. However, this is a crucial time to review its effects, provisions, and the awareness about the Act, and how much it has percolated at the grassroots level. Consequently, we must pay attention to the voices from the margin in order to comprehend the situation and need to bring these voices to the center to point out the lacuna and challenges of the Act as well as strengthen the discourse around the sexual harassment of women at the workplace. The study based on empirical findings, focuses on experiences of women workers at a wholesale vegetable market in Pune[1] and follows an ethnographic approach. The article argues that mainstream discourse on sexual harassment does not acknowledge experiences of women from the bottom of the socio-economic margins and it is a caste-blind gender discourse. Caste shapes women's experiences of sexual harassment at workplace differently and sometimes to mitigate the risk, women apply different strategies and build alternative mechanisms to combat sexual harassment at the workplace.

Keywords

Sexual harassment, strategies of resistance, gender and caste

Introduction

The Sexual Harassment Act 2013, in India, identifies women as a more vulnerable category to different forms of sexual harassment at the workplace in comparison with men. However, scholars (Dr. Punita Sodhi v/s Union of India and Others 2010, Gawali 2019: 288) have argued that the experience of sexual harassment is a subjective

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[1]Pune is a city in Maharashtra state of India.

phenomenon. Caste, class, religion, gender, and other social identities can shape women's experiences differently, and social institutions such as caste, workplaces, and educational institutes aggregate and sometimes help to normalize forms of harassment and violence against women. The mainstream discourse around the sexual harassment of women at the workplace is dominated by upper caste, class, urban, educated, and women in formal workplace settings. Therefore, their experiences of sexual harassment are more visible in the mainstream (Rowena 2017, Rao 2018). The recent #Metoo movement epitomized the fact of lack of representation of diverse groups and limited reach. There is a scarcity of studies on women's experiences in informal workplace settings, and of rural, lower caste, lower class, and uneducated women. How do these women from the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid encounter the daily experience of sexual harassment and violence? How do their experiences of sexual harassment differ according to their social location? How do caste, class, and gender matter at the workplace? And, last but not least, what are the mechanisms and support systems available to them? There is a need to bring marginalised women's everyday experiences to the center to provide essential insights into dealing with the sexual harassment of women in the workplace. Keeping these questions in mind, this article explores marginalised women workers' experiences of sexual harassment at the workplace. The data has been drawn from the more extensive Ph.D. fieldwork. The research study was conducted at the wholesale vegetable market in Pune, Maharashtra, and involved participatory observations and in-depth interviews with 88 women workers. To safeguard women respondents' identities and uphold confidentiality, their real names have not been used and initials have been utilised in place of their full names.

The Problem that has no Name: From Recognition to Sexual Harassment Act 2013

There is a substantial, in-depth body of literature on workplace sexual harassment of women. Prior to 1997, however, there was no legal term to describe sexual harassment despite the fact that women experienced it. Several incidents, such as those against Aruna Shanbag[2] and Rupan Bajaj[3] took place, but due to the absence of terminology and a legal framework, these cases received less public attention. After a long struggle, Rupan Bajaj got partial justice. Several women faced sexual harassment in their daily lives but were in a dilemma of how to define it. In addition, Vibhuti Patel (2005) argues that since the early 1980s sexual harassment at the workplace has remained one of the central concerns in the women's movement. The issue emerged for discussion,

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[2]Aruna Shanbag was nurse in Mumbai's KEM hospital. She faced a brutal sexual attack by her co-worker in the hospital. See Shreelekha Nair (2015) Aruna Shanbaug and Workplace Safety for Women: The Real Issue Sidestepped, Indian Journal of Medical Ethics.

[3]Rupan Bajan was working for the Indian Government as finance assistant. She faced sexual harassment from her senior officer Mr. K.P.S. Gill. See Chander Suta Dogra (2018) A Retired IAS Officer on How the #Metoo Movement Can Use Her Case Against K.P.S. Gill, Wire

in India, in the 1980s and gained momentum in the 1990s. Pratiksha Baxi (2001) argues that the category of *eve-teasing* (sexually colored remarks or taking physical advantage) finds widespread use in the 1990s. Varied forms of harassment that women were facing in public spaces were registered by the police under the molestation and outrage of the modesty of women. However, Baxi (2001) points out that women were differentiating between eve-teasing and sexual harassment. Eve-teasing was seen as less harmful and sexual harassment as more dangerous. Still, no legal framework was available for sexual harassment. Thus most complaints were filed under the IPC sections 354[4] and 509.[5] Further, Baxi (2001) argues that the eve-teasing discourse helped in later articulating sexual harassment terminology.

In 1992, Bhawaridevi's case marked a turning point in the understanding of sexual harassment at the workplace and the inter-relation of caste, class and gender shaping her experiences of sexual assault. The Rajasthan High Court's decision, in Bhawaridevi's case, epitomized caste patriarchal[6] values by refuting the rape accusations by arguing that it is impossible for upper caste family members to rape a lower caste woman (Pandey 2017). The judge ignored the long history of caste norms of 'purity and pollution' co-existing with the rape of caste-oppressed women by 'upper caste' men who otherwise treated the women as 'untouchable'. The Rajasthan High Court failed to give justice to Bhawaridevi and acquitted the accused. Later, after constant efforts and struggle by Bhawaridevi and women's organizations, in 1997 Supreme Court of India legally defined sexual harassment of women at the workplace as an offence and enacted Vishakha Guidelines to deal with the sexual harassment issue. However, the Guidelines were a temporary solution. It was after 16 years that the Vishakha Guidelines were finally replaced by Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. Similarly, in 2012 after the Delhi gang rape case, Justice Verma committee amended criminal law and added IPC section 354A to define sexual harassment. However, in the long journey of the struggle against sexual harassment, Bhawaridevi did not get justice but remained a powerful figure in the struggle.

During the Pinjra Tod and #Metoo, Dalit movements and scholars emphasized how Bhawaridevi's case was an example of caste-based violence, but got failed to adopt and replicate in the Act. Several scholars (Rowena 2017, Rao 2018, Kowtal 2019) have criticized the mainstream discourse on sexual harassment for being insufficiently attuned to how caste, class, gender, and religion structure experiences of sexual harassment. The discourse around caste in relation to sexual harassment

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[4]Indian Penal Code (IPC) 354 section stands for outrage of women's modesty through several acts like sexual remarks, touching, pinching and so forth.

[5]Indian Penal Code (IPC) 509 section stands for insult to the modesty of women by making sounds or any gesture which creates uncomfortable feeling. This section also recommends punishment for such acts.

[6]Caste patriarchy upholds the privileges of dominant caste males. For more, see Sunaina Arya's work Dalit or Brahmanical Patriarchy.

first started in the spaces of higher education. A study by Vandana (2020) underscores that Dalit woman students often get targeted and humiliated by male professors and colleagues. Dalit girls' sexual harassment experience is not merely based on gender but has the connotation of caste and class backgrounds. Young Dalit women student scholars raised critical questions about the mainstream discourse of sexual harassment at the workplace through Pinjara Tod, which sought to challenge the mainstream movement and showed their disagreements with the campaign's hierarchical and discriminatory approach (Gawali 2019: 290). Jenny Rowena (2017) argues that mainstream discourse around the question of sexual harassment is caste-blind gender discourse. She points out that lower caste women in India are majorly situated in the informal sector, and sexual attacks that they face in the workplace are closely tied to the vulnerability of their workplace and caste locations (Rowena 2017). Further, she argues that, while enacting the Vishakha Guidelines, scholars did not emphasize and look at the complexities of caste.

The definition of sexual harassment Act majorly focuses on harassment which is sexual in nature and does not talk about violent forms such as rape, sexual assault, violence, character assassination, public humiliation, and so on. On a similar line, Pallavi Rao argued that upper-caste women consistently dominate the discourse around sexual harassment and Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi women's voices and existence were erased or were not taken cognizance of (Rao 2018: 1). All these scholars criticized the mainstream discourse and emphasized on bottom up discourse. Therefore, there is a need to bring all these important aspects together and build a comprehensive discourse around sexual harassment. There is a need to explore, understand and acknowledge the everyday sexual harassment experiences of marginalised women. By exploring these experiences, one can extend solidarity and fight a legal and social battle so marginalised women can live with dignity and enjoy their fundamental rights. As Sharmila Rege points out, 'Knowledge'[7] has emancipatory potential when produced from specific social locations. If we produce knowledge from Dalit women's perspective, it will create a more emancipatory space because Dalit women's experiences are embedded in unequal power relations and exploitative structures of the society. Thus, it will not stick into the 'experience' but underline how these experiences are shaped in unequal power relations (1998: WS-40). Therefore, it is necessary to explore marginalised women's experiences and understand the question of sexual harassment from their perspective. When we understand their experiences, we will get to know more insights and the forms of harassment that they face in their daily lives. This subjective experience of sexual harassment and assault can lead toward theorizing experiences of marginalised women.

Sexual Harassment at the Workplace: Narratives from the Margin

As several scholars (Rowena 2017, Rao 2018, Kowtal 2019) argued for the importance of listening to marginalised women's experiences to understand the issue comprehensively, I have tried to incorporate women's narratives in this section. The

[7]Subjective experience as a form of knowledge production.

field study was carried out in Pune's wholesale vegetable Market (Mandi) from the first week of April to the second week of July 2022. Although women play a significant role in the market economy, male employees have historically predominated the Market/Mandi.[8] Several productive tasks such as segregation of rotten goods, filling goods sacks, loading goods in vehicles, stitching gunny sacks, picking over stones, pests in grain, and so forth, are done by women workers. However, their nature of work is not given much respect and importance; as a result, they are not recognised as essential workers but rather as supplemental workers. The majority of women workers belong to Scheduled Castes (61),[9] OBC (3),[10] ST (1),[11] DNT and VJNT (8),[12] UR (14),[13] and Muslim (1)[14] categories. There is a history of migration. Women workers migrated to the urban city for several reasons, such as lack of resources, in search of livelihood, abandonment by husband/family members, and so on. In the cities, they were forcefully thrown into the labour market with no preparation or protection. They adopted menial labour and remained outsiders in the local area. Sometimes the outsider identity became a ground for their discrimination and humiliation in public spaces. The majority of women have been working in the Market for more than 15 years. There is a range of ages, from women who are 27 years old to those who are over 60. However, in my participatory observation, I found that adolescent girls also accompany their mothers to the workplace and work with them. Out of 88 women, 37 are married and stay with their husbands and children, 34 women are widowed, and 17 women are deserted. The women's caste, age, and marital status have an inter-connection with their experiences of sexual harassment at the workplace, which I elaborate below. Narratives of women workers in the Market also shed light on non-sexual harassment, which has caste connotations such as character assassination, remarks based on social location, physical appearance, etc. These narratives suggest that forms of humiliation based on gender and caste should be acknowledged in the discourse on the sexual harassment of women at the workplace.

In my field interviews, women workers accepted the existence of sexual harassment at workplace. Women in the Market experience multiple forms of sexual harassment on daily basis. In the participatory observation, I found that middlemen

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[8]Market (Capital M) stands for wholesale vegetable Market, Pune.

[9]Scheduled Caste is a constitutionally designated group of people and among the most disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

[10]Other Backward Classes was constitutionally recognised by the Government of India in the 90s. OBCs are described as socially and educationally backward classes in India.

[11]Scheduled Tribe is a constitutionally designated group of people indigenous who are socially and educationally backward.

[12]De-Notified Tribe and Vimukta Jati Nomadic Tribe group of people were notified as born criminals during the British rule under the criminal Tribe Act 1871. In 1992, Government of India repealed the Criminal Tribe Act. From then these communities are known as De-Notified.

[13]Unreserved Category referred as general or socio-economically forward category.

[14]Muslim is a person who believes or follows Islam religion.

and male Hamals[15] often tease women using double-meaning words. In one incident, I was standing in the onion shop, and women workers were filling onions in the sacks and two Hamals were standing next to them. Suddenly a male Hamal said to a woman, "Don't you sweat while doing?"[16] And he and his male colleague laughed out loud. 'While doing' has a sexual sense. The woman got anxious and replied, "You speak nonsense"[17] and moved aside. After that Hamal started explaining that he was talking about work and, again, he laughed. The woman got so uncomfortable that she went directly outside the shop. In the second observation, some Pala[18] women were segregating rotten potatoes and filling good quality potatoes in the sack at the metal shed. One woman in the group was approximately 31-years-old, and had a dusky/dark skin tone. A middleman was asking all the women to work quickly, and while asking, began to call out the women by their names. However, he called this woman "*Kale* (blackish) go fast and get some tea and water for me".[19] Her face twisted in a grimace of unwillingness, but she could not resist him. Her physical appearance becomes a means to humiliate and pass pejorative comments at workplace. These pejorative comments violate the dignity of a person and create a humiliating environment at the workplace. Still, Act 2013 does not talk about pejorative comments which are closely linked to sexuality.

Sometimes pejorative comments and character assassination at the workplace are linked with a person's social location and works in a very subtle manner. For instance, in the same metal shed, L R and her 14-year-old daughter S R were working together. The middleman asked them "Yadi work fast".[20] Yadi's literal meaning is mother, but mostly this word is used to underline the social position of Lamani (Banjara) women. *Yadi* does not have respectability but is a word to differentiate and mark Lamani women as a whole. Workers in the Market frequently make fun of Lamani women, their language and mark them as outsiders. Middlemen, Hamals, and women workers often term Lamani women as *Lamani Tanda*.[21] In informal conversation, women and men often claimed Lamani women as thieves and corrupt women. According to them, Lamani women steal onions and potatoes in large amounts and never tell the truth. However, there is an open secret that a majority of women steal goods while working but the offence is majorly placed on the shoulders of Lamani women. This kind of character assassination and misinformation occurs on a daily basis. This assassination of character and labeling of the Lamani community as thieves comes from the general understanding of Criminal Tribal Act, which brands the Lamani community as criminal

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[15]Coolie/porter

[16]Participatory observation and field notes, 22/06/2022

[17]Ibid.

[18]Women those do segregation of rotten potatoes are known as Pala women.

[19]Participatory observation and field notes, 25/04/2022

[20]Ibid.

[21]Lamani is also known as Banjara. They are nomadic trading caste in India. Tanda literary meaning is community/settlement.

and habitual offenders. While the Act does not exist now, the criminalization of this community takes place on a day-to-day basis.

The third observation of offensive comments embedded within a double meaning also came from informal talk. While talking with a woman and a male Hamal about garlic, a woman worker from a neighboring shop entered into the conversation and started talking with the woman worker. Suddenly a male Hamal said "Aali Zombadi[22]" (Zombadi has come). I got shocked because I was aware of the local meaning of Zombadi. It refers to a person who tries to make sexual advantages or urges for sexual intercourse. He was making fun of her. Later, the woman worker with whom I was talking said,"Zombade is her surname. Do not misunderstand. Here, we people make fun".[23] For other workers, it is a fun but it is difficult to understand how that woman would have felt. It was a deeply insulting and humiliating experience that she experiences on a regular basis. Her surname became a mean of humiliation. In India, an individual's social location can be easily identified by their surnames, and they are mostly lower caste people with degrading names and surnames such as Dagadu (stone-like), Kachare (garbage-like), Ghadhave (donkey-like). Others use these surnames to humiliate and make fun. They also quickly mitigate the severity of the situation and normalize things by making jokes and masking their intentions. However, no one thinks of how deeply such comments and experiences break women apart. In male-dominated spaces, women frequently become an object of fun and humiliation. Vivek Kumar, a sociologist draws attention to the typology of violence against Dalit women. He argues that there are several types of vernaculars sayings, which are used by people, especially upper caste people, to humiliate and ridicule lower caste people (Kumar 2019: 146). Thus, women face humiliation and violence due to their social locations and the nature of their occupations.

Apart from the participatory observation, women's lived experiences of sexual harassment are harsh and humiliating in nature which displays the lacunas of the mainstream discourse on sexual harassment as to how the Act has failed to identify humiliating working environments. Women workers emphasised that staring remains a prevalent form of harassment. They struggle against the unwanted male gaze as underscored in informal talk: "How many people should we face? If we bend down and start filling the sacks, men look at us".[24] This kind of subtle experience of sexual harassment women face on the regular basis but do not discuss much as it is a regular feature for them. While talking about her experience in the Market, N P a deserted women from Grain Market who belonged to Mang (Scheduled Caste) community underlined that men do stare in the Market. "Earlier, I used to dress up well. As you see, my complexion is fair. I used to put *sindur* in hair parting, wear *gajara* (flower garland worn in the hair), colour hair. It was my first or second day of work in the shop. Our *sheth* (shop owner) asked me my caste. I said Mang. He got astonished and

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[22]Participatory observation and field notes, 05/06/2022
[23]Ibid.
[24]Informal talk with onion market women, 12/05/2022

said, No Bai (woman). You are lying. You do not look like Mang. You look like from our caste. He is Marvadi. My living standard was different at that time, so he passed such a comment".[25] Here it is crucial to understand that people do not think that lower caste women too can live dignified lives and do what they want. 'You do not look like' is itself a casteist comment made to perpetuate the stereotypes about the lower caste communities and control their sexuality by appearance, what to wear and other factors. N P Tai's experience shows that marginalized women get excluded from the mainstream forms of beauty, and they generally get associated with dark skin complexion, less etiquette, quarrelsome personalities, and less attractive characteristics. Thus, when her shop owner saw her, he was amazed and inquired about her caste location. This shows that the notion of beauty is less related to physical features and more based on caste locations. Further, N P Tai (sister) added, "Male Hamals used to stare at me and come after me, but I never pay heed. However, some women spread rumors about me. They used to say Bai (woman) has come from a brothel. They judged me due to my appearance and categorised me as a sex worker. Then, one day V G, a union activist, called me outside the shop. I was terrified. I thought she would hit me, but she said, you do not get afraid. I am with you. She explained to other women that I am not a sex worker. Her living style is different than us. She is from our caste. Her husband has abandoned her. Then a woman said, if her husband abandoned her, how can she dress up like that? Then V G maushi consoled me and asked me to come to work in simple clothes. After that, I did not dress up, and now I do not feel like wearing nice clothes and dressing well".[26] N P Tai's character assassination and public rumour mongering enormously hurt and lowered her confidence. This incident onwards, she stopped wearing what she preferred. These kinds of small but not unimportant factual details need to be read very carefully to understand the lived experiences of marginalized women and how their sexuality and mobility are controlled at the workplace and caste becomes a great factor in increasing their marginalisation.

Women workers also faced sexual harassment in the form of taking physical advantage. Consider the details of S S *maushi* (aunty) about an incident that occurred to her. S S *maushi* is a middle-aged widowed from a Mahar caste. While narrating the incident, her hesitation was clearly visible through her body language. She rubbed her thumb on her other fingers and avoided eye contact with me. She said, "Mostly young women do face sexual harassment from Dalals (middlemen). A few years back, I experienced sexual harassment from a Dalal. I used to work in his shop. He trades chilly and onion. He frequently used foul language and humiliated me referring my caste location. I always stood firm and talked back to him. One day, he asked me to pour an onion sack on the ground. I said, this is not my work. Let Hamal come. He will pour it down. Also, I did not pour it down because it was too heavy. He insisted me to pull the sack and drop it down. So, I went near the sack and started pulling. Suddenly,

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[25]Interview with N T in the grain market, 11/05/2022
[26]Ibid.

he came from my back, grasped me from the back side, and said, pull it like this…".[27] She acted the moment to me using her hands how he grabbed her from the back. As soon as she realized his misbehaviour, she turned back and pushed him away. The next day, she narrated the whole incident to the woman activist in the Market. A woman activist approached the union office and reported S S's complaint. The union called the middleman, asked him to pay 500 rupees to the Mathadi board[28] as penalty, and freed him from the charges. After that incident S S started to work in a new shop. The union neither helped her to search for a new shop nor took the right cognizance of the complaint. S S's narration exemplifies the situation of powerless women who belong to the bottom of the caste hierarchy and overtly face humiliation and non-cognizance from social structures such as the workplace and union. This example also shows that when women report their experiences of sexual harassment, they face retribution. In S S maushi's case, she lost her work and suffered from trauma and humiliation, which did not get recognised, and no one reached out to her after the incident to console her. It might be difficult for her to work in a different shop within the same Market because she faces the accused person on a day-to-day basis.

In the Market, touching, patting the back of a woman is common and taken for granted by male workers. R R, a 27-year-old deserted woman, who works in the onion market emphasized that, "When I was working at a potato shop there men colleagues used to stare at women and touch inappropriately".[29] While narrating the incident, she pointed to the waist area and shoulder. She added that, 'After touching men pretend it as normal and bad intention-less'.[30] Whereas, while sharing her agonizing experience about sexual harassment S S, a 41-year-old sweeper said, "There are so many bad experiences. If you want to come and work in the Market, you must keep your *izzat* (honour), *laz, lajja, sharam* (shyness) outside the Market. Also, where should we file our grievances? If our condition had not worsened, then we would not have come here to work. This is Bazaar (Market). Do you know what the Market means? Here butchers are large in number. Most of the time, men stare and pass comments and discuss with other men. So, what can we do? If we go and tell these things to the authority, he will also look with the same gaze. No one questions men, but women are easy targets. If a woman's *pallu*[31] gets slightly away, people will say she is a whore".[32] S S tai has rightly pointed out that they cannot approach and file their grievances due to the unavailability of a mechanism. Most of the people, sexual harassment is not an issue. Thus, no one pays attention on prevention. The vegetable market does not have an Internal Committee to deal with sexual harassment cases. Similarly, women's economic conditions bring them to this work, and their work conditions are such

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[27]Interview with S S at home, 02/04/2022

[28]Formal set up constituted under the Mathadi Act 1969.

[29]Interview with R R at home, 16/04/2022

[30]Ibid.

[31]The loose end of a sari.

[32]Interview with S S in the Market, 09/05/2022

that they cannot take risks. It might backfire on them. Similarly, women have often raised the question of honour. "No one wants to spoil their honour, so they do not go and approach higher authority".[33] In various studies, scholars (V. Geetha 2017, Anagha Sarpotdar 2016, 2020) have pointed out that women do not approach formal mechanisms due to shame and stigma. They have a constant fear that people will not believe in them, make fun, or gossip about them. In addition, there is a persistent fear of losing a job. Therefore, women do not come forward and file formal complaints.

Strategies of Resistance

Despite the apathetic approach of authorities towards the sexual harassment issue, women resist and actively refute male dominance, and forms of harassment in the Market. In my participatory observation, I found that women negotiate and adopt two different strategies to mitigate the risk of sexual harassment and being judged by male co-workers and clients. I observed that widowed and deserted women challenge patriarchal notions of an ideal woman and who can wear symbols of married women and who cannot. Almost all widowed and deserted women wear *Mangalsutra*[34] and put *bindi*[35] on their foreheads. Generally, social norms forbid widowed and deserted women from wearing these markers of marriage. In India, people can easily differentiate between married and unmarried women with the help of symbols such as *Mangalsutra*, *Jodvi* (toe ring), and *Sindur* (red power applied by married women). These symbols are visible markers of women's marital status. I initially saw these as a mark of autonomy and revolution. They seemed to have transgressed traditional boundaries and claimed autonomy over their bodies. When I asked some women when and why they decided to transgress these boundaries, their answers were more interesting and related to the practicalities of their lives. U G, a deserted woman from an onion shop said, "This is a Market, and you will find end numbers of personalities here. I wear Mangalsutra to make people perceive that my husband is alive and living with me. Similarly, when the workload is huge and the owner does not allow me to leave early, I tell him that my husband drinks and beats me so relieve me from duty early".[36] This is not only the story of U G, but of many other women. Symbolically women are signaling that they are not available and have male support at home. If women do not wear *Mangalsutra*, they face various questions. Thus, to avoid unwanted questions about their marital status, women wear it. Widowed and deserted women in the Market think that claiming their marital status will lead to more vulnerability. They do not have the support of male members of the family and thus, they will become an easy target to prey and an object of harassment. Claiming their actual marital status would send a message that *'they are available'.* Women in the Market are aware that in male-dominated spaces, they

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[33]Ibid.

[34]It has seen auspicious tread/necklace in Hindu religion. This necklace is tied around the neck of the bride by the groom during the wedding ceremony.

[35]It is small marker worn by majorly Hindu women on the forehead.

[36]Informal talk with U G in the onion shop, 12/04/2022

are more vulnerable and prone to harassment. Thus, they strategically deal with the issue by not sharing their marital status. By wearing these symbols, women show that they are not available to other men, and their body and sexuality is controlled and maintained by marriage bonds. This shows that women use patriarchal symbols to refute patriarchal values and as a strategy to be safe.

Women workers' second strategy is adjusting to the environment and emulating the talk of their male colleagues. As S V from the vegetable and R S from grain market shared, when they first came to the Market, they felt uncomfortable. Men talk in double-meaning tones. Earlier, the women workers did not know the meanings. After a few months, they also learned the language and started using bad/abusive words and talking back. Now, men rarely try to mess with them. While sharing their experience, there was a smile on their face as they have won. Similarly, several women underlined the importance of talking back, being bold and courageous while working in the Market.[37] If they observe a man teasing or stalking, they grab and beat that man. S D from fruit market underscored, "When will Market Committee take action on our issue? Till that time, why should we wait for justice?' If a man harasses a woman, we collect 5 to 10 women and beat him up so he would not behave in the same manner".[38] Women's narratives show that they negotiate and apply different strategies to mitigate the experiences of harassment. Similarly, women build alternative mechanisms to deal with the issue. It shows that women do not have much faith in the union committee. Union also does not follow due process to address the women's issues. S S is a woman activist in the Market said that women who have problems approach her. Sometimes she takes the issue to the union office, and most often she resolves it through the process of conciliation or on mutual terms. However, there is no clarity that on what terms and conditions do these processes take place? Do women get a fair chance of representation and justice? What are the drawbacks of handling such sensitive matters outside the redressal mechanism system? However, when the matter goes to the union, what happens one can speculate from the S S maushi's case. The union summoned the accused, admonished him, and asked him to pay Rs. 500/- as a fine. In my opinion, the decision was abrupt and unjust. It did not follow due process and diminished the seriousness of the matter, which in turn shows the apathy towards women's issues. Despite the Act and legal provisions, women are not able to get justice. Act and the legal provisions have remained in the name only. There is a lack of implementation and monitoring of the legal provision. It is time to re-evaluate the Sexual Harassment Act 2013 and bridge the gaps as soon as possible.

Lack of Redressal Mechanism and Support System

Women workers sometimes deal with the sexual harassment issue on a personal level, and sometimes they approach the Union members. However, they do not get justice

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[37]Market perceived as a filthy, bad place for respectable women to work due to negative connotation attached to it. For more read Dipesh Chakrabarty.

[38]Interview with S D in the fruit market, 19/04/2022

every time. There is an apathetic approach from the Union and Market Committee as well. The Market Committee did not constitute a committee on sexual harassment or make women and other workers aware of local committee[39] against sexual harassment. The majority of women workers are unaware about internal and local committees. They do not know whom to approach and how to file a complaint. They do not know where the district office is—how to get there, who will pay the cost of travel so and so forth. At the Market, most women are daily wage workers and earn Rs. 1 per sack, and that Rs. 1 further gets divided if women work together in a group. Some women said, sometimes they manage to earn Rs. 30 to Rs. 50 per day. In this case, they cannot afford the cost of travel, print outs of complaint copies, and other costs. Women from the outskirts cannot access places in the city easily, and it takes time to travel. There is high chance that they will lose their daily wage if they travel to a district office to file their complaint. A research study done by Martha Farrell Foundation and PRIA underlined that, out of 655 districts in India, only 29 per cent of districts constituted Local Committee according to the Act, 2013 (2018:7). Women workers in the informal sector approach a Local Committee as a last recourse but, if the mechanism is not in place, where will these women go? Without awareness, how can women from the informal sector get to know of a Local Committee's provisions? Therefore, there is need to rethink the district to block/village level assistance, mechanism system and create easy access to these mechanisms and support systems. Similarly, there is need to ensure establishment and proper set up of Local Committee.

After listening to the experiences of marginalised women, I conclude, women face sexual harassment at the workplace, sometimes overtly and covertly and their social location plays a vital role in sharing experiences differently. Their experiences of sexual exploitation and harassment are different and have never been heard or brought forward in the mainstream. Women from marginalised background are more vulnerable at the workplace, and their experiences of sexual harassment are frequently characterised as a serious matter of offence. They often face humiliation due to caste. Women working in the Market face sexual harassment from their co-workers and higher authority personnel, and most of the time, these harassers belong to upper caste backgrounds. However, on a personal level, women try to reduce the risk of sexual harassment by adopting several strategies. Therefore, there is need to think critically on the sexual harassment discourse and incorporate voices from the margins to strengthen the discourse and the provisions of the Act. The Act should address the violent and caste-based humiliation, which forms an offensive working environment. Similarly, while talking about strengthening the mechanism, one needs to understand the critical aspect of caste location, family and community safety. It has been seen in the atrocity cases and also in Bhawaridevi's case how her husband had been targeted

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[39]Local Committee is district level committee for those who does not have Internal Committee against sexual harassment at the workplace. Workers from informal sector can approach to Local Committee to file sexual harassment complaints.

and beaten up to teach a lesson to Bhawari.[40] Similarly, in the caste-based atrocities rape of women and emasculation of men is common. Thus, family and community safety becomes a competing priority with holding the perpetrator accountable such that a woman may choose not to speak out after being violated.

Therefore, providing assistance and safety to the survivor is important. Simultaneously, transparent and democratic mechanisms can be ensured through adequate representation from the marginalised community background. While the constitution of the Internal Committee 2013 Act underlines that senior women should be presiding officers and one member from law, social work background but it does not specify the social location of members. Thus, there is a huge possibility that due to the lack of knowledge about how caste and gender matters at the workplace, one may lose the main core of the complaint. Therefore, the Act and new guidelines should consider these factors. Bhawaridevi's experiences of sexual violence related to her caste oppression are not center to the policymaking. Thus the Act lacks a crucial part. Now there is time to address these past mistakes. Through policymaking one can incorporate marginalised women's experiences at the workplace to make democratic, transparent, sensitive and accessible mechanisms at the workplace.

Acknowledgement

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[40]Bhawaridevi's husband faced tremendous violence. He got beaten up and after that in front of him five members from the same family raped Bhawaridevi to show his and Bhawaridevi's social place in the society. Village ostracised them after the incidence.

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When Fists Write (of) the Past: Conceptualising Dalit Historiography through the Cultural Productions of *Dravida Varga Aikya Munnani*

Sephora Jose[1]

Abstract

Dalit historiography is the narrativization of the past from a Dalit perspective purposive of critiquing existing traditions of Indian historiographies and/or producing alternate histories. It is the discourse through which historiographical erasures and misrepresentations are challenged through narratives that recover and reinterpret the past from anti-caste standpoints. This counter-discourse reorients historiography and transforms historical understandings by recognising caste as a structuring principle of history. This article attempts to theorise Dalit historiography as a resistance epistemology by outlining its methodological and thematic aspects through a study of DCUF cultural productions. DCUF (Depressed Class United Front) is an Adi-Dravida community named *Dravida Varga Aikya Munnani* that emerged as an anti-caste politico-religious group in 1950s Kerala under the leadership of PJ SabharajThirumeni.

To understand the politics of the alternate history articulated by DCUF, the article first maps the field of mainstream Kerala historiography to which DCUF cultural productions may be seen as a historiographical response. DCUF cultural productions, as an articulation of Dalit historiography, intervene in the epistemology of this mode of history writing by placing caste as the fulcrum of history by giving an alternate picture of the past vis-à-vis the origins of caste, its manifestations and anti-caste resistance. This study foregrounds the political valence of history in Dalit struggle and the ongoing negotiations between Dalit communities with the mainstream vis-à-vis history and history writing.

Keywords

Anti-caste, Dalit historiography, Kerala historiography, DCUF, counter-epistemology, caste-enslavement, Adi-Dravida

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Introduction

As an epistemic discourse about the past, historiography has inextricable connections with power structures, making it a tool of domination and resistance. Therefore, historiography, or the narrativization of history, is a dynamic realm constantly in flux despite the general assumption of history as an unchanging fixity. This shift from understanding History as a chronicle of events to that of narrativization of the past, as Priya Satia observes, crumbles assumptions of a universal past of progress ("Decolonising Indian History" 32.13), which has been ingrained as part of the cultural common sense. Such a redefinition enables critiquing History for its embeddedness in the dominant epistemological structures and values. As David Arnold argues, this redefinition of history as narrativization also enables history for the "restitution of the lives, experiences, worldviews, and mindsets of people who are systematically excluded from history or given only a marginal role" ("Decolonising History: Method or Fact" 56:43) and helps to repair the systemic failures of history to understand, interpret and theorize historical positions that are set outside the dominant domain (55:39). Historiography, thus, becomes a medium for resistance and political redress.

Dalit historiography is the narrativization of the past from a Dalit perspective purposive of critiquing existing traditions of Indian historiographies and/or producing counter histories. It is the discourse through which historiographical erasures and misrepresentations are challenged through narratives that recover and reinterpret the past from anti-caste standpoints. This counter-discourse reorients historiography and transforms historical understandings by recognizing caste as a structuring principle of history.

Central to Dalit historiographic discourse, critique and counter-creation have been articulated vis-à-vis content and methodology in history writing. Indian Dalit historiography critiques the dominant colonial and nationalist historiographies as well as the counter-hegemonic history writing attempted by Marxist and Subaltern historians, all of which are seen to enact erasure and misrepresentation of caste and Dalit agency in history. The counter-narratives articulated by Dalit historiography use caste as the structuring principle in history to recover erased histories/ caste-relevant themes and re-interpret the flawed/inadequate dominant historiographic representations. The shift in the evidential paradigm followed in mainstream historiography also marks an epistemic intervention from an anti-caste standpoint and therefore deserves analytical attention.

This paper attempts to exemplify and theorize Dalit historiography as a resistance epistemology by outlining its methodological and thematic aspects through a study of DCUF cultural productions. DCUF (Depressed Class United Front) is an Adi-Dravida[2] community named *Dravida Varga Aikya Munnani* that emerged as an anti-

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[2]The Adi movement claims that the indigenous native people were dispossessed from their native land by the Aryan usurpers and denigrated as untouchables under Aryan socio-religious hegemony. While the movement spread under various names such as Adi-Dharm, Adi-Hindu, etc., in the Northern part of the country, it was called the Adi-Dravida movement in South

caste political-religious group in 1950s Kerala under the leadership of PJ Sabharaj Thirumeni, himself a Dalit. Despite staging powerful anti-caste activism, which extends to the social, economic, and ideological realms, DCUF's contributions are absent in the narratives of Kerala history, even in Kerala Dalit historiographic discourse. Considering the geo-cultural location of DCUF and the specificity of Kerala's history, an understanding of mainstream Kerala historiography becomes essential to decipher the historiographical interventions of DCUF. Attention to the regional specificity of the movement's history is important not only because caste is an endemic reality but, more importantly, because Indian historiography is effectively the history of the Indian heartland constituted by the Northern regions.

Mainstream Kerala historiography shows the agrarian expansion as a much later historical event as compared to the rest of India. The trade-based society in Kerala moved to agriculture in the eighth century AD after the Brahmin incursions from the regions of Karnataka. This picture of Brahmin incursion is starkly different from mainstream Nationalist and Dalit Indian historiographies, which present Aryan arrival through the lens of desi/videsi and North/South, respectively. Unlike in other parts of the country, when caste developed in Kerala, it did not branch out neatly based on the Varna principle. The considerable demographic proportion of the foreign traders constituted by Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Kerala, who engaged in occupations related to the transportation and exchange of goods, altered the way caste developed in Kerala (Shankaran Nambootiripad 22). Unlike mainstream Indian historiography which documents the Aryan invasion of the Indus valley and the Gangetic plain, mainstream Kerala historiography presents the arrival of brahmins in Kerala as incursive, characterised by ideological manipulation and establishment of hegemony (Menon 162). Although the land relations, as they appear in mainstream Indian historiography were caste-based, manifested as landlordism/Janmi system, slavery as an economic institution of exploitation and transaction of Dalit/slave castes does not appear in Indian historiography. Kerala also has a distinct history of colonial rule. In Indian historiography, the pre-colonial era is valorised as the golden age of Vedic civilisation, disrupted by Muslim invasions in the medieval period and imperialism. Unlike many other Indian states, Kerala, before its birth in 1956, was divided into three princely states, viz. Malabar, Kochin and Travancore. While the colonial rulers directly ruled Malabar through British residents since the late eighteenth century, Kochin and Travancore remained as princely states under monarchical rule till 1949. Mainstream Kerala historiography exemplifies the requirement to look at the 'regional' as the former is not a subset of mainstream Indian historiography.

Kinds of Mainstream Kerala Historiography

Recognition of the specificity of Kerala history demands attention to the historiographic trends in Kerala. The mainstream discourse of Kerala history principally manifests

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India, premised on the reclamation of Dravida indigeneity through the recovery of its social, cultural and material aspects.

two trends, the political and the economic, emphasizing the structures of rule and systems of production, respectively.

The Political History of Kerala

The political histories of Kerala focus on structures of power defined by the ruling classes/authorities/the state. It adopts a top-down perspective from locations of power, inevitably chronicling rule systems, rulers, and social classes which are part of the administrative systems. Consequently, it presents history as driven by individuals in power and the ruling classes, systems as designed and regulated by those in power, while 'the people', when mentioned, appear primarily as subjects that are acted upon. As the definitional and representational criteria of 'community' become political role and social status, those who do not wield power in the political machinery get ignored and / or sidelined. This state-centric historiographic paradigm does not talk about the role played by the Dalits, tribals and fisherfolk as political agents.

This mainstream historiography presents the medieval/post-Aryan era as the golden age characterized by remarkable growth in political power, economy, art and literature. Brahmin incursions which culminated in the arrival of ritually superior priestly Brahmins called Namboothiris are shown to have resulted in Aryanisation—a process of effecting socio-political and economic changes as well as the establishment of Brahmanical Hindu hegemony. Mainstream Kerala historiography presents Aryanization as a non-violent process attained primarily through Brahmin intelligence (Menon 46, Shreedhara Menon 162). Though caste is stated to be the determinant of social relations of power, socio-political formations like caste and class appear in this historiographic framework only as depoliticized socio-cultural categories. Therefore, caste is normalized and sanctioned as a cultural norm beneficial for socio-political stability and economic welfare. However, practices like agrestic slavery and untouchability are mentioned as social evils to be reformed/abolished. Caste-based practices like untouchability, seen as part of superstitious beliefs, are mentioned as social evils which are not under the purview of politics and, therefore, ought to be reformed through social movements.

The periodization adopted in such political historiography of Kerala also aligns with the state-centric framework that chronicles the reigns of various structures of the state. The dominant pattern of periodization divides the long timespan broadly into five periods; the Pre-Perumal rule/ Sangham era, Perumal rule, the monarchical rule of the princely states, Colonial rule, Nationalist movement and the formation of united Kerala. In other words, Aryanization, the development of kingdoms, the growth of colonial powers, and the nationalist call for an independent nation-state are the epochal moments in this historiography, reaffirming the metanarrative of the state.

The Economic History of Kerala

The other historiographic framework in mainstream Kerala history foregrounds the economic relations of production. This historiographic strand understands historical realities as rooted in the economy constituted by the material conditions of production

and land relations at a particular historical moment. The state becomes secondary in this paradigm while the power-holding authorities are defined in terms of class. In this framework, state power structures become reflections of the economy and its shifts. Economic history identifies society in terms of classes, depending on their relationship with land and production. The difference of economic history vis-à-vis its historiographic emphasis on economy rather than the state/political structures translates into a reversal of the historical view and sees historical changes welling up from the ground (the material relations of production) to the top (the State defined as structures of control of production). Economic histories add caste in the narrative as an influential factor in class formation, exemplified in the nature of property ownership, methods of resource allocation, and forms of surplus extraction. It acknowledges caste-based land ownership in Kerala, which translates into diminishing economic and social power down the caste ladder.

This historiographic tradition traces history in terms of the shift from tribal economy to agriculture and the later shift to trade and cash cropping in the colonial capitalist economy. Caste is seen to originate in the agrarian phase, marked by new rigid land relations and particular labor systems to maximize production, leading to the emergence of groups called *jatis*. The economic shift from the tribal economy to the agricultural economy also becomes the basis for the formation of the state to extract the surplus. Such economic histories project the relationship with land as the determining criterion of the socio-economic identity of individuals and groups. Though *jati* is added in the narrative wherever it is seen to be relevant, the narrative revolves around the relationship between social classes determined by their position in the production process. Therefore, caste becomes the invisible organizational logic for the formation of concrete classes/occupational categories which are emphasized.

The representation of slavery is a significant aspect in mainstream historiography vis-à-vis caste. Caste-based slavery is repeatedly recognized as an exploitative order from which land-owning classes benefitted. But the focus on the deprivation of the slaves reduced the history of slave upheavals to the history of Dalit conversions to Christianity as in EMS's narrative, or an absolute denial of slave resistance as in the history written by Rajan Gurukkal and RaghavaVarier. Gurukkal and Varier use the term 'slavery' interchangeably with bonded labor and servitude (8, 111,117, 202), blurring not just the transactional aspect of slavery but also its caste determinacy exemplified in the (mis)interpretation of the anti-slavery movement called PRDS as an emancipatory movement against serfdom. Unlike these two historians, PK Balakrishnan, illuminates the transactional nature of agrestic slavery, but presents it merely as an economic institution to extract labor (178). Similar historiographic foregrounding of class can be seen in the historicization of the nationalist movement, anti-caste movements, etc., in the economic histories of Kerala.

The periodization in this historiographic tradition aligns with its goal to articulate the decisiveness of economic changes in history. The historical junctures that mark different economic configurations are identified as pre-feudal, feudal, colonial, and nationalist. The pre-feudal tribal economy was followed by agricultural expansion

in the post-Aryan period, during which feudal land relations based on *jati* emerged. The history of the feudal period shows the hierarchized social organization of classes decided by specific roles in the production. The shift to the colonial period is marked by the integration of feudal-capitalist systems and the resultant shifts in production. The nationalist period is historicized as a period of anti-feudal anti-imperial resistance driven by the imagination of an independent nation-state. In this periodization paradigm, history is understood in terms of class relations, where caste is merely an additive factor.

The Evidential Paradigm in Mainstream Kerala Historiography

Historiography, having been defined as a political project with a specific agenda and strategies, makes the evidential paradigm followed in historiography significant. As a mode of knowledge generation, the historiographic methodology is embedded within dominant epistemic values. Mainstream Kerala historiography resorts exclusively to official artifacts and written documents as sources. Written documents like administrative reports and trade records, census and economic surveys of the state, verified archaeological artifacts, and literary classics and epics and travel narratives are taken as historical sources and validated.

Analysis of DCUF Cultural Productions

History is a significant category with which DCUF engages as part of its anti-caste politics. Analysis of the cultural productions of DCUF, including songs, memoirs, customs, cultural symbols, architectural patterns, prayers, and speeches/sermons illuminates both critique and counter-creation as forms of such engagement with mainstream historiography. This section delineates the major historiographic critiques and counters in the cultural productions of DCUF and analyses their complex conversations with various mainstream historiographic traditions.

Critique of Historiographic Erasure

DCUF's critique of historiographic erasure is majorly constituted by two aspects. They criticize the Brahmanical erasure of their indigenous identity as the Adi-Dravida tribe and their casteless cultural legacy. The critique against the mainstream historiographic erasure of Dravidian history is compounded by their reclamation of the royal legacy as the descendants of benevolent and just Dravidian kings of Chera, Chola, and Pandya dynasties. As Anuraj Thirumeni, the former chairman of DCUF says, "Poykayil Appachan[3] said that no alphabet is in sight about the history of his tribe/race. Sabharaj said that we have our history. But we are alienated from history."(Personal interview 3 Jan. 2021).[4] DCUF sees this historiographic erasure as a deliberate tactic to alienate

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[3]Poykail Appachan is a Dalit leader who founded the anti-caste movement Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) in the early twentieth-century, Kerala. DCUF worships him with reverence, as he is believed to be a divine incarnation for the liberation of the slave castes.

[4]All quotations from personal interviews are translated from Malayalam, by the author.

them from discourses of power and to perpetuate forms of caste servitude. One of the DCUF songs says,

> "The Vamana leaders have thwarted the Dravida voice
> The Vamana leaders have wiped out the Dravidian history" (Personal Interview 7 Jan. 2021)

In addition to erasing casteless cultural legacy, DCUF argues that mainstream historiography omits their resistance struggles against caste. They critique the mainstream historiography for its infrequent mentions of anti-caste leaders and movements. Furthermore, they underline that DCUF movement and Sabharaj are absent not only in mainstream history but even in the Dalit historiography of Kerala. Anuraj Thirumeni writes, "Sabharaj Thirumeni was one of the bravest leaders of the depressed class movements after the formation of Kerala. He pioneered his social activism by forming the organization named DCUF in 1958. Mainstream historians, Dalit intelligentsia, and writers pretended not to have seen this movement and ignored it from historiography" (*Dravida Prasthanam Keralathil* 3).

The Creation of Alternate History

Recovery of ignored sources, perspectives, and experiences, along with reinterpretation of historiographic archives and existing representations, constitute the alternate historiography attempted by DCUF. The historiography of DCUF shows the creation and employment of unconventional sources. The memories and stories about Sabharaj's speeches in the streets about the liberation of the Dalits abound in the narratives of the members of DCUF. Sabharaj Thirumeni engaged with the Dalits through his evening meetings and study classes about slavery and their liberation. As Satheeshan, one of the early followers of DCUF recalls,

> Thirumeni, after his work in the quarry, would come to Manchadikkari (an island primarily inhabited by a Dalit population). His disciples and some of us would also accompany him. Thirumeni would wear his *Angavasthram*. After wearing that, whatever he says is motivated by a divine spirit. He would sing about the slave sufferings, about our ancestors who were sold off in the markets, those who were beaten to death, those who were yoked to the plow with bulls. Everyone will repeat the songs after him. Often people end up crying aloud. These memories will never fade. His voice was thunderous. (Personal interview, 17 Jan. 2021)

Another member of DCUF recalls,

> When Thirumeni comes in the evening, I would also go with him. In those times, we used to do theatrical performances like plays, *kadhaprasangam*, etc. When Thirumeni comes, we perform short *kadhaprasangam* (a performance art in which a story is narrated by mixing prose and poetry) and other things like

that. Nothing else, he used to talk about our own problems, our experiences, our history. Once when Madhuchettan performed a *kadhaprasangam*, people were crying… So many times, v*illadichanpattu* was also performed here; and people would come out of their houses to watch this, and they would return home only late. (Personal interview 29 Jan. 2021)

These narratives indicate that the construction of history and its transmission in DCUF was a collective affair. History originates in people's narratives and primarily survives through their memory. History appears here as a moving narrative characterized by fluidity and adaptability.

DCUF employs unconventional sources such as memory, mythology, legends, cultural symbols, practices, oral literature, etc., alongside official-written sources as historiographic sources.The use of such texts is pertinent to the historiography of Dalits, whose epistemic worldview and patterns of knowledge production are distinct owing to their position in the caste system. For instance, Anuraj Thirumeni, the ex-chairman of DCUF, remarks, "We haven't printed more copies of those books. Everyone knew the songs well, you know, so there was no need to print the copies." (6 Jan. 2020)

The adoption of a caste lens also transforms the periodization followed in historiography. In DCUF's archive, history is divided into periods, viz. the rule of the Dravidian kings, Aryan regime and centuries of enslavement, colonial modernity and renaissance, and the anti-caste activism of DCUF. In contrast to the mainstream historiography, DCUF historiography shows the historical junctures as driven by caste. However, the linear progression of history evident in their historiography resembles the mainstream historiographical projection of history as linear and teleological.

Recovery in Historiography

DCUF's historiography based on an alternate evidential paradigm capacitates the recovery of ignored perspectives and experiences in historiography. Recovery of Dalit experiences and agency in the historiography of DCUF challenges the mainstream historiographic presentation of Dalits merely as marginal laborers. DCUF's recovery of experience is important not only because they employ experience as a category but also because of the specific way in which experiences are invoked. The historicization of experiences of enslavement and feudal servitude in the oeuvre of DCUF highlights the physical and emotional aspects of slave experiences from the perspective of the enslaved. This contrasts with the mainstream representation of slavery as an economic institution and highlights it as an anti-social and dehumanizing system. Moreover, they invoke and link caste violence in contemporary times with the system of slavery and feudal oppression.

Experiences of caste slavery recovered in the historiography of DCUF enable an understanding of slavery as a social institution, different from its mainstream presentation as an economic institution defined by the exploitation of bonded laborers. In the DCUF narrative, the beginning of the enslavement is traced to the

Aryan invasion/Aryan settlement, and the processes of establishing domination are detailed to show the scattering, oppression, and dehumanization of the slave castes. Their narrativization of slave experiences and the historicization of slavery in terms of enslavement animate a shift of focus from the 'slave' to the 'enslaved'. For example,

> Haven't you taken money by selling us in the markets?
> Haven't you put chains on our legs and hands?
> We are the descendants whose blood boils in anger
> You, monsters, never allowed us, the enslaved, to be free. (Personal interview 26 Dec. 2020)

The enslavement of the Adi-Dravida in the Aryan regime, the imposition of indignities like untouchability and caste names on them, and their denigration as slave castes are the major points in the narrative of enslavement. The architectural structures called *Mathrubhavanam* and *Pithrubhavanam*[5] in the DCUF headquarters preserve the memory of their forefathers and foremothers who were sold off to faraway lands. The slaves do not appear as bonded laborers in these cultural texts but as dehumanized people who were denied their humanity. Images of the separation of families, brutal punishments like burning and whipping, violent actions like rape, murder, transaction of humans, exploitative practices like tying men to the plow along with bulls, etc., that appear in their texts present the history of slavery from the perspective of the enslaved. The narratives are nuanced in detailing the social, material, and emotional, experiences of slavery, such as ostracization, oppression, exploitation, deprivation, dehumanization, and grief. The brutality of the physical punishments, sexual harassment, rapes, caste murders, etc., indicate the violent nature of the system. A member of DCUF recollects the horrors of slavery:

> During the time of slavery, the slaves were killed for anything. I remember my grandfather telling me he had seen men being forced to plow the land along with bulls. Imagine what kind of cruelty it is! Almost 80 years ago, a man lived here. As my father told me, there was a big callus on his shoulder due to the plow's weight. During those times, my father used to go to Thiruvalla. He had been a member of PRDS. And this *vallyachan* (the older man) was also in PRDS. The atrocities done to them were terrible. There were even slave markets in Vechoor. There was a place called 'Chuzhalikkuzhy' in Manjadikkari where the masters drowned many slaves. It is a whirlpool where four canals meet. And if/when a slave gets old or dares to disobey his master, he would be pushed into the 'Chuzhalikuzhy' as punishment. In those times, most of the land in Manjadikkari was owned by a family called 'Thuruthimaliyil'. There were Panickars appointed by that family to kill the dissenting slaves. (Personal communication 29 Jan. 2021)

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[5]*Mathrubhavanam* and *Pithrubhavanam* mean the house of the mother and the house of the father, respectively. DCUF headquarters have these temple-like structures in memory of their enslaved ancestors. They light the lamp in these regularly to pay respect to their foremothers and forefathers.

The objectification of the enslaved castes and their being exchanged as gifts and commodities, exemplify the extent of dehumanisation in caste-slavery. Images of Dalits working alongside bulls in the field, enslaved people being pushed down in the mud to bind the ridges, thrown into a whirlpool when they age and become incapable of working, recur in the cultural archive, unfolding the dehumanization in caste slavery that prevailed in Kerala till the late nineteenth century. The coercion and control of labor in caste slavery are also articulated in the texts. Another song in the cultural oeuvre of DCUF talks of the exploitation of the enslaved castes by control through coercion and fear. The narratives reveal that extreme poverty and deprivation of the enslaved communities strengthen the exploitative regime of caste slavery.

> Ayyo (alas)! My hands and legs are falling weak
> I need to get some *thal* and *thakara* to eat.
> I shall drink the muddy water.
> But how can I stand this storm and cold
> Don't even have a place to rest my head! (13)

The depiction of destitution in these lines when understood in the context of caste slavery is more complex in showing that material deprivation is a sign of social inequality and indignity. The enslaved are dehumanized to the extent that they do not even wish for clean water or good food. The social ostracization of the enslaved castes disallows them access to public space and basic amenities of life.

The texts poignantly disclose a world of emotions highlighting the enslaved people's grief, emotional connections, and familial bonds. This is particularly radical in the historicization of slave experiences as it unfolds the social and emotional life worlds of the enslaved. This powerful depiction of a world of the affected highlights the humanity and social subjectivities of the enslaved, both as individuals and as part of society. It draws attention to the social relations of the enslaved that have been discounted from mainstream historiographies. Poignant images like that of a woman and her husband being sold off to distant places, slave families being separated, children who experience the horrors of orphanhood, etc., shift from the mainstream representation of slavery as a material institution to a depiction of slavery as a social institution determined by caste. This recovery of slave suffering expands both the mainstream and Dalit Kerala historiographic discourses by unfolding slavery as a social institution and pioneering documentation of slave experiences in historiography.

DCUF recovers the history of anti-caste resistance primarily in terms of the major events and political leaders who led those events. In this recovery project, DCUF identifies the Adi-Dravida people as the original inhabitants of Bharat and the Blacks as belonging to the same race as the Adi-Dravida. This historiographic mission is also manifested in the renaming of places after the names of social revolutionaries like Martin Luther King, Ambedkar, Ayyankali, Pandit Karuppan, KP Vallon, Paradi Abraham Issac, etc. Additionally, DCUF songs document the names of forgotten

anti-caste leaders who worked with Sabharaj Thirumeni. As ND Kumarji, Sabharaj's associate and disciple, writes,

> Our misfortunes haven't ended despite the emancipatory struggles of Sri NM Joseph, Kandan Kumaran, Vellikkara Chothi, Paradi Abraham, Chathan Puthoor Ashan, KP Vallon, ND Ashirvadam, and Krishnankutti. Dravida children should wake up thinking and remembering the miseries suffered by Simon Yohannan, Ayyankali, and Poykayil Thiru Sabharaj Thirumeni (8).

An excerpt from *Thiru: PJ Sabharaj: Orma, Rashtreeyam, Atayalam* further exemplifies this pattern in DCUF historiography. "DCUF was rich with a line of great leaders like Sabharaj. ND Kumarji, S Arumanayakam, KC Ramankunj, PM Nanappan, Issac Mathew, PJ Easho, PI Andrews, PD Simon Chelakomb…Kuttoor Thankachan, CM Baby Charamkulam were some of those leaders" (34–35). Furthermore, the book also recovers the history of women's political engagement in the movement by recovering their names. To quote from the same book, "An important factor in the history of DCUF is the presence of women leadership and women-led movements. Dr. Mary K John, C A Chellama, PP Leelamma, C V Mariamma Stephen, KJ Annamma, MA Sarojini…were strong women leaders of DCUF" (32).

The invocation of the history of anti-caste resistance through the recovery of individual leaders conforms with mainstream Nationalist and Kerala historiographic paradigm that posits individual/event-centred history. While the historiographic framework follows the structure of the mainstream Kerala historiography and Indian nationalist historiography, in terms of content, it expands Dalit Kerala historiography by introducing many forgotten anti-caste leaders to Dalit historiography.

DCUF engages through history with the question of identity, primarily emphasizing aspects of indigeneity and lineage, aiming to foster self-respect and pride that emerge from historical awareness. Recovery of the Adi-Dravida glory in terms of epistemic, material, and ethical superiority and contrasting this with the Aryan regime as evinced in the historiography of DCUF is linked to the reclamation of a dignified indigenous identity. The idea of Adi-Dravida as the indigenous race composed of various royal gotras counters the indignities, impurity, and brokenness imposed on their being seen as enslaved castes or untouchables. DCUF presents the Aryan invasion as a historical conquest through violence and treachery. They highlight the indigenous identity by foregrounding Adi-Dravida glory vis-à-vis knowledge/philosophical wisdom, social harmony, and material prosperity. Dravidian rule is celebrated for maintaining the ideal or desired conditions of living with respect to social, ideological, and material aspects. The glory of the kingdom, as shown by their cultural texts, emanates from the egalitarian and corruption-free political climate created by the rule of just and benevolent kings. The image of a utopian time of truth, fraternity, and equality recurs in these texts. The people of DCUF often recite the popular Malayalam song about '*mavelinad'* (the ideal reign of Mahabali) to reckon the Adi-Dravida reign.

> Under the rule of Maveli
> People were treated as equals.
> In those times of harmony
> No harm or havoc touched any.
> No falsehood, no deceit
> Not even a trace of dishonesty.
> No false measures, no lies.
> No anxieties, no diseases
> Infant deaths were not even heard of.

To quote from a speech delivered at the annual convention of DCUF,

> This (Bharat/India) is our land. We are the descendants of a tribe that ruled this land. We are the Adi-Dravidas. Our ancestors have authored Vedas in this land; they have written epics in this land. Our ancestors have written literature. So, we are the descendants of a group of great men who were writers, rulers, and philosophers. Aryans are the aliens who came from Antioch, Rome, Hungary, Tibet, Belgium, Philippines, Portuguese, British, Arabia and other countries to rear cattle in our land. They came to our land and destroyed the rule of our land, which was based on truth, justice, and dharma. They killed our kings, they butchered our gurus, and they destroyed our leaders. They conquered India and called it a Hindu nation. When the power was shifted to the Aryans, the original people of the land, the Adi-Dravidas, became Pulaya, Pariah, and untouchable polluting creatures. (Speech at the DCUF Annual function 26 Dec. 2020)

These narratives contrast the social justice followed in Dravidian times with the unjust and violent Aryan regime. Phrases like *'Aadiyardeepam'* (The light of the Aadiyar),[6] *'Aadiyamakkal'* (Children of Aadiyar), *'Rajakeeya-purohithakulam'* (Royal-priestly), etc., which appear in the cultural archive of DCUF indicate Adi-dravida as a harmonious tribe which has a royal heritage. This depiction, in spite of fostering an alternate dignified identity, reproduces the Brahmanical value system that defines the community in terms of its religious and political stature. In other words, reinforcing priestly and royal legacy as the premise of reclaiming dignity resonates with the Brahmanical understanding of glory, and therefore, its anti-caste politics is about inverting the Brahmanical hierarchy in terms of racial contradiction between the Dravidians and the Aryans.

The ideological aspect of the indigeneity argument illuminates the epistemic superiority and philosophical richness of Adi-Dravida. As shown in the quotations earlier, DCUF claims a rich knowledge tradition that belongs to the tribe evinced in the existence of many philosophical texts authored and read by Dravidian *rishis* and learned men and women:

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[6]Aadiyar in Malayalam means the original people.

> Hey Dravidas, we are the native inhabitants
> You would fail to hold back tears if our story were told
> If the truth is said, the heart will break
> But we have a lot of historical truths to tell.
> The history of Bharat, is not the story of the *Bhagavad Gita*;
> It is not the *Quran* that is safely preserved.
> It is neither the *Ramayana*, which extends to seven *kaandhas*[7].
> Nor the laborious huge work, *Bible*.
> Vyasa, the great sage, discovered the great text
> And found that it is composed by Thiruvalluvar
> Vyasa gained wisdom and had
> Rewritten the text into sections[8]. (DCUF song, Personal interview 17 Jan. 2021)

DCUF claims that Thiruvalluvar was a wise man who belonged to the Adi-Dravida tribe. He authored the text *Thirukkural,* a great treatise on multiple topics that pertain to human life. This work is claimed to have been taken over by the Aryans.

> The text *Thirukkural* contains the history of the land. But the Savarnas did not approve it. Vyasa[9] had known about it in his vision and rewritten it into several sections like history, law, medicine, art, culture, education, information technology,etc. So, what Thiruvalluvar had written, was the history of Bharat. It is not the history of the fight between Krishna and Karna; it is not the history of Ram and Lakshman. (Personal interview 17 Jan. 2021)

As these texts unfold, Dravidian rule was based on their superior knowledges contained in the Vedas and Shastras. This is further exemplified in the artifact, the sword and the buckler placed in the DCUF headquarters, which symbolizes their royal legacy. It is designed with four dots at the center indicating four Vedas and six dots in a circle indicating six sastras. The sword and the buckler represent the rule of the Adi-Dravida based on the Vedas and Shastras. Despite indicating an epistemic domain comprising alternate moral and philosophical ethics, the use of the words 'Vedas' and 'Shastras'denotes that DCUF's discourse on Dravidian knowledge resonates with the vocabulary of Brahmanism that privileges the Vedas and Shastras as ultimate sources of wisdom.

DCUF historiography also highlights that the Adi-Dravida were a prosperous and wealthy tribe.The material riches of the Adi-Dravida kingdom are highlighted by referring to their prosperous harvests, full granaries, golden throne, *rishikulam* (residence of the great gurus), etc. They claim ownership of numerous temples

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[7]*The Ramayana* is composed in seven sections.
[8]Reference to *The Mahabharata*, considered to be one of the most important texts in Hindu mythology believed to be written by Veda Vyasa.
[9]Vedavyasa is a Hindu sage who is believed to have written the classic epic *Mahabharata.*

and shrines/*kavus*, which were Brahmanised in the post-Aryan period. Prabhuraj Thirumeni says,

> [I]n this country, the scheduled castes built 186277 temples, 15000 *kavus*, 66667 *kallambalam,* and consecrated gods in these temples. If you check the history of *Vaikathappan, Ettumanoorappan, Kaduthuruthiyappan, Thirunakkarayappan, or Sabarimalayappan*, [10] you will find them to be the ancestors of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. If they (Brahmins) put a *poonol* (sacred thread) on these gods we will not accept. (Prabhuraj Thirumeni 26 Dec. 2020).

The regional location where DCUF traces its royal racial past is also significant in its historiographic politics. DCUF argues that they are the natives of Bharat or INDIA, which they expand as Inter-National Dravidian's Independent Area. Dravida appears as the linguistic identity of the Adi-Dravida tribe, who are shown to have originally inhabited India. DCUF equates the Adi-Dravida with the Nagas and the Asuras to claim that Dravida is a pan-Indian identity. "The 'naga' and the 'Dravida' are two names of the same people. Many will not accept that the Dravidas and Nagas were not only inhabitants of South India but were inhabitants of the whole of India, both North India and South India. But these are historical truths." (*Thiru PJ Sabharaj:Orma Rashtreeyam Atayalam* 28). As one of the members of DCUF says, "the name 'Bharatham' came not because Bharata ruled here. Sabharaj Thirumeni had taught us that India is the land of Dravidians. INDIA means -International Dravidians' Independent Association." (Personal communication 6 Jan. 2021). This approach marks an intervention in mainstream Indian historiography through a creative appropriation of the mainstream Nationalist historiographic framework. Nationalist historiography which alleges the colonial and Muslim conquests as the cause for the decline of glorious Indian culture is changed by shifting the culpability of the nation's fall onto the Aryan invasion. But simultaneously, the idea of a glorious nation, premised on the idea of common roots vis-à-vis culture, history, and descent, is maintained. In other words, they subscribe to the modern idea of nation and call for the banishment of foreign Aryan settlers by valorising the former. Their reinterpretation of the word 'INDIA' as International Dravidians Independent Association, and demythologisation of 'Bharat' as not ruled by Bharata, indicate how it follows the framework of nationalism by infusing it with an anti-caste perspective defined as Anti-Aryan/Anti-Brahmin(ical).

The identity reclamation in the narratives of DCUF also foregrounds lineage as a pertinent concern. They contrast their oppressed conditions in the Aryan regime with the ideal rule of their Dravidian forefathers. Equating Dravidians and Asuras and keeping them in opposition to the Aryan Brahmins, DCUF highlights this contrast exemplified through the repeated reference to the legend of Maha Bali, who was betrayed and manipulated by the Brahmin Vamana. As narrated by one of the early associates of Sabharaj Thirumeni, "Mahabali was the last Dravidian king. Since he

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[10]Deities consecrated in various Hindu temples in Kerala

was great and invincible, they sought the help of Brahma-Vishnu-Maheswara to defeat Mahabali" (Personal interview 17 Jan. 2021).

DCUF's reclamation of their royal lineage is most evident in their naming pattern. Sabharaj urged his followers to name their children after the great Dravidian kings. All the members of Deva Jana Samajam (the spiritual wing of DCUF) have names referring to kings such as *Thampuran* (lord), *Thirumeni* (revered), *Yajamanan* (lord/master), *Raj* (king), etc. AnurajThirumeni and MB Manoj write, "The enslaved in India were once a community with self-pride and glory. Understanding that history is the only path to their liberation. That is why Appachi formed positions in the community such as Rajarishis, Devarishis, Rajamathas, Devamathas and Rajakanyas"(Thiru PJ Sabharaj: Orma Rashtreeyam Atayalam 102). These names denote Adi-Dravida as the royal-priestly tribe. Another member of DCUF recalls the naming ceremony of his daughter as follows,

> Thirumeni had named my children. My eldest daughter is Rani Sumitra Devi. My sons are Niyathiraj Chakravarthy and Nayanaraj Chakravarthy. And my youngest daughter is Nrupa mol. When our last daughter was born, we sent him (Thirumeni) a letter informing him about it and inviting him to the naming ceremony. I requested him to find a name for her. After three days, we got a letter. Only this much was written on it; my address, Appachi's signature, and three names. When he came here the night before the ceremony, he asked my wife and me to choose one among those names. We both liked the name 'Anuraja'. So, we told him to name her as 'Anuraja'. Appachi also said it is a good name. The next morning, after all the prayers, the ceremony began. Appachi held her in his hands and was praying. While praying, he heard a humming voice in his ears, and then he said, "she is Nrupamol." We were surprised. (Personal communication 29 Jan. 2021)

Kaipuzha Jayaraj, one among Sabharaj's early associates writes,

> We are coming singing the song of blood
> The song of blood, the song of struggle
> We are the worshippers of the Satya-dharma
> We are the children of the rishi-Bharata (n.p.)

DCUF narratives trace their lineage to the Dravidian kings who established kingdoms of Chera, Chola, and Pandya kings, who are shown to have ruled *Dravidanadu,* of which Kerala was a part. According to the speech by one of the *rajarshis* at the annual function at Mukkada,

> Bharatam was ruled by the Dravidas. The Aryans, who were intelligent, mighty, and physically attractive, mingled with the Dravida women and, through deceit, extracted the country's secrets, financial sources, and ruling strategies. Thus, the Dravidians lost their country. Many Dravidian kings ruled even Kerala. Cheran, Cholan, Pandhyan, Chenkuttaman, and Chethara Prathapan were powerful Dravidian kings. (26 Dec. 2020)

The depiction of the Adi-Dravida as the descendants of the Dravidian kings is further exemplified in the words of Satheeshan, a member of DCUF. He says,

> We were dominant in this land. We were the owners. But everything had been robbed from us, and we got enslaved. That means Dravidians lost their glory after the reign of rulers like Chera, Chola, Pandya, Chenkuttaman, Chethara Prathapan and Kotharani. Mahabali was the last Dravidian king. (Personal interview 17 Jan. 2021)

The historiographic representation of royal legacy in DCUF conforms with the mainstream Kerala historiography in its equation of the Cheras to the native rulers of the regions of erstwhile Kerala. It is significantly different from Kerala Dalit historiography, which shows the Cheras as a royal dynasty in ancient Tamilakam which plundered regions of Kerala to amass wealth. As evinced in these narratives, DCUF privileges the political realm, similar to the political historiography of Kerala. In contrast to Dalit Kerala historiography, which highlights the social realm, DCUF's historiography defines the community in political terms, emphasizing on material prosperity and social harmony thanks to good governance.

Reinterpretation of History

Understanding history through the alternate framework of caste compels relooking and reinterpreting existing historiographic representations. Identification of historio-graphic archives as historical validates the reinterpretation of archives and the narratives based on them. DCUF texts attempt such reinterpretation of historiographic sources and narratives to construct their alternate history.

In contrast to the mainstream representation of Aryan hegemony as effected through Brahmin brilliance and possession of agricultural technologies, DCUF represents the establishment of Aryan hegemony through violence and manipulation. This narrativization challenges the equation between Brahmins and innate superior qualities by accentuating that Aryan/brahmin superiority is a sheer matter of domination and not inherent prowess. The reinterpretation of the Aryan invasion by DCUF highlights Aryan treachery as the cause of the decline of the Dravidian kingdom. DCUF texts emphasize the ideological control attained through the appropriation of Dravidian knowledge traditions. The Brahmanical appropriation of Dravidian epics such as *Thirukkural* and their Vedas and Shastras is a recurring argument in the historiography of DCUF, as discussed in the previous section. Along with reclaiming their dignity through the reclamation of epistemic superiority, DCUF also underscore that the Aryan invasion was violent and gory. As MJ Pandit writes,

> Hey, crores Dravida young people,
> Go on and save our land.
> Aryans the betrayers
> Have invaded our land, Bharat. (n.p)

The violence and treachery of the Aryans is further reiterated,

> The Aryans, the most heinous tribe, Aryans, the most wicked tribe, Aryans who even lust after their mothers, a tribe with the most despicable culture, came to our land and destroyed the rule on our land, which was based on truth, justice, and dharma. They killed our kings; they butchered our *gurus*, and destroyed our leaders. They conquered India and called it a Hindu nation. When the power was shifted to the Aryans, the original people of the land, the Adi Dravida, we became *Pulaya, Paraya,* and polluting untouchable creatures. Thus, *Pulayan, Parayan, Vedan, Vettuvan, Velan, Ulladan,* and *Adivasi*s became powerless. (Speech at DCUF annual celebration 26 Dec. 2020)

The representation of Kerala renaissance is another crucial concern in DCUF historiography which demands critical attention. While agreeing to the mainstream historiographic idea that the renaissance was pioneered by Sree Narayana Guru in the nineteenth century attempting the reformation of individual caste groups, DCUF marks a rupture from this renaissance tradition and posits their movement as anti-caste defined in terms of the unification of caste groups to form a community. In one DCUF song, Sabharaj Thirumeni writes:

> Nanu guru[11] has come to console his caste
> He ignored the Harijans
> Don't ever think that he came for our liberation. (*DCUF Viplava Ganangal* 10)

Although he critiques the renaissance movement for its inability to unify people across castes, these lines show adherence to the same approach that it critiques. This narrative also suggests an exclusionary identity politics premised on the Harijan identity. Furthermore, while claiming to be anti-caste, their self-identification as the Harijan reinforces the Gandhian reformist paradigm.

> Kaipuzha Jayaraj, one of Sabharaj's disciples, writes,

> > Hadn't they tortured our fathers and mothers
> > For the past thousand and eight hundred years!
> > Do you know anyone who has done anything for them?
> > Has Budha, Krishna, Muhammed, or Christ done something for them?
> > Has Narayanan done anything for them?
> > Do you know the reason, dear brother? (*DCUF s Viplava Ganangal* n.p.)

Jayaraj's poem critiques not only the renaissance movement but various religions in India for failing to resolve the caste problem. The lines indicate that all these religions are equally culpable in perpetuating caste. Placing these religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, on the same line of critique, however, overlooks their historical differences in the engagement with caste via religion. The rejection of Buddha and worship of Ambedkar, who believed in the philosophy of Buddha, is

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[11]Sree Narayana Guru was the pioneer of the Ezhava movement in Kerala.

another contradiction in their anti-caste discourse. As evinced in Deva Jana Samajam's (Spiritual wing of DCUF) pantheon, DCUF forges a Dalit identity premised on the history of indigeneity and enslavement, and worships anti-caste leaders from Dalit/ slave castes such as Dr. B R Ambedkar, Ayyankali, KP Vallon, Pambadi John Joseph, Poykayil Appachan, and Sabharaj Thirumeni as the gurus and gods of the community. Talking about Sabharaj Thirumeni, Rajmohan Thamburan, the chairman of DCUF, says, "Appachi used to intervene in the problems of everyone. He never looked at the caste of anyone. He asked us to unite irrespective of sub-caste differences. Adi-Dravida is our identity. We had been enslaved. Appachi used to say that history should unite us." (Personal interview 6 Jan. 2021)

As Anuraj Thirumeni writes,

> After the death of Poykayil Appachan in 1939 and the death of Mahatma Ayyankali in 1941, in post-Independent India, the Dalit discourse degenerated based on subcaste/religious identities. The same predicament continued even after the formation of the Kerala state in 1956. Though the democratic discourses and the community reforms tried to open up public spaces, Kerala society continued to be divided based on caste and political parties which sided with specific castes. DCUF intervened in this context by stressing the need to unite beyond the sense of inferior consciousness, irrespective of these differences.(22)

DCUF's thrust on Dalit identity as the enslaved is reinforced by MB Manoj and Anuraj Thirumeni,

> [I]n some sense, DCUF is an organisation that expands the idea of PRDS (Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha/The Divine Church of Visible Salvation). Simultaneously, it retains certain characteristics of Ayyankali movement's socio-political activism. Also, it included the visions of the Cheramar sanghams, which were focused on the issues of Dalit Christians. Thus, clearly, DCUF shows a pattern of adopting the multiple strands of the Dalit movement in the renaissance. (23)

DCUF underscores that it needs to be marked in the discourse of renaissance for its revolutionary anti-caste stance. They highlight the unification of the subcastes as the distinguishing aspect of DCUF. They do this by focusing on the Dalit participation in the renaissance movement and by aligning only with the movements of/by the Dalit castes during the renaissance and later Nationalist period.

Conclusion

As exemplified in Indian and Kerala Dalit historiographies, social formation is informed by caste, and looking at history from the perspective of the anti-caste

communities necessitates recognition of history as the sum total of patterns of domination and resistance. Putting the historiography of anti-caste communities like DCUF in conversation with the mainstream and Dalit historiographies, this study reveals that Dalit historiography is not an identity-based counter-project but an analytical one that narrativizes the past from a Dalit standpoint. This interventionist standpoint, defined as anti-caste, is not necessarily oppositional to the mainstream traditions of historiography. The relationship between mainstream and Dalit traditions of historiographies is a complex one that includes diverse kinds of negotiations vis-à-vis historiographic content and framework.

Analysis of the cultural texts of DCUF exemplifies that their historiography primarily chronicles domination and resistance vis-à-vis the question of caste slavery. Caste-based enslavement and antislavery/anti-caste movements occupy the heart of their historiography. DCUF presents enslavement as a political issue of invasion and dethronement, resulting in enslavement. In DCUF cultural texts, emphasis is on the ideological realm, highlighting their dignified identity as the royal descendants, and attempts it's restoration through the reclamation of glorious history, knowledge and kingdom. The restoration of the Dravidian kingdom is articulated by adopting the mainstream political historiographic framework of Kerala.

Acknowledgement

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"Our Poverty has No Shame; the Stomach has No Shame, so We Migrate Seasonally": Women Sugarcane Cutters from Maharashtra, India

Saroj Shinde[1]

Abstract

During the season of sugarcane cutting, men and women seasonally migrate toward the sugar belt. Drought conditions in their native districts are always highlighted as the reasons for seasonal migration. However, existing literature on sugarcane cutters emphasizes that mostly poor, lower caste, landless, small landholders, and resourceless people migrate to the sugar belt. Even pregnant or lactating mothers are not an exception for seasonal migration and the work of sugarcane cutting. In Maharashtra, issues like poor work conditions, labor rights, financial exploitation, hysterectomy among women, citizenship status, education, and health of sugarcane cutters are already in the discussion forums. After migration, these workers live without housing, sanitation facilities, and drinking water. For women, there is no social, economic, labor, and personal security. Workers have to bathe, defecate openly, and drink untreated water. Specifically, women have special health needs, and there should not be a compromise while accessing essential health services. Considering the background information, this article considers questions like why women migrate in adversity and do women work for the Sugar Belt without facing any hardship? People at large relate the phenomenon of migration to human development or economic development. Similarly, it is possible to study internal migration or seasonal migration. Nevertheless, the analysis argues that seasonal migration of the poor, unskilled, illiterate, lower caste, landless, resourceless, and vulnerable cannot be connected to human development. Instead, we can relate it to survival at large. Significantly, the ignorance of the state towards these workers and their needs can be seen from the perspective of social exclusion.

Keywords

Women sugarcane cutters, seasonal migration, migration of vulnerable people, sugar belt, reasons for migration, social exclusion

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Introduction

After Independence, agriculture policy favored the sugarcane crop, as also evidenced by a demand for sugar. Consequently, sugarcane crop production increased in Maharashtra. Therefore, the setup of sugar factories was indispensable for processing sugarcane into sugar. Meanwhile, the crop of sugarcane and its harvesting has a very long history. In India, the first sugar factory was established in 1784 in Bihar. After Independence, Indian agriculture policies supported sugarcane farmers. An increase in sugarcane crop cultivation is the result of those policies. In Maharashtra state, the first sugar factory was established in the district of Ahmednagar in 1948. It came into operation in 1950 and was India's first cooperative sugar factory. Later, numerous private and cooperative sugar factories were established. All development related to sugar production directly or indirectly encouraged the seasonal migration of people toward the sugar belt (Chithelen 1985; Engineer 1997). Due to the high output of sugarcane and the establishment of many sugar factories, the demand for labor increased. The seasonally migrated labor force from the drought-prone districts of Maharashtra fulfilled that demand (Chithelen 1985). Therefore, a favorable agriculture policy, increase in sugarcane cultivation, the establishment of sugar factories, and seasonal labor migration were demand-driven processes (Engineer 1997; Patil 2013). Even today, there is a supposition that drought conditions are the reason for the seasonal migration of sugarcane cutters. Even if we agree with that assumption, then logically, all people from drought-prone districts should migrate to the sugar belt to cope with the drought. Nevertheless, only poor, lower caste, and those without resources migrate toward the sugar belt. Notably, both men and women are equally involved in sugarcane cutting. Even pregnant or lactating women are not an exception for seasonal migration and involvement in sugarcane cutting.

Work conditions, work burden, and labor exploitation of sugarcane cutters are part of timely discussions in Maharashtra. After migration, these workers are without any security; there is no housing, sanitation facilities, or drinking water provision. For women, there is no social and personal security. Workers have to bathe, defecate openly, and drink untreated water (Abbas 2016; Bansode 2013; Engineer 1997; Kendre 2011; Shinde 2019). Despite such working conditions, people from drought-prone areas still prefer to work. This background gives us a context to explore the concerns of women sugarcane cutters. It also creates the space to underline the reasons behind seasonal migration and the involvement of women in sugarcane cutting. Incidentally, in countries that produce sugarcane, sugarcane harvesting is mainly performed by men (Santos et al., 2015; Pobreza & Azúcar 2007; Luz et al., 2012). Therefore, this article analyzes the reasons behind seasonal migration towards the sugar belt—the analysis of entry points for women to migrate highlights their negotiation at many levels. In addition, the nature of work and benefits of migration add relevance to the analysis of the reasons for the seasonal migration of women sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra.

Methodology

A qualitative study explored why women migrate toward the sugar belt—41 women were part of this study, 23 women were working for private sugar factories, and 18 for cooperative sugar factories. Nature of work, work conditions, and the reasons for migration were the framing factors. The data collected through this exploration was primarily analyzed using thematic analysis. The overall study mainly highlights the reasons behind the seasonal migration of women toward the sugar belt. The research proposal of the study had sought an ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board, TISS Mumbai. The ethical issues of the research were appropriately addressed by considering basic principles of human research, such as respect for participants, beneficence, and justice.

Results and Discussion

Socio-economic Profile of Women Sugarcane Cutters

Similar to the prior research on sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra, the present study features the dominant involvement of women from the lower castes. Study participants were from lower caste categories such as SC, ST, NT, and VJNT. Almost 70.7 per cent of the respondents were scheduled tribe, belonging to communities like Bhil, Pavra, and Varli. The remaining participants were from the different lower caste groups such as Matang, Vadar, Banjara, and Vanjari. Along with lower social status, participants were from poor economic strata. Most women were below the poverty line, as 27 women had yellow-colored ration cards. Nearly 13 women were without ration cards. All the respondents migrated from 8 different districts of Maharashtra, including districts like Dhule, Jalgaon, Nandurbar, Beed, Parbhani, Nashik, Aurangabad, and Jalna. Some of the districts are drought-prone, and some have recognition of tribal districts. The age structure of study participants was as follows: ten women were below 18 years, nearly 28 women were between 18–24 years, and three women were above 25 years. As informed by the participants, 38 out of 41 women were married before 18 years.

In terms of educational status, almost 82.9 per cent were illiterate. The remaining participants were educated up to secondary levels of education. The high proportion of illiteracy among these women is shocking. Similar trends continue even among the children of the sugarcane cutters. On enquiring about the none to low levels of education, many women responded by saying, "Why else would we be cutting the sugarcane then? Sugarcane cutting is like school for us". The poor educational status of women explains the endorsement for the practice of early marriage among this demographic. It is important to note that many respondents who reported secondary education could not read and write except for their signature and name.

Nature of Work

In sugarcane cutting, there is no structure for the workers to work. Work starts anytime in the early morning and finishes at night. All workers are aware of the intensity of

toil during the working season. Otherwise, there is no fixed time or working hours. Workers have to work beyond their physical capacity. Almost everybody who works as a sugarcane cutter faces body pain on a daily basis. During the daytime, after the work responsibilities on the farm, women go to the tent area to cook and return to the field as soon as they finish cooking. From the tent area to the working field, they have to walk. That distance could be less than a kilometer or more. These workers avoid breaks between working hours since they aim to complete their target of cutting sugarcane. Based on the number of tons of sugarcane they receive their salary. In most cases, even pregnant / women with newborn babies endure the same work burden. Nobody is happy to work as a sugarcane cutter. However, there is continuity in their migration and sugarcane cutting, which is maintained out of helplessness, poverty, debt, and the absence of any other alternative. Many women experience weakness, body pain, giddiness, and other health problems. They have to compromise on their physical and mental health while working. Exploitation, exclusion, poverty, debt, illiteracy, and compromised motherhood are words to describe their overall status as human beings.

Is Seasonal Migration Beneficial or not?

Some of the participants said that seasonal migration benefits them to a level where they manage their survival. It was their only option to cope with drought and its consequences on their livelihoods at their native places. Besides being optimistic about migration, it is not about becoming rich or uplifting the economic status. It is about survival, sustainability, and thriving. Here, ' thrive' meant to build a house and ensure the marriage ceremony of sons and daughters but not become rich.

Moreover, according to a few of the respondents, there are no benefits through this work, but to survive and escape the drought. More importantly, many participants could not answer whether migration benefits them or not. It is because most of them migrated for the first time. The rest of them had long work experience in sugarcane cutting, where they said benefits vary from season to season; there is no permanent benefit in sugarcane cutting. Along with unfavorable work conditions and exploitation of these workers, these women live without social-economical security. They have to compromise their health, especially the reproductive health of women, and their children's education. Still, questions remain, despite having adversity at the destination, why do they migrate? Why do only women from specific social groups migrate? Why are women left without an alternative for seasonal migration and sugarcane cutting?

Reasons for Migration

In the context of sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra, the people involved in the seasonal migration are often poor and landless. They migrate because of drought. This argument is valid in the larger sense, but we cannot apply it to all workers involved in sugarcane cutting. Instead, there is a need to include a few more workers' perspectives on the reasons for migration. From the view of the present study, women migrate because of the consequences of drought conditions—a factor which has received less attention in previous research studies.

As women said, "There is no drinking water in my village, and I cannot afford to buy it", or "I have land but do not have a water irrigation system." Moreover, they also mentioned that there is no work availability, and therefore their needs for food are not met in their native place. Drought, water scarcity, debt, and work unavailability were the reasons to migrate toward the sugar belt. Alongside, building houses and any other fulfillment of their wish was also the reason behind the migration. In short, workers' migration and involvement in sugarcane cutting is not largely associated with economic yield, but rather about receiving the bulk of the money at once and in advance. There are many constructed reasons behind the seasonal migration specific to Maharashtra. The migration of the sugarcane cutters is connected mainly with drought and its consequences, such as water scarcity and work unavailability, as also mentioned in the earlier analysis. However, certain sociological factors are attached to the reasons. Those reasons are reflected in the replies of women when they say, "Our poverty has no shame; our stomach has no shame, so we migrate."

Entry Points for Women to Migrate

Marriage

As expressed by most women, marriage was the entry point where women enter the work of sugarcane cutting, this along with reasons like drought, water scarcity, and work unavailability. On the other hand, many get involved in seasonal migration and sugarcane cutting with their parents during their childhood, but without labor identity despite working along with their parents. However, marriage is the event where husband and wife together could be one pair (*koyata*), and they can deal with Mukadum or contractors separately. An essential part of marriage being an entry point is, in Indian culture or the culture of every caste or community, is that the marriage ceremony is a big event. It is significant even for poor people. This event requires money to perform different tasks, including giving dowry.

In the present study, most respondents were poor or with subsistence levels in the economy. As informed by women, it has become the tagline that, "If you want to perform the marriage ceremony, collect money in the bundle and perform it." The critical question is, who would be ready to give a considerable amount of money to poor people? Which is a more convenient option for these poor people to choose? The answer is contractors or Mukadum. The contractors give an amount in advance even before working for them. Often, workers utilize that amount to perform the marriage ceremony of sons or daughters. Thereafter, returning that amount to contractors becomes the duty of a newly married couple.

Therefore, after marriage, couples become regular seasonal migrants. Hence, debt is also the reason for seasonal migration. However, soon after marriage, because of the high illiteracy rate and lack of awareness about family planning, these newly married women are likely to become pregnant very early. Still, because of the burden of money or debt, women have no choice but to migrate even during pregnancy. After marriage, their entry into the work of sugarcane cutting later becomes an affair each year. They

continue to borrow money from contractors every year to meet their basic needs and keep their survival intact. Therefore, in this seasonal cycle, women have to bear the burden of most of the loss. The loss is in physical distress because of the work burden. Women also carry the loss in terms of mental health especially during their pregnancy. Sometimes, because of seasonal migration and its continuous cycle, women do not get a chance to think about their reproductive health.

Poverty, Sense of Insecurity, and Family Disputes

Along with marriage as the entry point, extreme poverty, family disputes, and a sense of insecurity in the native place are equally responsible for the migration of women and their involvement in work. If a woman with parents, in-laws, or close relatives is involved in the seasonal migration for years, nobody will look after the woman. A similar context can be applied to the marriage of girls at a young age. If the woman chooses not to migrate, her parents or in-laws will not permit and let the woman stay alone in her native place. Therefore, that insecurity creates a bridge of no option, and a woman has to migrate. Moreover, it could also be said that the sense of insecurity comes from the extreme poverty level. Therefore, poverty and subsequent insecurity are the entry points that together make women migrate and get involved in sugarcane cutting.

In addition, based on the shared experiences of study participants, family disputes are also one of the crucial reasons for women to migrate. More specifically, if a woman has disputes with her in-laws or husband, she is left with only one option: seasonal migration and sugarcane cutting to secure her survival.

Visibility of the Seasonal Migration of Sugarcane Cutters from Possible Theoretical Frameworks

In particular, with the phenomenon of seasonal migration, some frameworks theoretically capture the phenomenon of migration. However, none of the frameworks comprehensively theorizes the seasonal migration of poor, lower caste and class, resourceless, and landless people. Many have framed such migration of people as a survival strategy—a perspective that is inadequate. For instance, Lee's pull and push factors theory of migration highlights the positive and negative factors involved as the reasons for migration (Lee 1966). There are a few more migration theories, like Ravenstein's laws of migration (Ravenstein 1885) and Wolpert's model of migration (Wolpert 1966). All these theories are inadequate to describe the seasonal migration of sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra.

However, the seasonal migration of women sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra calls for an alternative framework: drought conditions at the native place and availability of work in the sugar belt are not just the push and pull factors, respectively, but their migration is beyond these two. They migrate to adversity, they live contrary to their native environment, and their migration cannot be linked with any aspect of human development. The theory that plays a vital role in visualizing the framework of the present study is the theory of social exclusion. Social exclusion is "the denial of equal

access to opportunities imposed by particular social groups upon others." The process of exclusion partially or wholly excludes certain groups or populations from full participation in the society they live in. The outcome of social inclusion may vary in terms of deprivation of income, education, health services, political and citizenship rights, state resources, and many others (Sen 2000; Thorat 2008; Judge 2014).

Seasonal Migration as Social Exclusion

Amartya Sen identifies two forms of social exclusion; active and passive social exclusion. In active social exclusion, there are deliberate attempts of the state/government or agency to exclude particular groups. There is no deliberate attempt to exclude passive social exclusion, but specific groups are excluded passively through the social processes (Sen 2000). On the other hand, Sukhadeo Thorat identifies social exclusion from the perspective of the caste system in India. He says, "Social exclusion in India revolves around the societal institutions that exclude, discriminate, and isolate people based on their caste, ethnicity, religion, and gender" (Thorat 2008; Judge 2014).

In the context of the present study, women's seasonal migration toward the sugar belt realizes social exclusion. Though the state or district authorities are not involved in making them move toward the sugar belt, they migrate because of social dynamics, such as lower socio-economic status. However, why do only illiterate, lower castes, poor, landless, small landholders, and resourceless women migrate toward the belt? Suppose a particular geographical region, for instance, Marathwada in Maharashtra, faces drought conditions and its consequences—in that case, all the people from that region should migrate to avoid adversity. However, we find only certain groups of people migrate. Hence, these realities give space to argue that the seasonal migration of particular groups of women is a form of social exclusion.

Conclusion

Particularly with the phenomenon of migration, we see people largely connect it with human or economic development. Similarly, one can study internal migration or seasonal migration. However, we cannot connect the migration of poor, unskilled, illiterate, lower caste, landless, resourceless, vulnerable people to human development. Instead of economic growth or human development, we can connect their migration with survival.

The reasons for seasonal migration are social and political at large. Based on that, one can raise the development issue of women from the lower socio-economic strata. The seasonal migration of women from lower socio-economic status reveals the regional disparity and caste vulnerability. In general, resourceless people migrate seasonally because they cannot cope with adverse conditions. Along with drought conditions, the lack of work in their villages, lower social status, poverty, a sense of insecurity, marriage, debt, and family disputes are contributing factors to the seasonal migration of these women. The involvement of women, particularly in work with a

heavy burden, may cause loss. As a result, early marriage, early motherhood, high parity, compromised motherhood or reproductive health, etc., are common among this working group. Surprisingly, the state is aware of the seasonal migration of these workers, including pregnant or lactating women. However, nobody has taken responsibility for these workers in terms of providing state services such as education, health, and citizenship rights. Therefore, deliberate or non-deliberate negligence of the state creates the space to explore how women's seasonal migration leads to their social exclusion at many levels. Hence eliminating social disparities, regional imbalances, and vulnerable population pockets should be the core agenda of human development.

Declaration of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in the present research and writing.

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Utilizing Dalit Autobiographies in History

Jatin[1]

Abstract

In the academic field, debates in the discipline of history largely contest whether the people whose narratives are absent in the dominant archives of knowledge, including Dalits, can be considered as devoid of history. Such contestations raise queries about the ways in which these groups form a sense of their past. In this light, can we consider cultural forms of narrative as reliable and 'valid' means to form an understanding of past, and to what extent? Can the cultural narrative forms, particularly autobiographical accounts, be utilized to reflect on the past of these communities? What methodologies does such an approach demand, and what challenges does it pose? This paper shall grapple with these intriguing inquiries. It attempts to position Dalit autobiographies and their utility in locating the sense of their past and in the larger knowledge production. This paper fundamentally proposes that Dalit autobiographies can lend crucial insights into the history of Dalit communities and beyond. These autobiographies can provide a perspective 'from below' and contribute to understanding how Dalits made sense of their past into narratives. I argue that Dalit articulation of their life experiences in the form of autobiographies not only rupture the assumptions of a singular past but also foregrounds the multiplicities and specificities to their everyday experiences.

Keywords

Dalit autobiographies, untouchables, history, caste, space, everyday, sub-castes, knowledge production

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"Softly but firmly she told him, 'Look, Satyamurthy. Your caste and my caste are not one. You are Christians.' She meant mala Christians, untouchables. 'We are brahmins. You are have-nots, we are haves. You are a Communist. My father is for Congress. How in the world can there be anything between us?'"

— *Sujatha Gidla[2]*

"On one side of the road was (our community) settlement and on the other side were huge *pucca* houses (solid, built with durable materials) where high caste people used to live, who were employed in 'good' jobs (well paid, respectful, and secured). Within (our) colony (the dwellers) were mostly untouchables, illiterate and labor. On one side of the road were the poor, illiterate, and on the other side of the road were the rich (and) educated. Only one road divided them but it was a land-sky (like) difference among these two (sections)."

— *Kaushalya Baisantri[3]*

"…And in villages, a man may be educated, he may wear a shirt and pants, he may even have a job with a good salary, but the real prestige lay in owning land. Among untouchables, owning even a small piece of land is rare."

— *Sujatha Gidla[4]*

"Let's go to the park, I'll eat some sweets,
Eat some sweets, spread out my mat,
If somebody tears up my mat, I'll call an ironsmith,
If the smith's hammer breaks, I'll call a repairman,
Come on, let's go to the park, I'll eat some sweets."

— *a Hindi folksong recited in Vasant Moon's autobiography[5]*

Introduction[6]

In the academic field, debates in the discipline of history largely contest whether the people whose narratives are absent in the dominant archives of knowledge, including Dalits, can be considered as devoid of history.[7] Such contestations raise queries about

the ways in which these groups form a sense of their past. [8] As Antonio Gramsci has opined: for those who do not have history, have culture, thereby contesting the distinction between history and culture.[9] Culture and its manifestations are also intrinsically connected to power and shifting class relationships. In this light, can we consider cultural forms of narrative as reliable and 'valid' means to form an understanding of past, and to what extent? Can the cultural narrative forms, particularly the autobiographical accounts, be utilized to reflect on the past of these communities? What methodologies does such an approach demand, and what challenges does it pose? This paper shall grapple with these intriguing inquiries. It attempts to position Dalit autobiographies and their utility in locating the sense of their past and in the larger knowledge production. This paper fundamentally proposes that Dalit autobiographies can lend crucial insights into the history of Dalit communities and beyond. These autobiographies can provide a perspective 'from below' and contribute to understanding how Dalits made sense of their past into narratives. I argue that Dalit articulation of their life experiences in the form of autobiographies not only rupture the assumptions of a singular past but also foregrounds the multiplicities and specificities to their everyday experiences.

The paper intends to respond to the suspicions about whether Dalits can articulate in the existing power structures. In this light, the paper attempts to analyze Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's argument critically, 'Can the Subalterns Speak,' its reception, and its consequences for marginalized groups' narratives and forms of articulation.[10] This paper further suggests that Dalit autobiographies demand to be referred to for not only the parochial purpose of retrieving the marginalized voices, but to treat them as alternative archives. With this approach, one can utilize the autobiographies for corroboration with the dominant archives, and to make sense of the past through margins with a bottom-up approach.

To make a case for the utility of Dalit autobiographies, this paper shall first contextualize it within the larger historiographical debate and comment on the marginalization of Dalit autobiographical narratives. Moving forward, I shall introduce

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the Indian society who are ascribed the lowest status in the 'caste-based' social hierarchy, and are considered ritually polluting based on the Hindu religious and ritual practices. Dalit term originates from '*Dalita*,' fundamentally means 'oppressed' or 'downtrodden'. This term was first used by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, and then by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in 1928 in his newspaper Bahiskrit Bharat. Later, this term was revived during the Dalit Panthers movement by Dalit activists and intellectuals in 1970. I have employed the term to collectively refer to and make general conclusions in the context. For details, see: Laurence Simon and Sukhadeo Thorat, "Why a Journal on Caste?," *CASTE / A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* 1, no. 1 (February 14, 2020), https://doi.org/10.26812/caste.v1i1.159.

[8] For details: Ranajit Guha, *The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays.* Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009.

[9] A. Gramsci, in Q. Hoare (ed.), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci,* New York, 1980.

[10] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Routledge, 1994), pp. 78–123, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315656496-13.

the three autobiographies chosen for analysis and discuss the methodology and approaches that the paper utilizes. This section will not only focus on the challenges in analyzing these autobiographies but also highlight the confines of disciplines in tackling them, thereby calling for a transdisciplinary approach. In the next section on knowledge, archive, and power, I foreground the thesis argument through a discussion on the conditions of knowledge production as well as the invisiblization of Dalit autobiographies. The section highlights the positivist influences, absence of Dalit narratives in the dominant archives, Brahmanical hegemony and Dalit exclusion in the knowledge production in Indian society, and subsequent non-recognition of narrative forms like Dalit autobiographies. It suggests how to navigate these challenges methodologically by treating Dalit autobiographies on their own terms. In the following section, I analyze the three Dalit autobiographies. By showing how Dalit autobiographies can help in gaining understanding primarily in themes of gender and caste, spatial differences in practices of untouchability, and intersectionalities among the untouchables—I provide support to my claim that Dalit autobiographies can be an indispensable source. Additionally, my analysis would reflect on the influence of translations on Dalit autobiographies and the politics of language to call for a critical and multidisciplinary approach for decoding Dalit autobiographies. Finally, I end the paper with a concluding note.

Contextualizing Historiography

A debate exists in the scholarly discourse about whether the genre of autobiographies can be considered a valid form of historical source, particularly in the context of South Asia. On the one hand, positivist and Western scholars not only rejected autobiographies as fiction but also considered the genre as specific to the West.[11] Interestingly, Reynolds opined how the European critics, who were earlier not ready to take autobiographies beyond literary fiction, started to make claims about autobiography as an exclusively European or Western genre.[12] Such claims, therefore, rejected the legitimacy of autobiographical accounts outside of the West, including in South Asia. On a par, subaltern studies scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have questioned the ability of marginalized groups to articulate their narratives freely.

On the other hand, a body of literature has emerged which takes into account the significance of autobiographies. It includes works of David Arnold et al., Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, Sharmila Rege, and Tanika Sarkar. This scholarship challenges the positivist contention of autobiographies as fiction and the idea of 'the truth.' This group instead argues for multiplicity of truths.[13] Malhotra and Hurley argue that one's version of truth can be fiction for the other.[14] Further, these works have shown how autobiographies, despite being a crucial genre in other

[11]Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, eds., *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2015, p. 3.
[12]Ibid., pp. 3–4.
[13]Ibid., p. 23.
[14]Ibid., p. 23.

parts of the world, are specifically neglected in South Asia. [15] Such scholarship has particularly pressed upon the power dynamics in knowledge production in Indian society. Specifically, the works of David Arnold and Sharmila Rege underscore that in South Asia the authority over knowledge is monopolized by dominant caste groups, particularly Brahmins, as we shall discuss. Moreover, to highlight the genre's importance, Malhotra and Hurley have also argued that for certain communities autobiographies can be the only possible means of articulating their narratives.[16] Highlighting another importance, Tanika Sarkar argues that autobiographies provide a window for exploring the larger time period of the text and its readership. [17] Hence, this group of scholars has shown how autobiographies can be a crucial form of literature and a tool to articulate the differences politically.

While forms of narrative like autobiographies struggle to carve their own space, there are certain positive developments in the field. Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine in Arnold's book propound that there is a growing body of literature about untouchables which is primarily anthropological, including Freeman (1979), Moon (2001), and Viramma (1995).[18] In this paper, I shall build upon the scholarship signifying autobiographies. I support their contention, and through using Robert Darnton's and James Clifford Geertz's approach, I attempt to show how Dalit autobiographies can prove crucial sources for history. My work aims to contribute to the debate by showing how autobiographies can lend insights that can enhance the existing understanding of Dalits, their history, as well as practice of untouchability. Building on the idea of multiplicity of truth, I extend it to argue for a multiplicity of pasts as well. My analysis of the three autobiographies challenges the monolithic understanding of Dalit communities and the practice of untouchability by highlighting the intersectionalities within Dalit communities and differential practices of untouchability in different spaces and geographical locations.

Methodology and Three Dalit Autobiographies as Case Studies

In this paper, I shall be closely engaging with the analysis of three Dalit autobiographies of diverse background as my primary sources to address their significance for history. I shall deal with Dalit autobiographies in both English as well as vernacular and the ones translated from the vernacular to English. The first one is Kausalyā Baisantrī's *Doharā Abhiśāpa,* published in 1999. The second is Vasant Moon's translated autobiography titled *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography*, published in 2001, originally published in Marathi language with the title *Vasti*. The third one is Sujatha

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[15]David Arnold, Stuart H. Blackburn, and British Library, eds., *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 14.

[16]Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, *Speaking of the Self.*

[17]Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban: A Modern Autobiography.* New Delhi: Zubaan, an imprint of Kali for Women, 2013, pp. 36–37.

[18]Cited in Arnold, Blackburn, and British Library, eds., *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History,* p. 14.

Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*, published in 2017. Here, I shall foreground the rationale for choosing these autobiographies, the challenges in decoding Dalit autobiographies, and the confines of the disciplines. By focusing on disciplinary limitations, I argue for a transdisciplinary approach to make sense of Dalit autobiographies.

The rationale behind the careful selection of these autobiographies has to do with a number of factors, including the specific perspectives and details that these texts have to offer. These accounts are chosen in the sense that they reflect on multiple intersectionality and diversity among the Dalits as well as Dalit autobiographies. Some of the parameters which I took into account while making the selection were—based on gender: including both men's and women's autobiographies; on the basis of language: autobiographies written in the vernacular, translated in English, and written originally in English; on spatial basis: reflecting on the experiences of Dalits based in different parts of the Indian subcontinent; on the basis of subcategories: different untouchable castes, different subcastes, and Dalits converted to other religions; on the basis of readership: addressing to local and global readership; based on the temporal and historical conjunctures these works came out; among other factors. This research design will enable highlighting the intersectionalities among Dalits and thereby help nuance the understanding of diverse Dalit pasts, and their everyday experiences. Therefore, this set of autobiographies is promising in many respects and demands careful analysis.

The task of making sense of these complexities in Dalit autobiographies poses many challenges. Clearly, these autobiographies consist of more complexities and pose unique challenges of analysis than the other narrative styles. To point out a few challenges, these autobiographies do not have a coherent, connected narrative. Second, in many cases, the author tends to focus more on the life narratives of other people rather than themselves, which was evident in Sujata Gilda's autobiography at many instances, as the paper shall discuss. Third, the idea of time in these narratives is different as they do not follow a linear sense of time. For instance, let us look at Kosalya Baisantri's autobiography. If judged from the point of the dominant historical narratives and writing styles, it possesses many inconsistencies. Her autobiography does not follow linear way of writing, idea of time, and lacks a proper sense of chronology. In her work, she switches across temporal junctures and spaces frequently, at times from paragraph to paragraph, without necessarily marking the shift.[19] Evidently, her notion of time and sense of the past does not fit into the linear way of history writing. Moreover, when these autobiographies are translated, it adds to the challenge of deciphering them. In the process of translation, as we shall discuss in the later section, the focus of the autobiography's narrative can shift, which may have implications for the autobiographical consumption itself.

Therefore, in many senses, these autobiographies challenge the confines and assumptions of different disciplines, including history. In this context, the paper raises the question—despite aspiring to gain an understanding of the past, does one need to

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[19]Baisantrī, *Doharā Abhiśāpa*.

look at the Dalit autobiographies through the lens of history and its methods only? Here, I suggest that to deal with the challenges in analyzing Dalit autobiographies, one must move across the disciplinary boundaries. The above discussion—about the involved complexities and varied aspects of cultural, temporal, societal, location, and linguistic context—adequately makes it evident that the task of analyzing such autobiographical narratives requires a diverse methodological engagement. While highlighting the need for multidisciplinarity in making sense of the cultural forms of narratives, cultural historian Robert Darnton beautifully opines:

> Where the historian of ideas traces the filiation of formal thought from philosopher to philosopher, the ethnographic historian studies the way ordinary people made sense of the world. He attempts to uncover their cosmology, to show how they organized reality in their minds and expressed it in their behavior.[20]

This paper, therefore, proposes that understanding Dalit narratives demand a much broader and multidisciplinary approach. In this paper, I utilize the methods of historical anthropology to analyze these Dalit autobiographies and adopt the tools of critical linguistic analysis to comment upon the politics of language and translation. My primary methods and approaches include Robert Darnton's attempt to make sense of different worldviews through cultural history and their articulation into cultural forms (such as folklores).[21] Further, I attempt to investigate the utility of Dalit autobiographies through the methodology of 'thick description' as suggested by Clifford Geertz. I employ his method of analysis by systematically marking the structure of signification to contextualize the Dalit narratives and their reception.[22] Within Dalit narratives, like in doing ethnography—while faced with such an abundance of complex conceptual structures in Dalit autobiographies, Geertz's suggestion would be of critical importance:

> Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense: of "construct a reading of") a manuscript-foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior.[23]

Thus, the paper attempts to focus on how the life histories in the form of autobiographies get interpreted and made sense of socially, and are situated in the knowledge corpus. For a sound theoretical grounding, I make use of the scholarship emphasizing autobiographies, as discussed in the historiography section. With such a diverse, multidisciplinary, and alternative approach, one can engage with complex narratives like Dalit autobiographies.

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[20]Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History.* New York: Basic Books, 1984.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Elizabeth Colson and Clifford Geertz, "The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays," *Contemporary Sociology* 4, no. 6 (1975), pp. 637–38, https://doi.org/10.2307/2064031.

[23]Ibid., p. 10.

Who's Writing about Whom and How: On Narrative, Power, and Knowledge

The positivist idea of scientific and objective history, dominance of Brahmins and upper castes in production of knowledge, and the contention about 'can the subalterns speak'—says it all. This is precisely the reason why sources like Dalit autobiographies have to struggle in finding legitimacy in the academic field.

Here, I examine the reasons for the marginality of Dalit narratives both in academia and outside. Not only is there a lack of narratives from the marginalized communities within the archives, but outside of the archives as well, articulations such as the Dalit autobiographies have been sidelined. It calls for questioning what percolates to us as knowledge, who controls its production and dissemination, and who provides legitimacy to it. Additionally, a pressing concern for me has been the way narrative and forms of narrative are perceived in a hierarchy of authority and legitimacy. Gramsci has highlighted the role and relation of knowledge, hegemony, and power in his works. Building on, I suggest that this narrative hierarchy clearly resonates with the existing power structure, and one needs to challenge it. In the context of Dalit autobiographical narratives, I suggest looking at the phenomenon of invisiblization at two levels. First, in the global context due to the influence of enlightenment and colonialization. Second, in the particular context of South Asia and Indian society, where Brahmins and their formulated societal norms, including the varna system, provided Brahmins the sole monopoly over charting and disseminating knowledge.

In the global context, the positivist 'archival turn' and the focus on rational 'fact' and scientific 'truth' had a significant impact on what came to be recognized as knowledge and how the disciplines were shaped. Given the emergence and shaping of the disciplines in Europe, followed by the colonial conquests, the worldviews about the colonies and colonial societies were formulated in the West. If we trace from European imperialism, the colonial regimes controlled the powers and produced colonial knowledge forms, including law and cultural ethnographies, which ultimately described the colonies and their people. In multiple aspects, these forms continue as knowledge or have influence over it.[24] Clearly, knowledge production has been controlled by those who hold power and is utilized to maintain their dominance.

In the case of South Asia and its society, Brahmins were the ones who exclusively enjoyed access to knowledge and controlled its production and dissemination. Brahmins—who are a minuscule minority in the population, yet dominate knowledge production. Brahmins and their formulated texts, such as *dharmasastras*, or codes of conduct for the society, continue to have an immense influence on the rituals and culture in Indian society. These socially prevalent codes already put the untouchables or Dalits outside of the varna order and prohibited Dalits from all sorts of education

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[24]However, this was not peculiar to the colonial empire. Similarly, even in the precolonial period, such as the Mughal empire in Indian subcontinent, the state controlled the knowledge production and produced court chronicles, law books, among others.

and knowledge, including reading and writing.[25] These long-prevalent societal norms have led to the creation of such hierarchal power structures which exist in the field of knowledge production till date. Even now, Dalit narratives, like their folklores and autobiographies, still struggle to find legitimacy and carve their space in the mainstream.

Sharmila Rege intensifies the discussion on the implication of this Brahmanical monopoly on the consumption of non-Brahminic narratives and on the discourse on caste in the public sphere. Rege has pointed out how Brahmins' dominance in knowledge production has had an impact on the public sphere as noticeable in the nineteenth century debates on caste. The discussion of caste in the public sphere was illegitimized and considered as the 'betrayal of the nation.' This strategy of confining caste to the private was challenged by the mobilization of Satyashodhak, non-brahmin and Dalit counterpublics.[26] Furthermore, Rege discussed how even many reformists and nationalists confined the problem of caste to only purity and pollution and the concept of untouchability. These groups saw these 'ills of the caste system' as a hindrance to 'larger "common good" like social unity.'[27] Therefore, they never really challenged the core exploitation of the caste system itself. Sociologist G.S. Ghurye too considered anti-brahman movement as a result of the divide and rule policy during British colonialism and was anxious about the decline of the priest system.[28] These views show how Brahmanical hegemony goes unnoticed in the public sphere despite its mammoth role, which I attempt to challenge here.

Writing on the autobiography of Dalits, the authors Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine discuss different kinds of silences. The authors warn that the title of their work, '*Beyond Silence: A Dalit Life History in South Asia*', is not indicative of the silence on the part of the Dalits. Dalits do articulate their expressions. But it is the silence on the part of the dominant castes in the society who do not acknowledge their voices and knowledge. It is the silence arising out of the higher castes' contempt and deliberate ignorance.[29]

Recent works such as Dipesh Chakrabarty's have shown how Europe or the West has dominated the field of knowledge production for long and argue to do away with

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[25]Manusmriti, or Manava-Dharmasastra is one of the primary societal codes of conduct that has significance in Indian society and its ritual practices. Though it does not mention untouchability, which was added later to the Hindu dharmasastras, it mentions the code for the lowest varna in the varna system, called Shudras. Some excerpts from the text on Shudras include: "IV – 99. He (the twice born) must never read (the vedas) —— in the presence of the Shudras." and "I – 91. One occupation only the lord prescribed to the Shudra to serve meekly even these other three castes." Source: Velivada, last access: 16 March 2023. https://velivada.com/2017/05/31/excerpts-manusmriti-law-book-hindus/

[26]Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios.* New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006, p. 25.

[27]Ibid., p. 25.

[28]Ibid., cited in Rege, p. 25.

[29]Cited in Arnold, Blackburn, and British Library, eds., *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, p. 252.

the fetishism with Europe and European dominance in academic discourse.[30] However, such works do not shed light on the Indian context, where similarly, Brahmins dominate the power structure in knowledge production. Therefore, there is a need to look beyond and utilize the critical approaches in different disciplines as a corrective. In this light, the works of Bernard Cohn (and his historical-anthropological approach), Nicholas Dirks, Ann Stoler, and B. Axels—make us think and move a step beyond.[31] These works trace a historical genealogy and characterization of what percolates to us in the form of archives and dominant forms of knowledge. Ann Stoler also draws attention towards the silences and violence in the production of the state archives and the 'archival fever.' Using these approaches can make us critical of the assumptions about pristine nature of the knowledge, and aware of the violent silences in it.

Gramsci aptly puts it that the history of the subaltern groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic.[32] Since these disadvantaged groups have not been largely a part of the existing archives, or their voices have been either appropriated, represented, or lost. Therefore, the traditions of memory in these communities are primarily performative and oral. However, recent forms of textual narratives, such as Dalit autobiographies, have emerged from these communities. Therefore, these autobiographies provide an excellent opportunity to explore and understand the worldview of these socially and epistemologically marginalized groups.

Gaining from the insights of the discussed scholarship and subsequently practicing the methods suggested along with a critical approach—I suggest that one can attempt to do away with the existing bias in the archives, disciplines, and academia. The idea is that one must challenge the positivist and linear understanding of the past that privileges certain narratives and genres. It must be done both at the level of disciplines and at the level of existing power equation within the knowledge production, where the dominant does not acknowledge the narratives of the marginalized and deny legitimizing it as authoritative knowledge. Hence, while understanding the Dalit autobiographical accounts, the Brahmanical dominance in the society and academic circles need to be acknowledged.

Theory in Praxis: Analysis of the Three Autobiographies

When we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning. The thread might even lead into a strange and wonderful world view.[33]

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[30]Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, New Edition, Revised, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History Ser. Princeton: University Press, 2009.

[31]Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays / Bernard S. Cohn; with an Introduction by Ranajit Guha.* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987; Brian Keith Axel, ed., *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2002; Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.

[32]A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci,* 1980.

[33]Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History,* p. 5.

Let us focus on the three autobiographies that are picked for the paper. Taking a cue from Robert Darnton, I ask: what do they have to offer, to unravel? Starting their analysis from historical context, these three Dalit autobiographies came out during or after the last decade of the twentieth century (1999, 2001, 2017). It is important to note that this was after the Mandal Commission, when identity politics was picking up in India and political parties were organizing around caste. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, one of the most prominent Dalit leaders whose enormous influence is discussed in all these autobiographies—was also awarded the most prestigious national award, Bharat Ratna, posthumously in 1990. This shows that, by this time, the nation state also attempted to recognize Ambedkar as a national figure and his contribution to society and the nation. This recognition was due to Ambedkar's charismatic influence among Dalits and other marginalized groups and their political organization. During this period, there was a growing sense of politics of numbers, organizing around identity, and pitching their voice among the untouchables. I suggest that this may be the possible reason why Dalit literature and autobiographies have picked up during and after the 1990s.

This section will be a theory in praxis, where I critically analyze the selected three Dalit autobiographies to make a case for their crucial importance for history. I shall focus on exploring the richness of these autobiographies through the three themes: space and differential practice of untouchability, gender and caste, and intersectionalities and subcastes among untouchables. These detailed discussions attempt to rupture the assumptions of a singular past and foreground the diverse experiences of untouchability and intersectionality among Dalits.

Space and Caste

These autobiographies vividly show how Dalit experiences were diverse based on their geographical location and space, including region, classroom, basti or neighborhoods, temples, and nations. Sujatha Gidla's, who was based in a different geographical area and then moved abroad, had a different experience of untouchability and caste structure as compared to Moon and Baisantri. However, despite being within the same region, even Moon and Baisantri had a starkly different lived experience, given their location in different localities and neighborhoods. In Moon's autobiography, it is clearly enunciated how the Mahar world, particularly the community settlement of Maharwada in the Vidharbha region, was different from other localities even within the same regional area. Mahars in Vidharbha had a good standing and were relatively much more empowered and organized. They had comparatively better access to many basic rights and amenities as compared to the other untouchables, including Mahars themselves in other regions. They were better placed in aspects such as education, involvement in trade, and martial activities such as *akhadas* or wrestling grounds, among others.

> "Mahars of Vidharbha were even better off than the Mahars of the regions of Maharashtra, 20% of the population, including in the city of Nagpur."[34]

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[34]Moon and Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India,* pp. xii-xiii.

In contrast, despite coming from the same regional area of Nagpur (Vidharbha) but not Maharwada, Kosalya Baisantri experienced a significantly different level of challenges. The intensity of discrimination against untouchables was extremely high as compared to in Maharwada, where Vasant Moon grew up. On the one hand, Moon mentions how his Brahmin classmates from the school visited him at his house when he was ill and drank water. Contrary to this, in Baisantri's settlement, she and her elder sisters were the first untouchable women to join the school and receive an education. When she was attending school, no other girl students, who were all from the upper caste brahmins or low caste but upper class, were even ready to talk to her. She was ostracized by her classmates even when she impostored herself as a touchable Hindu low caste and poor, and not even revealed her untouchable identity. Evidently, she never had the courage to open up about her caste or invite her friends to her house because of the fear of being further discriminated. It was only at her marriage that she invited some of her friends at her neighborhood in the marriage function who were shocked knowing where she came from.

Moreover, the autobiographies highlight the differential practice of untouchability and caste norms in different spaces. This phenomenon corroborates the narratives portrayed in earlier works on untouchability, such as the portrayal of urban-rural differences in untouchable experiences in Mulk Raj Anand's novel.[35] Similarly, in Baisantri's autobiography, she discusses how in different spaces the consciousness of untouchable identity and norms differed. Highlighting one such norm, she mentions how she was very uncomfortable with the way the saree's corner, *pallu*, had to be held above the head only by the untouchable women.[36] She points out the difference in how she walked freely like other brahmin girls outside her own settlement but within the settlement, she never had the courage to defy the norm. In another context, Baisantri mentions how untouchables were not allowed inside the temples, and they would make their prayers outside the boundaries of the temple premise. However, she also discusses how she and her sister used to go to a Ganpati temple after school to get *prashad* or eatable alms.[37] The temple was outside their colony, where no one knew their caste identity. Hence, the anonymity had spatially enabled her to defy the set norms of untouchability. In the guise of anonymity and for the lure of getting prasad/ food, the author and her sister used to enter banned spaces like temples—signifying the kind of escapes and their own ways of dealing with untouchability in the everyday.

An interesting contrast of spatial experience of untouchability is visible in Vasant Moon's case. While discussing his childhood, he mentions that he did not experience much discrimination from his upper caste teachers and Brahmin friends in the classroom. However, outside of the classroom, when he went out to beg at a Brahmin settlement near his own, he was brutally rebuked and shooed away.[38] Further, in the introduction of Moon's autobiography, Eleanor Zelliot also notes the inconsistencies

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[35]Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable.* Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics. London: Penguin, 1940.
[36]Baisantrī, *Doharā Abhiśāpa,* p. 48.
[37]Ibid., p. 46.
[38]Moon and Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India,* p. 22.

in the practice of untouchability: Mahars rolling *bidis* (cigars). Zelliot's argument is that caste is 'relevant in a specific language area'. However, I argue that it is relevant in a specific '*vasti*,' in Moon's words, a socio-spatial setting. Though she is quoting the difference in the sociospatial setting but concluding it to be a different language region.[39]

Further, the aspect of private and personal sphere, and accordingly, different degrees of inconsistency in the practicing untouchability and caste norms emerge out in these autobiographies. As per the caste norms, while in public space, the practice of inter-dining and sharing food was not allowed among the touchables and untouchables. However, in the private, Baisantri mentions how an upper caste clerk used to ask for groceries and vegetables from her house, stay in her house to save money, but would not accept cooked food from her and even discriminate with her child. Similarly, while her mother would go and sell the bangles in the touchalbes' colony, the women would buy bangles from her because of cheaper and good quality but would take a bath after accepting them. When Baisantri's mother stopped selling bangles in the touchable colony due to an incident of discrimination, the women sent a messenger to ask for the bangles. Kosalya Baisantri, therefore, has opined that the upper castes and Brahmins are hypocrites and selfish since they selectively apply the caste norms as per their own benefits. These everyday occurrences underscore the complexities of the changing practices and varying degree of untouchability along with the time, space, and context.

Gender, Caste, and Autobiography

Among multiple complexities involved, the intersectionality of gender within caste structures is one of the most crucial. Gender plays a decisive role in how one would experience the world despite being within similar caste and social structures. On the theme of gender and caste, the most recent work of Shailaja Paik, *The Vulgarity of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality and Humanity in Modern India,* highlights that it is not just the caste structures that were exploitative for Dalits, but also the gendered normative stigmatization of Dalits and their culture. Moreover, she argues that the masculinity of Hindu society depended upon controlling, taming, and exploiting the Dalit communities. Dalit women and Dalit communities as a whole could only achieve legitimacy if they followed the normative structure set by the upper caste for them. Therefore, her work puts forth the intimate sex-gender-caste equation existing in the society.[40] Another takeaway from her work is that one cannot view the Dalit caste studies as exclusive. To understand the non-Dalit communities as well, one must take Dalit studies into consideration to form a grounded understanding. Gaining insights from her work, this section underscores the role of gender in complicating one's understanding of Dalits and their everyday experiences.

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[39]Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.
[40]Shailaja Paik, *The Vulgarity of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality, and Humanity in Modern India*, South Asia in Motion. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2022.

Not only how different genders may have different experiences, but recent works have also noted how different genders might articulate their lived experiences, and their narratives quite differently. Anshu and Siobhan discuss how women may have different narrative styles to articulate their experiences. Among the three case studies of this paper, the uniqueness or seeming 'problem' in Sujatha Gidla's narrative is that she discusses more about the other characters than her own experiences. Her autobiography is characterized by storytelling. Gidla's work may seem more like a novel which is written in such a way as to make the reader curious and keep them engaged throughout. At times, she has been making swaying comments and generalizations, and later responding to them through her narrative itself. However, what may seem like a problem might be a way as to how some marginalized and traumatized groups, such as women, articulate their narrative. As Malhotra and Siobhan's book highlights, Uma Chakravarti examines three novels written by Pakistani women on the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 that she understands to be "deeply autobiographical in sentiment." In particular, she makes the point that the novel form allows the female authors to "speak for a larger feminine self beyond personal experience," thus amalgamating the individual self with history at South Asia's "most intensely violent moment."[41]

Similarly, despite coming from the same region and same caste, a stark difference in the writing style can be observed between Moon's and Baisantri's writing. Baisantri's life history focuses on the struggles and dire realities of lived experiences as an untouchable. Contrary to this, Moon narrates his story focusing more on the aspects of resilience instead of the challenges, something that resonates with an element of pride in being able to escape the confines of untouchability. The differences in narration can be because of the location of the author. When Moon is writing his autobiography, the way he narrates probably has to do with his gender, location, and the moment when he is writing. After being actively involved in Dalit organizations for a while, he has risen to the position of being one of the most prominent Ambedkarite activist and scholar—the one who was assigned the task of gathering and editing the works and speeches of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. Therefore, it is probably his way of expressing how he escaped the odds of untouchability and the sociocultural structures of exploitation.

A critical analysis of these autobiographies, that come from both men and women, reflects that certain taboos related to everyday and personal life were not brought up in the public discourse. The self in these writings is dissuaded from opening up about certain aspects which are considered 'personal' or tabooed and hence barred in public discussion. This includes the omission of discussion about the hardships related to maternity, menstruation, sexuality, and love affairs. Despite immense discussion about child marriage, normalization of frequent impregnation of girls at a young age, multiple births and death of children, diseases and disability being a common part of the life of Dalits, among others—the omission of relevant issues like maternal health, puberty, menstrual health, et cetera was striking as it went completely missing.[42] Such

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[41]Cited in Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, *Speaking of the Self,* p. 6.
[42]Baisantrī, *Doharā Abhiśāpa.*

was the case even when Baisantri, in her narrative, describes that in her community, having children was as normal as 'drinking water,' and conceiving and having children were distanced from sexuality through a divine explanation. She describes the understanding prevalent in the society: "children are what the god gives as per its wishes, what can one do in such a scenario."[43] It was considered as something natural, divine, and where the human did not have any say or control.

On the gender equation, the autobiographies highlight a strong sense of patriarchy within the untouchable communities too. Evidently, multiple marriages or widow remarriage seem to be a common practice within the community, and it is particularly smooth and favorable for men.[44] There were instances of discussion on the skepticism about the sexuality of women, adultery, and its consequences for women. In the case of the widows, women were also stigmatized and restricted through certain social norms. While on the other hand, a widower had no social restrictions. Additionally, it was normal for a man to have multiple marriages. In fact, having multiple wives was seen as a sign of prosperity and power. As Baisantri describes, it was considered that having multiple wives reflected that one could afford to take care of a larger family.

In the case of childbirth, despite having love for the daughters, there was preference given to the male child and male birth was celebrated. Daughters, or unmarried women, were considered as '*paraya dhan*' or other's wealth by the parents. In Kosalya's family, a male child's birth after six daughters was celebrated, and sweets were distributed in the colony. Still, the author's parents were considered as exceptions given that despite the social mood, they ensured education for their daughters.[45] Besides, Baisantri's narrative also reflects on the gender dynamics in the struggle for resources. It is reflected in the case description of the tap water contestations. It was mostly women who would be involved in the primary struggle and would attack the others not just physically but morally based on their normative "character" and use gender and normative behavioral based slurs against them.

Within the patriarchal structure, women's empowerment significantly depended on the degree of autonomy, support, and power that women had in their own space, household, and domestic issues. In the case of Kosalya Baisantri, the author's mother was able to take steps like educating all her daughters and son only because she had the autonomy and say in her own household. In addition, the author's father was supportive of her mother, unlike in the case of her grandmother and grandfather or others in the community. According to her, this was the reason no other girl in her settlement could get proper education, and since no one else took women and their education seriously. [46] Therefore, internal autonomy of women and familial support are significant factors in developing prospects of women empowerment among Dalits. This kind of deeper reflection on the sensibility is absent in men's autobiographies.

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[43]Ibid., p. 51. Translations are mine.
[44]Moon and Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India*, p. 19; Baisantrī, *Doharā Abhiśāpa*.
[45]Baisantrī, *Doharā Abhiśāpa,* p. 51.
[46]Ibid., p. 47.

Though Moon acknowledges his mother's contribution in his life and success, but does not reflect well on the larger gendered scenario.

For Dalit masses, most of whom were not only socially challenged but also financially deprived, education emerged as a means which was considered as one of the only ways to achieve social and economic mobility. While discussing women's education, these autobiographies suggest that despite being in the educational institutions, untouchables are not really included into the institutions or could do well in the existing system. In many cases, they were highly challenged and compelled to take different courses to achieve things like accessing drinking water and socializing with classmates—something that might appear very mundane, simple, or accessible for the rest.

The degree of challenges Dalit women faced was much higher and more complex. Even among Dalits, the sensibility towards women's education varied. The importance given to education also differed among different sub-castes in Mahars.[47] Kosalya discusses the additional challenges in the process of getting sensitization on the front of women's education. The task was onerous because, at that time, hardly anyone would believe that it was important for a Dalit woman to get an education. Moreover, given the poor economic conditions, paying for women's education was seen as an unwanted investment— something which was unaffordable for most Dalits any day. Therefore, the initial local schools (Jai Bai's school) and skill centres run by the missionaries were free of cost, and thus, attracted the aspirant Dalit women. As soon as Kosalya Baisantri's education started to depend on monetary investment, it again caused a backlash from the family due to the financial conditions. Even after getting into the institution, Baisantri's experience of education outside of her settlement among other caste students was also a cultural and class shock.[48]

An interesting thing to note is that the kind of education and training skills provided to women were also based on their normative role as a mere housewife or an assistant to other workers. The 'feminine' skill set based on gender roles that were provided to them included how to take care of a patient, what to be done in emergency situations, cooking, weaving, et cetera. Possibly, in some way, this supported and helped extend the existing labor distribution among the genders.[49] In addition to this, what added to the challenges for women in getting education and training was the practice of child marriage. Due to early marriages, women like Kosalya's elder sister were pushed into household, family structures, and motherhood. Having multiple children, among other responsibilities, at a very young age would have killed all the possibilities of even thinking about pursuing education, informally or remotely.[50]

Despite the existing odds, these autobiographies also indicate the emerging aspirations among Dalit women. Not only in the autobiographies of Kosalya and Sujatha, but in Moon's autobiography too, we catch a glimpse of women's aspiration

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[47]Ibid., p. 52.
[48]Ibid., p. 37.
[49]Ibid., p. 38.
[50]Ibid., p. 45.

towards education through her mother. In Moon's acknowledgment of his mother, he focuses on her education when women, particularly Dalit women's education was not a norm. He describes her aspiration and struggles in a patriarchal society. She worked as a laborer yet aspired to condition her children as the 'best' like the elites.[51] Such intricate inquiries into gender perspectives among Dalits are made possible through these autobiographies.

Diverse Untouchable Communit (IES): Castes, Subcastes, and Power Hierarchy among Dalits

While engaging with Dalit subjectivity, one must be cautious of the intersectionalities among Dalits. In this section, I attempt to deconstruct the shallow consciousness of Dalit-ness and foreground the diversity among Dalit communities. My aim is to generate consciousness about and encourage the narratives of the diversity within communities among Dalits—something that is unrecognized in the common understanding. 'Dalit' is not a homogenous entity. It cannot be traced in the past as it is a term that emerged for the political organization of the most marginalized castes. Therefore, there exist many differences, and even conflicts, among several untouchable castes and even within subcastes. Whereas the autobiographies highlight that the untouchables shared a bond of common lived experience—untouchability, identity and its stigma, and caste-based exploitation—they are also self-critical in reflecting on the varying differences within the communities. For instance, the autobiographies discuss the differences in the customary cultural practices among different untouchable castes and subcastes. The practices of inter-dining and endogamy were also practiced among the other untouchable castes, and at times among different sub-castes as well. Kaushalya Baisantri discusses how inter-subcaste marriage was not prominent in her caste. She discusses that in general if a inter-subcaste marriage takes place, it was not legitimized by the community. She also discusses how certain sub-castes have developed well and are seen as comparatively 'respectable', while some, like her own, were considered 'uncivilized' and further looked down upon. Besides, at the beginning of the paper itself, one of the quotes from Gidla's narrative shows how there were internal differences among Christian converts based on their original caste status.

At times there were internal hierarchies among the untouchables where they used to practice touchability and untouchability. Some of the untouchable castes would practice untouchability among other fellow untouchable castes. Kaushalya Baisantri depicts these internal differences. She also discusses how tribals were neither literate nor rich, yet they were not untouchables. Since these tribals provided labor at touchable houses, they also practiced untouchability with Dalit communities. Nonetheless, the higher castes and brahmins never used to let tribals touch them or their belongings. Even when the tribals were allowed to work and provide labor at the houses of these touchable, there was a separate washing area outside with a separate tap for cleaning activities. Once it was done, the touchables would perform re-cleaning with water and

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[51]Moon and Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India.*

only then take things back to their houses. Despite this, these tribals also practiced untouchability with the untouchable castes, probably because of their work.

Sujata Gidla also discusses the hierarchy among the untouchable castes as per their occupations. Malas, the author's caste, were village servants meant to do menial works, and Madigas carried dead animals and used their hide to make leather.[52] Malas practiced untouchability or despised Madigas due to their 'impure,' stigmatized occupation. Here, one can notice that the caste logic of purity-impurity was being replicated and seeping among the untouchables themselves to create an internal hierarchy. These hierarchies were internal among Dalits, since for the caste Hindus they were all untouchables, all despicable to the core.

Similarly, Moon mentions the differences among different subcastes and other untouchable castes at many instances. He further describes how internal caste differences hoped to be annihilated to form internal unity. This was one of the steps taken to organize the untouchables politically. He mentions how earlier separate subcastes had separate *akhadas* or wrestling grounds and there were internal contradictions, which were later resolved, and thus, the tensions among the subcastes were slowly waning.[53]

Moon also mentions the case of the priestly caste within the Maharwada. He discusses that even among the untouchables and under subcastes, there were priestly untouchables to perform rituals like brahmins. He mentions that it was because the brahmins did not provide their service to untouchables. However, these priestly subcastes were then considered as more pure and higher in the hierarchy as compared to the other subcastes among untouchables.

On a separate note, Baisantri discusses in her narrative how hierarchy was prevalent not only among upper castes and untouchables, but how lower castes also found it difficult to find acceptance among upper castes. She depicts how the two Kunbi women students in her class, who were neither untouchables nor economically challenged, were still not able to mix with the Brahmin girls.[54] This clearly displays the hierarchy among the students in the class and their circles based on the caste hierarchy existing in the society, which does not necessarily have to do with economic means and material gains.

How do We Critically Read Dalit Autobiographies: Instances of Language and Translation

Language is the primary medium of articulation. However, its role is not limited to articulation alone. Language too has its politics and complexities. Naturally, then, the language influences the articulation and its reception. How does and to what degree does the language of articulation impact the narrative? What impact does translation have? Does articulation in a native language or in another language make any difference? While focusing on the influence of language and translation, this section argues for a critical reading of Dalit autobiographies.

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[52]Gidla, *Ants among Elephants*.

[53]Moon and Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India,* p. 9.

[54]Baisantrī, *Doharā Abhiśāpa*.

In the context of accessibility and politics of language, Sharmila Rege in her book opines Ravikumar's argument, an activist and writer of Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu. He proclaims that though the increased translations would provide Dalit literature more accessibility and expose casteism, he also warns that there is a 'politics of selection at work in terms of what is translated and by whom.'[55] Further, Malhotra-Hurley's work also suggests that in the name of translation, the Whites influence and shape the narrative.[56] Their work suggests that translations are much more complex than what they might appear on the surface. It has to do with the equations of power, hegemony, racism, colonialism, gender, and masculinity.

Among the autobiographical texts analyzed, language prompts turn out to be one of the significant factors in shaping their narrative. It is important to note that none of these three autobiographies are in the native language of the authors. Vasant Moon's autobiography, though originally written in his native language Marathi with the title 'Vasti' (meaning 'community settlement'), was translated into English by Gail Omvedt with an introduction from Eleanor Zelliot. This phenomenon had its own impact on the autobiographies and their consumption. A heavy influence of translators—their location, biases, and their perception of what stands as good articulation, probably to serve a specific type of readership, including mainstream academia—has varied consequences for Moon's autobiography. Eleanor Zelliot never fails to explain or connect how Moon's narrative has relevance for the Western audience. She clearly points out that Ambedkar's political rights and legal approach vis-a-vis Gandhi's change of heart approach has relevance in American culture.[57]

In the case of Gidla, as she moved out abroad, for her the audience consisted of North Americans. Therefore, it was natural for her to write in English. Since this Western audience barely had any idea about the caste system, it impacted her articulation and the narrative too. She would explain the caste system in comparison with slavery and racism and would provide her narrative with an exotic tinge through her writing style about Dalit lives and South Asia. In the case of Baisantri Devi, though her native language was Marathi, she explains that she is writing in Hindi because there is a dearth of Dalit autobiographies in Hindi. Therefore, she aspires to be one of the pioneers of Dalit women's autobiography in Hindi language.[58] Her limited knowledge of Hindi or attempts to translate her thoughts from Marathi to Hindi could have added to some of the incoherencies and incongruencies in her work.

In Vasant Moon's autobiography, one can conspicuously note the changes that the translation can have on the narrative. In his autobiography, the translation led to fundamental changes, including the change in the title, focuses, and emphasis on what the translator thought the people needed to know. Given that the translator of Vasant Moon's autobiography, Gail Omvedt, was a trained academic activist with a grounding in the understanding of caste, proficiency in English, and was from Europe— all these

[55]Rege, *Writing Caste, Writing Gender.*
[56]Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, *Speaking of the Self.*
[57]Moon and Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India*, p. x.
[58]Baisantrī, *Doharā Abhiśāpa*. She states this in the introduction.

factors have a lot to do with the kind of framing that the book finally has. For example, she has a section in the introduction describing what is untouchability, primarily targeting the non-Indian audience. This location greatly impacts and changes how the book is shaped and transformed. For example, Kosalya Baisantri never considered this vital as she was aiming at an Indian, Hindi-speaking audience who, by virtue, would know what the caste system is. In Vasant's autobiography, there are certain aspects that the translator problematizes. In her introduction, Eleanor Zelliot justifies the change of the title saying it makes it more 'understandable'. Also, she says that in Moon's story, many aspects are what you find in any poor urban neighborhood, but there is something "peculiarly Indian."[59] This, in a way, fizzles the distinctions and uniqueness of untouchable castes' living as labor. In my opinion, despite the translator being conscious of the fact, this approach or articulation probably does more harm than good to the purpose.

Further, there are multiple omissions and changes that come along with the translation. It also has to do with the impact of the intercontinental readership that shapes what comes out in the text. On the one hand, in the introduction of Moon's autobiography, the translator mentions that she has kept intact many names to retain the 'taste' of Moon's memories. Zelliot also raises the omissions in Moon's work. She points out that he did not mention that Mahars did not have the right to enter the temples until Independence and no Brahmin came to perform puja in Mahar temples till then.[60] However, Zelliot also mentions that she has left out many names and has altered several, including the names of the neighborhoods and caste. It comes across as highly problematic how the translators in Moon's autobiography are changing the names of the caste to the occupations possibly to suit the convenience of the non-Indian readers. How does it make sense not to mention the names of the castes themselves in a Dalit autobiography? Moreover, one of the names the translator used for the untouchable caste communities is the "Pickpocket caste.[61]" Zelliot does not even provide any reference to the caste's actual name or any discussion about the category of 'criminal tribes,' thereby falling into the same trap of creating normative categories for different communities. Similarly, the translator has changed some of the names of the neighborhoods too. Further, in the context of the nomenclature of Dalit castes, Zelliot also mentions how certain castes prefer Sanskritized versions of their names.[62] I partially agree with this argument. However, it does not seem to be the case with the Chamars, who are highly active in the anti-caste politics.

It is important to note that despite all these differences, the autobiographies also highlight that the untouchable communities shared a bond of everyday lived experiences of untouchability—identity, stigma, and caste-based exploitation. The narratives tell us how, under Ambedkar's leadership, this shared experience ultimately helped unify untouchables in raising their voice against caste-based prejudice and

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[59]Moon and Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India,* p. ix.
[60]Ibid., p. xv.
[61]Ibid*.,* p. xviii.
[62]Ibid*.,* p. xvi.

exploitation.[63] Gidla's narrative also shows how Satyam, an untouchable, was trained to think more about the divisions around the class and not caste due to his affiliation with the Communist party. Nonetheless, he along with other untouchable communities joined Ambedkar in his quest to fight against the exploitative structures of caste.

Conclusion: Their Narrative, Their Truth, Their Past, Their History

What do such traces and utterances in Dalit autobiographies tell us? Can their 'whispering' also be considered as the 'voices of history'?[64] Through this paper, I have shown that Dalit autobiographies are crucial sources which demand to be utilized for making sense of the past and history of the untouchable groups, and about the contemporary period and touchable society too. However, the paper has demonstrated how the conditions of knowledge production and power have invisiblized knowledge forms like Dalit autobiographies. In this paper, I have argued that the dual structures of positivist confines and Brahmanical hegemony need to be acknowledged and challenged.

My paper further presses upon the importance of Dalit autobiographies by foregrounding their uniqueness. This paper shows how these autobiographies challenge the idea of linear progression and the linear notion of time in history. These accounts help tackle the assumptions of a singular past, identity, and everyday experiences. Despite showcasing a sense of community, these autobiographies hold a remarkable level of consciousness of intersectionalities within their narratives, which makes them a critically rich historical source. They also provide a reflection upon such intricacies, including the challenges, struggles, aspirations, and escapes from Dalits' conditions in everyday. The cultural aspects and details in these autobiographies are so rich that are rarely found in any other archival sources. Apart from the three themes of spatiality, gender and caste, and intersectionalities among Dalits, there are many threads that these Dalit autobiographies unfurl. It includes reflections on the impact of national-international events and structures, such as World Wars and colonialism, on marginalized groups at the local level; intrinsic links of disease and disability with Dalit lives; differential perspectives on themes like nationalism as well as on leaders including M.K. Gandhi and Ambedkar; and socially practiced escapes for social mobility.

Responding to Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak's contention on whether the subalterns can speak, this paper has presented a case of how Dalit autobiographical accounts can be considered as a repository of their voices and histories.[65] Despite all the challenges and limitations of the autobiographical accounts, this paper has built a case and has argued: yes, they can. Though the task may be daunting and onerous, however, as

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[63]Both Vasant Moon's and Sujatha Gidla's autobiographies reflect upon the indispensable role of B. R. Ambedkar in fighting against untouchability and exploitative caste structures.

[64]Guha, *The Small Voice of History*.

[65]Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*.

the paper shows, one can decode these autobiographies through a multidisciplinary approach, suitable methods, and undertaking a critical analysis. I uphold that Dalit autobiographies are one of the critical forms of articulation of their voices, their truths, their sense of the past, and their history.

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Scheduled Castes in the Indian Labour Market: Employment Discrimination and its Impact on Poverty

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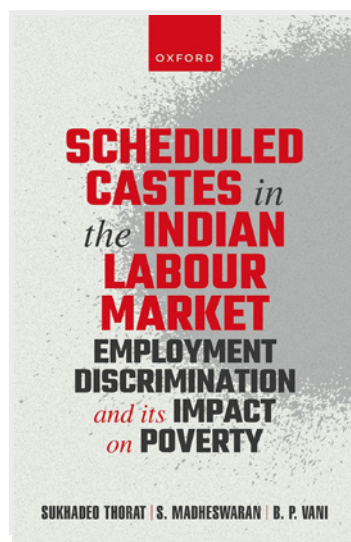Publisher: *Oxford University Press, UK*
Year: *2023*

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The discrimination of scheduled caste in the labour market has been a matter of great concern. Various empirical studies and literature have attempted to understand the nature, forms and consequences of discrimination. The book by Sukhadeo Thorat, S. Madheswaran and B.P. Vani brings out an important account on the caste-based discrimination experienced by Dalits in the labour market. The authors systematically analyse the nature and forms of discrimination in the labour market. The book successfully attempts to quantify the magnitude of discrimination and its consequences on labour market outcome to the former untouchable, i.e. scheduled caste. Based on the latest NSSO data findings and employing rigorous statistical techniques such as decomposition methods, the book makes an important understanding on caste-based inequality and prejudices in wage and employment. Indian society is divided on the basis of caste and religion. Marginalised communities face discrimination on the basis of social groups they belong to rather than their individual characteristics. Social exclusion and discrimination often manifests in social and economic transactions and affects the socio-economic wellbeing of socially excluded communities. Due to denial of basic rights for livelihood, the socially marginalised communities are forced to live in acute poverty.

The analysis in the book is the further addition of the work on labour market discrimination done by the author (Thorat & Attewell 2007). In his seminal work, the author examined the nature and form of discrimination in job applications in the private sector in India. The author in his previous work on economic discrimination had systematically analysed the role of caste-based prejudices and stigma in reducing employment opportunities for the Dalit labour force in India. The analysis in the book highlights that social identity-based discrimination and wage disparity have not reduced despite the affirmative action policies (Duraisamy & Duraisamy 2017).

The book is divided into eleven chapters. The authors introduce the book by contextualising the role of the caste system and its impact on livelihood opportunities for people on the margins. The book presents a historical account of the exclusion of untouchables in employment opportunities. Analysing the caste-labour relations, the authors argue that untouchables faced deep-rooted discrimination in accessing equal wage and employment opportunities. Along with statistical evidence of caste-based discrimination, the book provides detailed theoretical discussion on the economics of caste-based discrimination in the labour and wage market. Critiquing the academic discourse of studying labour market discrimination, the authors highlight that caste discrimination in employment has been systematically neglected in mainstream research. The research on caste-based discrimination had failed to recognize the problem seriously and ignores the discrimination factors in employment. Besides, most of the research had failed to differentiate the nature of discrimination in the public and private sectors. It is noteworthy that this book provides comprehensive discussion on both private and public sector employment. Explaining the classical economic theories of discrimination, the authors provide useful insights on the causes and consequences of employment discrimination and contextualise these theories in the Indian context. One of the unique contributions of this volume is that it has successfully innovated and modifies the western theories of market discrimination in the context of caste in India. Apart from theories of economics of discrimination, the book also provides crucial insight on Dr Ambedkar's theoretical perspectives on caste-based discrimination in employment, wage and occupation. The book also provides a deep understanding of the econometric methods of measuring discrimination in the labour market and its impact on income and poverty for Dalits in India. The statistical techniques used in the volume help to validate the arguments on how social group identity determines access to labour market and the impact of discrimination in reducing the wage and income for marginalised social groups. The authors estimate the impact of wage and labour market discrimination in reducing income and thereby increasing the probability of Dalits falling into poverty. Analysing the labour force and workforce participation by social groups, the book highlights that former untouchable castes have to face both exclusion and inclusion. While they are excluded from the self-employed as well as high paid jobs, they are often forcefully included in low paid manual work. The empirical results discussed in the book provide conclusive evidence regarding the occupational segregation of scheduled caste in low paid and elementary occupations. The book provides comprehensive discussion on

employment discrimination experienced by the scheduled caste in the labour market. Through decomposition econometric techniques, the authors attempt to understand the role of human capital endowments and discrimination in explaining difference in access to employment between scheduled caste and upper caste. Thus, quantifying the caste-based advantage to the upper caste and disadvantage to scheduled caste, the book brings out that the discrimination in the probability of access to employment is much higher in the private sector in comparison to the public sector. The book also provides an important read on policy suggestions to eradicate discrimination in labour market. The authors argue that improvement in investments in human resources would certainly have significant impact on labour market opportunities but would not be sufficient to protect scheduled caste from discrimination. The authors also suggest various measures to reduce discrimination such as changes in the policies both in public and private, legal safeguards against discrimination and most importantly the need for reservation in the private sector.

The book also explores unemployment discrimination encountered by scheduled caste in the labour market. Discussing caste-wise disparity in the employment rates, the authors explain that the unemployment rate is higher for scheduled caste as they suffer both open and under-employment than other social groups. The book also questions the concept of demographic dividend in India by critically analysing youth unemployment and under-employment specifically youths from marginalised social groups. Explaining the distressful situation of employment among the scheduled caste, the authors argue that scheduled caste youth not only suffer higher unemployment but also encounter longer waits for employment despite having higher education than upper caste. Also, the likelihood of remaining unemployed is higher in urban areas than rural areas. It is imperative to not only enhance higher education particularly professional skills among scheduled caste youths, but also take policy measures such as deterrents to caste discrimination in hiring and equal opportunity in employment. Another critical question which is addressed by the book is wage inequality experienced by scheduled caste workers while accessing labour market. The decomposition analysis implied in the book provides empirical evidence that social identity such as caste affects the wage inequality through discrimination and limited access to education and professional education. Importantly, inequality in wages is lower in low paid jobs where the scheduled caste is segregated and wage gap is higher in tertiary sector employment, particularly in the private sector. Lack of safeguards and regulations against caste discrimination in the private sector further aggravates the problem of wage inequality for Dalit workers. Historical injustices in the form of denial of right to capital assets and education continue to adversely affect the employment and wages to Dalit youths. Apart from affirmative policies, measures such as reparation to the Dalits are critical to address the legacy of caste-based injustices. The authors also question the claim made by the private sector regarding merit and denial of discrimination by providing evidence of discrimination in hiring as well equal wages for Dalits. The upward mobility in the job hierarchy in the private sector is marred by discrimination in wage earning faced by scheduled castes. There is constraint in terms of the upper limit of

a Dalit moving into higher paid jobs due to caste discrimination. Thus, the statistical analysis in the book provides systematic evidence of occupational discrimination and wage discrimination faced by Dalit workers while accessing the labour market. A Dalit worker has to face inequality in access to certain occupations and also unequal wages within the given occupation.

The book also makes significant contributions in analysing the impact of discrimination in employment and subsequent loss of income due to wage discrimination on the poverty of scheduled castes in India. The econometric exercise related to employment and wage discrimination in the book reveals that despite having similar endowments, the probability of employment is lower for scheduled caste workers than upper caste workers. Loss of employment opportunities and equal wages due to discrimination further aggravates the economic distress of scheduled caste households and pushes them into the poverty trap. The authors argue that apart from endowment measures to reduce poverty, eradication of discrimination in wage and employment would reduce poverty by 40 per cent. This is quite significant in terms of policy formulation for the eradication of poverty among socially marginalised groups. Thus, apart from increasing the ownership of agriculture land and capital and education, it is essential to formulate a policy for eradication of caste-based discrimination to check the menace of high incidence of poverty among discriminated social groups. The book provides a critical understanding of the high incidence of poverty among scheduled caste and suggests policies to overcome the problem. Ironically, scheduled caste continues to face restrictions in the occupations which were denied to them historically. The authors argue that in order to reduce inequality between scheduled caste and high caste, there is need for reparation or compensation along with affirmative action on education and employment.

To conclude we can say that the book is an important read due to its critical engagement and initiation of a dialogue on inequality and discrimination in the labour market.

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