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LEGACY OF GENDER AND CASTE DISCRIMINATION

caste of caste, mixed media, Savi Sawarkar

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Introduction

Ashok K. Gurung[1]

The annihilation of caste-based injustice is one of the most pressing challenges facing humanity. The caste system directly dehumanizes over 240 million Dalits worldwide and sustains a complex system of graded exclusions and highly skewed privileges that benefits a select few while harming more than one billion people within and outside of the caste system in South Asia. Caste, in its myriad forms, enables and sustains a dense web of systemic inequities tied to one's birth and endogamy. For millions of Dalits, the weight of the caste system is like a millstone around the neck, slowing grinding away at their future. Any meaningful engagement with a deeply entrenched and inter-generational caste-system must wrestle with fundamental questions such as what is caste and why does it persists. Most importantly, we need new narratives that can help us move beyond a casteist world.

Following debates on the persistence of caste-based discrimination, which was also the theme of the inaugural issue of *J-Caste*, this special issue on the ***Legacy of Gender and Caste Discrimination*** curates a set of multi-disciplinary research with a particular focus on Brahmanical patriarchy. It is also important to note that many of these authors are the first-generation of graduates in their communities, making their work even more noteworthy and important for expanding our discussions on caste.

This special issue consists of thirteen academic papers, a poem, an essay, a policy paper, and three book reviews. They underscore the central role of caste, as a distinct social category, in understanding the injustices and inequities experienced by Dalits, and in particular Dalit women.

Guest co-editor Sunaina Arya's Editorial Essay, "*Theorising Gender in South Asia: Dalit Feminist Perspective,*" provides a powerful argument about how "patriarchy in South Asian context is inherently linked with caste." Arya argues that caste is essential for understanding the increasing violence against women and young girls and why we must interrogate arguments about *Savarna* feminists that ignore and undermine the lived experiences, aspirations and political agency of Dalit women in South Asia.

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The articles by Jyoti Diwakar, Tanvi Yadav, and Amit Thorat offer important contemporary context and analysis on why violence against Dalit women persists. In her article *'Sex as a Weapon to Settle Scores against Dalits-A Quotidian Phenomenon'* Jyoti Diwakar draws on two recent case studies of sexual violence against Dalit women to discuss the impact of *Savarna* notions of caste purity and how caste controls gender norms in India. Similarly, Tanvi Yadav's work on Dalit women as witches in "*Witch Hunting - A Form of Violence Against Dalit Women in India"* examines how witch hunting narratives are still one of the most common weapons for maintaining suppression of Dalit women in rural India. As Yadav argues, the impetus for sustaining the practice of witch hunting is a conspiracy of Brahmanical patriarchy that is designed to control women and sustain caste-hierarchies. Amit Thorat et al. article "*Persisting Prejudice: Measuring Attitudes and Outcomes by Caste and Gender in India,*" written in collaboration with a group of social scientists, analyzes a large phone survey that confirms the persistence of conservative gender and caste attitudes and highlights how caste-based attitudes shape issues of women's work, mobility, inter-caste-marriage, and physical violence by married men.

The articles by Anurag Bhaskar and Poonam Singh engage with the intellectual arguments of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Ram Manohar Lohia. Anurag Bhaskar's article on "*Ambedkar, Lohia, and Segregations of Caste and Gender: Envisioning a Global Agenda for Social Justice"* makes compelling arguments about the need to go beyond male-dominated Dalit movements and upper caste-led feminist movements. Poonam Singh's article, "*The Advent of Ambedkar in the Sphere of Indian Women Question*," offers an important analysis of Ambedkar's thoughts on how endogamy makes caste and gender inseparable. As Singh argues, this claim is crucial for understanding Dalit women's situation in India today.

The articles by Kalyani Kalyani, Prashant Ingole, Tushar Ghadage, and Amar Bahadur BK engages with complex questions involving voice, agency, awakening, and the power of religion and culture in dealing with caste-based oppression and indignities. In "*Tathagata Buddha Songs: Buddhism as Religion and Cultural-Resistance among Dalit Women Singers of Uttar Pradesh,*" Kalyani Kalyani provides insights into the power of music and how it has moved from the realm of aesthetic sensibility to a language of resistance against an oppressive social order. Similarly, Amar Bahadur BK's article "*Speaking is Healing: Dalit Women Gain a Voice through a Charismatic Healing Movement in Nepal*," provides distinct ethnographic insights and analysis on why voice -- the act of speaking in public with a microphone -- is important for Dalit *Sachchai* women in Nepal. The *Sachchai* is described as a charismatic healing movement where followers meet over readings of testimonial and Bible speeches. Tushar Ghadage's paper "*Ambedkarites in Making: The Process of Awakening and Conversion to Buddhism among Non-Mahar Communities in Maharashtra*," examines the politics of why Matang Dalit women convert to Buddhism. Prashant Ingole's paper *"Intersecting Dalit and Cultural Studies: De-brahmanizing the Disciplinary Space*," delves into anti-caste discourses and explores strategies for de-brahmanizing knowledge production from colonial and post-colonial perspectives.

The pieces from Thomas Crowley and Kristina Garalyte provide insights into how protests and commemorations produce new spaces for contestations and resistance of caste politics.

In "*Leisure, Festival, Revolution: Ambedkarite Productions of Space*," Thomas Crowley examines protests and commemorations and how they have worked to produce a distinctly Ambedkarite space, one radically counterposed to hierarchical, Brahminical productions of space. In her article, "*Dalit Counterpublic and Social Space on Indian Campuses*," Kristina Garalyte asserts that recent Dalit student activism on university campuses is indicative of a move towards counter-culture, which uses public space to negotiate contested social status.

Gaurav Pathania's poem "Blackhole" in Hindi and English powerfully captures the inhuman practice of manual scavenging, cleaning of gutters, cleanings of roads, and cleaning of human excreta, all unclean jobs lacking in even basic safety measures and relegated to Dalit workers. The metaphor "Blackhole" used in this poem represents Dalit lifeworld.

The works by Aparna Vyas and Sarita Pariyar explore the power of storytelling and how the storyteller's own lived experiences with caste discrimination and violence generate new and powerful narrative stories. Aparna Vyas's paper "*Cultural Psychological Reading of Dalit Literature: A Case Study of Joothan by Om Prakash Valmiki*," examines the autobiographical account of one of the most influential Hindi Dalit writers. Drawing on theoretical cultural psychology, Vyas analyzes the transformation of a Dalit boy (*Om Prakash*) subjected to caste-based atrocities into a notable writer, helps us understand the lasting impacts of childhood atrocities and how such knowledge can be used to resist and reshape discourses on caste. In "*A Touchable Woman's Untouchable Daughter: Interplay of Caste and Gender in Nepal*," Sarita Pariyar deftly deploys her own encounters with caste indignities. Pariyar narrates a powerful story of how gendered violence and atrocities are deeply intertwined and embedded in a society dominated by the Hindu code, drawing on the tragic consequences of her mother's inter-caste marriage and the unresolved murder of Ajit Mijar. Her piece also questions the flawed democratic processes in Nepal and calls for a deeper interrogation into why caste continues to strip people of their humanity.

In our new Policy Arena section, Joseph Assan et al. offer an important assessment of the implementation of the free Midday Meal School feeding program in Lucknow, India. The study examined the program's impact on educational access, performance, participation, and wellbeing. The research team sampled students and teachers from predominantly Dalit, Lower Caste, Ethnic, and Religious Minority households to ascertain whether the strategic program implementation protocols also ensured social inclusion and addressed various forms of discrimination commonly reported in the literature.

In light of the need to support new scholarships on caste and systemic inequities facing Dalit scholars, I am thankful to Professors Laurence Simon and Sukhadeo Thorat, Joint Editors-in-Chief of CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion, for inviting Sunaina Arya and I as guest co-editors for this special issue. The idea of promoting new narratives on caste from emerging scholars and leaders came through a multi-year conversation with a group of scholars and thinkers such as

Professor Sukhadeo Thorat, Shailaja Paik, Anupama Rao, Sarita Pariyar, Laurence Simon, Suraj Yengde, Pradip Pariyar, and included scholars from India, Nepal, and the U.S. We agreed that the insidious nature of caste, and the ways that the caste system manifests its impacts beyond South Asia, required new perspectives and global networks to counter its effects.

In 2018 I was Senior Director of the India China Institute at The New School, and in that capacity I was able to persuade my friend and long-term collaborator Toby Volkman at the Henry Luce Foundation to provide some modest support for a week-long workshop with over a dozen young scholars and leaders, as well as an international conference, focused on Dalit issues. That crucial support from the Luce Foundation helped galvanize and mobilize additional support from the India China Institute, Brandeis University, Barnard College, Columbia University, the University of Massachusetts, the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, the Samata Foundation, the University of Cincinnati, the International Ambedkar Mission, the Boston Study Group, and the Julien J. Studley Graduate Programs in International Affairs at The New School. Thanks to this amazing network, we were able to host a week-long workshop in New York City from October 21-24, 2019 titled "*Toward Equal Dignity and Equal Rights: Global Dalit Change-makers*." The workshop was convened right before the Fifth Annual International Conference on *The Unfinished Legacy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar*, "Dalits in Global Context: Rethinking Religion and Gender" (October 24-26, 2019), which was also held at The New School.

There was a large outpouring of interest in our call for papers for the conference, and we received over 360 abstracts from across the world. Out of that pool of abstracts, we invited 26 emerging scholars and activists and 12 established scholars and experts from South Asia, Europe, and the United States to join for a one-week intensive workshop prior to the conference. The papers featured in this special issue were initially presented by the authors at the Fifth Annual International Conference on *The Unfinished Legacy of B. R. Ambedkar*. We then invited select emerging scholars to incorporate conference feedback on their papers as well as insights from deliberations at the workshop and conference in New York. Sunaina Arya and I reviewed these draft papers, and with inputs from the larger editorial team of the Journal, they were sent out for additional double-blind peer-reviews. Some of the papers retain much of their original form from when they were presented at the conference, while others were significantly transformed into entirely new works, we believe for the better.

Because of the persistence of caste-based exclusions within academia, the pool of highly educated and promising scholars and activists committed to social justice, especially from the Dalit community, is unfortunately still small. Therefore, the evolving role of the new Global Dalit Change-Makers (GDCM) is exciting and promising. For example, Anurag Bhaskar, who writes regularly in major Indian newspapers and social media, is at the forefront of critically expanding policy debates on the intersection of gender, law, caste, and constitutional change in India. Sunaina Arya, a PhD candidate at Jawaharlal Nehru University, recently co-edited *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader* (Routledge, 2019), and is expanding scholarship and debate on feminism in India. Similarly, Sarita Pariyar, who is a writer and

leading Nepali public intellectual, is transforming debates on caste-questions by focusing on challenging narratives of gender, sexuality, and increasing violence against Dalit women in Nepal. Kalyani K. is a Ph.D. scholar from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, who is working on Dalit-Bahujan resistance in North India. She is exploring the cultural space of Dalit-Bahujan and its role in reclaiming the public-sphere. Similar to other marginalized peoples worldwide, Dalits have limited social assets, so this new GDCM global network has the chance to play an important role in helping advance debates on equal dignity, equal rights, and equal opportunities.

For scholars working on race, class, and gender issues in U.S. and European universities, intersectionality is arguably one of the most important theoretical frame for understanding the complex interplay of social identities and power relations. Scholars working on caste questions, especially from Dalit communities, are adding another perspective to intersectional studies with their inclusion of a caste-based analysis. This is another important lens to expand our understanding of intersectionality and diverse social identities, identities which are highly fluid and contested in South Asia. As we look towards a post Covid-19 pandemic world, questions about caste need to be re-examined and reframed, and the scholars featured in this special issue provide us valuable insights into how this can be done.

I am grateful to many, especially Kalyani Kalyani, Sarita Pariyar, Sunaina Arya, and Anurag Bhaskar for helping raise many important questions. For example, we discussed: how might we make caste a fundamental category of analysis for understanding and engaging with aspects of inequities that are central to feminism, gender, religion, and class? How should scholars grapple with questions surrounding agency, politics, and power among Dalits and other marginalized peoples? As I reflect on the process and final outcomes of this special issue, many questions emerged about how we might better encourage and support critical engagement with caste questions. How can we support new critical narratives on caste from multidisciplinary perspectives? How can we rethink the practices of who produces and controls knowledge about caste? How can we foster deeper and more robust intellectual debates and research through new networks such as the Global Dalit Change-Makers?

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Theorising Gender in South Asia: Dalit Feminist Perspective

Sunaina Arya[1]

Patriarchy in the South Asian context is inherently linked with the caste system. Therefore, patriarchal practices and beliefs have an origin in the social ideology of caste. The caste system divided the Hindu population into social groups called castes. Moreover, it compartmented the rights and dignity to each caste in an unequal and graded manner. The rights and dignity get reduced as we go down in the caste hierarchy from highest (*brahmin*) to high (*kshatriya*) to middle (*vaishya*) to low (*shudra*) and lowest (*atishudras*, or *dalits* or *'untouchables'*).[1] The so-called 'untouchables' are placed at the bottom of caste hierarchy, hence have no rights except to serve the castes above them. Importantly, all the castes have been made exclusive and separate from each other through the institution of 'endogamy' i.e. marriage within the same caste. To preserve endogamy it was necessary to put restrictions on women with regard to marriage (and individual rights) and penalization for violation of the same. A unique feature of this system is that women, irrespective of their caste, have very less individual rights—economic, social and religious, since women were the gatekeepers of 'caste purity' (as we shall learn in first section). Violent force or, social ostracism were applied as main instruments to keep in place caste related rules, including gender rules that have been going on for centuries. The dalit women who are at the bottom of caste hierarchy suffered doubly— not only denial of rights (economic and educational) and individual freedom as 'untouchables', but also as 'lower' caste women. This vertical structure of caste and the horizontal strata of patriarchy render dalit women fall lowest in the class hierarchy. Thus, they face intersectional violence which goes bypassed in the contemporary mainstream writings of savarna feminists.

The present picture of South Asia does not depict an advancement on human rights of dalits, specifically of dalit women. What is more disturbing is that the caste norms and practices against Dalit women, have not disappeared in spite of laws against them. They are the raison d'être for the persistence of sexual

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exploitation of Dalit women even today. Put another way, the past is alive in the present with modified practices. This article reflects on this ugly statute of past against dalit women through theoretical efforts to understand its genesis, using Phule-Ambedkarite scholarship. It is organized into three sections—beginning with the brahmanical theory of patriarchy, unveiling denial of agency to dalit women, and probing Marxist/ Liberal approaches—to argue for dalit feminist theory as the positive answer to this graded inequality.

Present South Asia as a Legacy of Brahmanic History

We witness many caste based violent incidents where gender also plays an important role and vice versa, even today. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, many cases of brutal gang-rape and murder of Dalit women have come to the fore.[2] The recent horrendous gang-rape of a 19-year-old Dalit woman by four *Rajput*/*Kshatriya* men[3] has got international media attention as reports about the nature of injuries inflicted on the victim came to be unveiled.[4] The rapists had reportedly cut her tongue, broken her spinal cord and attempted to murder her.[5] She died struggling for her last breath in Delhi's state-owned Safdarganj Hospital on September 29, 2020.[6] But the Uttar Pradesh Police has been denying the crime,[7] they even burnt her body in night against the Hindu cremation norms while pushing away her family members already in despair.[8] Moreover, *savarna* meetings have been held in defence of the alleged rapists mobilizing four neighbouring villages, while there is no protection to the Manisha's family fighting for justice in such circumstances. There were hassles and delays involved in every step—registering the case, media coverage of the crime, providing medical care, initiating the investigation. This police brutality, and threats of savarna men, with failing state apparatus, resulted in nationwide outrage from non-savarna communities over her death. The protests crossed national boundaries with placards and hashtags such as #HathrasHorror #DalitWomenLivesMatter #UPCMResign and so on swarming popular social media sites.

Unfortunately, September 29 is mourned in Dalit history as the anniversary of the 2006 Khairlanji Massacre, wherein a Dalit woman and her daughter, and two sons were stripped, paraded naked and murdered by the *Maratha* men of the village. Before being murdered, both the women were gang-raped.[9] Indian judicial system has failed to provide equal justice to Dalit women as is available to savarna women, as seen again in 2016 Kopardi violence.[10] More vulnerability to dalits and impunity to savarnas is a pattern found in crimes against Dalits.[11] Since Khairlanji, data released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) on atrocities against Dalits show a tremendous rise in Maharashtra, with major crimes like murder and rape being highest.[12] In 2019, Maharashtra registered 2,719 cases of atrocities against Dalits and and *Adivasis* (tribes or indigenous people).[13] Worldwide agitation against the Hathras caste-crime could not prevent similar incidents of gang-rape and murder of dalit women by savarna men. An 8-year-old raped in Balrampur, a teen raped in Bulandshahr, in Azamgarh, another rape again in Hathras district of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.).[14]

There has been an increase in the absolute number of cases of sexual violence against Dalit women since 2014 in U.P. The number of cases of sexual violence against Dalit women in the state increased from 1188 in 2014 to 1568 in 2019, with high of 2026 in 2016. The average number of rapes cases during 2011-2013 was 1735 which increased to an average of 2490 cases in the state during 2014-2016. What is even more disturbing is that at least thirteen percent of the women victims in last six years, between 2014 and 2019, are minors. In one of these years, their share shot up to twenty one percent.

This sorry situation is not limited to the most populated state of India; a high rise in caste atrocities is reported from the southern states also. Tamil Nadu recorded eighty-one caste-based atrocities, forty-one cases of assault, fourteen murders, five cases each of rape and attacks on couples who married outside their caste, four deaths of Dalit manual scavengers, three cases each of humiliation of Dalit panchayat presidents and discrimination against Dalit government servants, two cases each of honour killings and desecration of statues of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, and one incident each of discrimination in school and bonded labour. Moreover, Dalits were prevented from burying their dead in the common graveyard, and a Dalit graveyard was also desecrated. All these cases have been committed within a short spam of four months, March-June 2020. Such caste-crimes have been increasing since the pandemic lockdown month in India i.e. March 2020.[15] Tamil Nadu has seen at least forty percent increase in caste atrocities against Dalits since the beginning of the Covid-19 lockdown in India.[16] In the neighbouring state Kerala, 712 cases of atrocities against Dalits (and 182 against Adivasis) were registered in 2016 as against 696 in 2015 and 712 in 2014.[17] Andhra Pradesh state reported over 150 cases of atrocities against Dalits between March and July this year.[18]

Atrocities against Dalits, mostly girls and young men abound in the predominantly Hindu country of Nepal, where inter-caste alliances are not only taboo but end up in honour killings notwithstanding legal safeguards.[19] A 12-year-old Dalit girl was raped and murdered in a temple in Bajhang district of Nepal last month. Bodies of a Dalit lad and his three friends were recovered from a river after a row over an inter-caste marriage.[20] There are many many such cases of caste-crime.[21] This commonality of violence against Dalits results from a caste-conscious psyche that transcends national boundaries.[22] A couple is killed by local authorities viz. *Khap Panchayat* or, by their parents or guardians or powerful 'high caste' landlords, with the idea of preserving the caste 'honour'.[23] Practising and enforcing the rules of caste as assigned to a particular caste group is considered honourable, while defying them is regarded with disdain or contempt. This caste/clan 'honour' stands threatened when a couple commits the audacity of choosing their partner themselves, defying caste norms. Challenging endogamy (intra-caste marriage) is perceived as an invitation to rape, murder, gang rape before murder, burning alive, and such drastic forms of violence. The plight of Dalit women is similar across South Asia.[24] In Pakistan too, Dalits are the worst victims of discrimination, kidnapping for ransom, rapes, false blasphemy cases, and poverty.[25] In Bangladesh, Dalit girls and women are victims of prostitution and human trafficking for bonded-labour, who lie at the bottom of the caste pyramid.[26] Unlike

other South Asian countries, Bangladesh has no official recognition of caste-based discrimination despite almost 5.5 million population of Dalits, which renders their lives even worse.[27] Thus, we find systematic injustice, indignity and inequality for Dalits (more so with Dalit women) in the socio-cultural, even legal, context of South Asia.

These empirical facts leave us wondering why the twenty first century world witnesses such heinous crimes against Dalits, Dalit women and such most marginalized communities in the subcontinent. One essential element is the persistence of caste,[28] as observed in the murders of Dalits for reasons such as wearing jeans, for riding a horse on their wedding, for eating *ghee* (rarified butter). In other words, Dalit assertion of equal human rights receives violent backlash from savarnas. A major loophole in addressing these cases lies in perceiving caste as distinct from gender and vice versa. Our mainstream feminists have done enough to separate the caste question from gender discourse which shocks the world at the brutal crimes against Dalit women. The need of the hour is to bring into public discourse the inherent link of caste with gender. This is not talked about often, because one would need to read and acknowledge the contributions made by India's most educated and vocal champion of equality, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, who also happened to be a Dalit. The caste-dominated intelligentsia feels insecure to bring forth Ambedkar's scholarship given their inability to challenge what I call 'brahmanical superiority complex' that can be compared to 'white supremacy.'

Twin-Sisters: Caste and Gender

B.R. Ambedkar's scholarly analysis of caste, *Castes in India: their mechanism, genesis and development*, proves that patriarchy is a twin-sister of brahmanism.[29] Brahmanism can be understood in form of 'graded inequality', that each and every member in the Hindu social order has been allocated a predetermined position of privilege or, deprivation based on first their caste and then gender. The categories of caste and gender are employed together to sustain endogamy, i.e. the absence of inter-caste marriages. Ambedkar deliberates upon evil social practices like child marriage, forced widowhood, *sati* and such. He explains the concept of '*numerical equality*' within a caste community as the underlying reason behind such rituals.[30] When the numeric balance of a particular caste gets disturbed by uncertain deaths, the gender disparity yields a potential for inter-caste alliances. In cases of an accidental death of a husband, a 'surplus woman' is created, while the opposite situation creates a 'surplus man'.

In order to balance the surplus woman, *sati pratha* was prescribed by the brahmin priests where a widow was persuaded to immolate herself in the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. It is firstly found in the code of Vishnu, which mentions that a woman 'after the death of her husband should either lead a virtuous life or ascend the funeral pyre of her husband.'[31] Pedagogical revolutionary Jyotirao Phule criticised this tradition, 'have you ever heard of a man performing '*sataa*'? Men can marry many times, [but] the same is not allowed to women. . .'[32] He highlighted the unequal differentiation between women and men in the name of religious faith. Thus, British

Governor-General Lord William Bentinck outlawed the practice in December 1829 by the Bengal Sati Regulation. But the practice of sati is still revered in our social culture, and cases of sati enforcement have been found also in this century.[33] Temples which were built in name of sati victims are still maintained, where special prayers are held twice a day glorifying sacrificed women of the past as *sati mata*.[34] Madhya Pradesh state had reported such cases 2006 and 2002.[35] Uttar Pradesh had such cases reported in 2005, 2002, 1999, 1994 while Maharashtra witnessed a suspected *sati* case in 2015.[36]

However, legal restrictions and raised consciousness among women has made it difficult to manipulate them into becoming sati. The second ritual imposed on women was that of enforced widowhood by brahmins. A widow had to alienate herself from all kinds of colours, festivals, delicious foods, daylight, wedding ceremonies, deity worships, and such occasions regarded as sacred. She was not allowed to marry another man and was consigned to live a colorless and joyless life. She was forced to spend the rest of her life alone in dark and await death. Social reformer Jyotirao Phule was the first person who 'attacked the interconnectedness of knowledge, human rights, caste, and gender by starting schools for Dalits or untouchables in 1848 and widow homes for Brahmin women in 1854. He thus 'challenged Brahmanical practices in their discrimination against lower castes and the restriction of the sexuality of upper-caste women', writes historian Shailaja S. Paik.[37] These reforms had brought major improvements, but a major part of our rural society still follows such norms to control the sexuality of women.

Both of the above rituals were advocated for the situation of a surplus woman in a particular caste and continue to be observed by and large. But, a surplus man is neither expected to be immolated on the funeral pyre of his wife, nor devote the rest of his life only chanting the name of his deceased wife. There could not be any rites or prescriptions against the wishes of a man, since the man has been the maker of the law. Man has been an asset while woman has only been seen as a means to fulfil his whims and desires. The man has been the measure of all things in this brahmanical world. Only women had to be sacrificed; also in the cases of 'surplus man' because '[t]he only place where [a woman] can be independent of [her husband] is in hell.'[38] Therefore, a third mechanism for maintaining this numerical balance was invented: child-marriage. As the term implies, a girl child from the same caste was married to a widower. Thus, we see strict control over women's sexuality has been the only means to maintain endogamy. That is why, honour killing is one of the horrific forms of murder in the caste-ridden Indian subcontinent.

This strong link between caste and gender can be seen in almost every issue/incident related to either of them. For example, savarna women during the anti-Mandal commission agitations rendered it visible through their placards which read *'We don't want unemployed husbands' and 'We want Employed Husbands'*.[39] When reservation for Other Backward Caste (OBC) was introduced in government jobs as recommended by Mandal Commission, women from 'upper' castes opposed it with their endogamous perspective or same-caste marriages. It is visible that these savarna women failed to reflect on two crucial possibilities during the post-Mandal era. First,

they didn't consider themselves as the competitors to OBCs, rather they protested on behalf of their 'potential husbands'.[40] Second, the heterosexual savarna women could not imagine getting married to OBC or *Shudra* or 'middle' caste men. This historical event exposes how a caste based situation is deeply linked with one's gender location and vice-versa.

A more recent example comes from the difference between mainstream savarna feminist and Dalit feminist critique of #MeToo movement.[41] While Dalit feminists expressed their concerns regarding access of technological means to Dalit women, savarna feminists published a collective statement from the *Kafila* blog criticising the 'name and shame' uprising.[42] Ironically, these mainstream feminists who loudly advocate *'my body, my rights'* have argued for bourgeois 'due process' for the matters of sexual harassment. Also their disregard of Dalit feminism is explicit in the title, 'Statement by Feminists…' itself. This means that those women calling out names of their harassers are not 'feminists.' Moreover, it is implied that only the authors of this statement are 'feminists'. Evidently, Dalit feminist scholarship has been impudently ceremented in the mainstream feminist articulations. Let us see some other ways in which caste degrades Dalit women lives that they are most vulnerable to sexual violence.[43]

Brahmanism: Denial of Dignity to Dalit Women

Religious practices like *Devdasi, Murali, Jogini* or *Jogtini* sanction young girls from Dalit families to devote their entire lives in the service of priests. In the name of faith, their parents give away these girls to authorities of local temples. The brahmins succeed in convincing those naive people that their Dalit girls are the 'chosen ones' for the service of god. Since Dalits have been historically prevented from entering into temples, they perceive this narrative as an opportunity to connect with God. These girls are mostly between four and nine years (pre-menstrual) age when dedicated to temples. The illiterate rural Dalit families fall prey to this brahmanical conspiracy and push their young girls into a life of exploitation in the hands of priests. Sexual exploitation of Dalit women has its roots in such obnoxious practices which were designed by brahmins for gratification.

The young Dalit girls living as a *Devdasi, Murali, Jogini* or *Jogtini* are made to do chores like cleaning up temple premises, serving as domestic help to priests, and inevitably forced to provide sexual favours to them. They are coerced to put up with physical mistreatment, mental harassment and sexual exploitation on an everyday basis. *Devdasi* (slave of god) is also often considered as *Gaondasi* (slave of the village), who is raped by all and any man of her village. Their bodies go through multiple abortions and no one cares for the babies born out of such abusive alliances. These women are never accepted in society and end up into prostitution for a living. Even the girl children born and brought up in such circumstances cannot escape this wretched life of prostitution. In this way, the descendants of such outcaste Dalits fall into stigmatized occupations void of dignity. Historically, it is evident that caste plays the primary factor in sexual labour in our part of the world. Thus, humiliating jobs like

bar dancing, 'sex work' or prostitution are populated by Dalits, 'lower' caste Muslims, trafficked Adivasis and other minorities even today.

The Marxist feminists argue for a liberal standpoint on the occupations of 'sex work' and bar dancing like menial jobs. From a liberal perspective, Nivedita Menon writes, 'There is no more or less agency exercised in 'choosing' to work as a domestic servant… with minimum dignity... than there is in 'choosing' to do sex work'. In the same context, she also mentions the first pan-India survey of sex workers which concluded that about seventy one percent of female sex workers prefer this occupation because of inadequate and insufficient pay in other occupations. Clearly, the woman in so-called 'sex work' opt for this profession because they have very limited choices, that is, either to be exploited in domestic and other kinds of works which don't help them run their house or to be exploited in prostitution which helps them financially to run their house. Notably, all the options open to them are void of dignity. These women technically may be called an agent but the restriction of opportunities available to them leaves the sole option of prostitution for their financial needs. If these women are provided with a job of similar pay but avail them dignity, obviously they will choose that over prostitution.

Another argument presented by Menon is that unlike we do not seek to abolish the institution of marriage because of women's subordinate condition rather we tend to improve the laws ensuring women's respect and dignity, we should not seek abolition of 'sex work'.[44] One of the problems in her argument is ignoring the difference between women in the institution of marriage and women in prostitution. An important aspect of this difference is the othering of 'sex workers' by the women in marriage institutions. A woman's dignity does not reduce in getting married while it clearly does when she becomes a prostitute. Our socio-cultural norms give the highest respect to a married woman but leave all disdain for women in prostitution. Moreover, savarna feminists themselves regard prostitution as 'a necessary evil' arguing that this saves the 'respected' women from toxic men.[45] Clearly, the savarna women feminists seek to prevent themselves from the lust of toxic men while justifying for marginalized women's exploitation, instead of arguing for the improvement of men's toxicity. A discomforting objection from Dalit feminist standpoint is that these savarna feminists choose to be academics, writers, spokespersons, and hold such positions of power and authority to merely theorise 'sex-work' (and not practice it).

This difference between the position of savarna mainstream feminists and Dalit feminists can also be observed in the response to the Maharashtra government's ban on bar dancing in 2005. Maharashtra Home Minister explained the reason behind this ban that it 'perverts the morals of our young men.' Consequently, Marxist feminists opposed the ban based on their liberal understanding resisting 'moral policing', whereas Dalit feminists welcomed the ban. Dalit feminists argued that this 'semi-respectable' occupation eventually led these women, from marginalized castes, into an inescapable life of prostitution. Rehabilitation of the women losing their job was the demand of Dalit-bahujan feminists. Since women's sexuality is linked with their caste-class locations, debates over sexuality cannot be held in isolation. Recent reports from National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), National Federation of Dalit Women

(NFDW) and National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) establish the structural violence rendering Dalit women most vulnerable. NCRB evidences that at least four Dalit women are raped everyday in India.[46] This is based on only the reported cases while we all know that hardly half of such cases actually get reported. Thus, we see that mainstream savarna feminists fail to understand that 'caste determines the division of labour, sexual division of labour and division of sexual labour'.[47] The single-axis framework of mainstream savarna feminists not only sidelines Dalit women issues, but their articulations show their disregard of intersectional feminism theorized by B. R. Ambedkar and Dalit advocates of Ambedkarite feminism.

Brahmanical Othering of Ambedkarite Feminism

As we discussed earlier Dr. Ambedkar championed the cause of women with his seminal contribution to the theory of caste, and gender along with his pragmatic contribution of Hindu Code Bill in the Indian Constitution. Savarna feminists accuse him of being *not feminist enough* with their selective and erroneous reading.[48] Mainstream critics point at half line from his speech to the women in Kamathipura[49] that he called them a 'shame to the community'. Turning blind to the systematic sexual exploitation of Dalit women and the survey reports proving same, the savarna women evidence a bourgeois abstraction in their favour. Ambedkar advised in the same speech that women should refuse to 'live under conditions *which inevitably drag [them] into prostitution*'.[50] In his dialogue with the women 'sex workers' in Kamathipura, he focused on the caste-ordained linkages between labour and sexuality in the historical context of sexual exploitation of Dalit women which is explained in the previous section.

A Marxist feminist critique of some crucial Acts of Hindu Code Bill argues for the advantages availed to women over men in matrilineal practices, observed in few parts of India. Menon writes, 'The Hindu Succession Act (HSA) nullified the better position of daughters under matrilineal laws, making sons equal inheritors'.[51] This worry of equating the position of sons and daughters needs to be put in broader context. Making sons equal inheritors in the property should not be seen as disempowering daughters. Her criticism adheres to an extremist position where men are rendered in subordinate situations. The goal of feminism is to avail justice and equality to each and every citizen irrespective of their gender, caste, class, region or sexuality, etc identities. Rege, in the same context, points to remind mainstream savarna feminists that the Bill sought to equalise the status of men and women.[52]

Mainstream savarna feminists' attitude towards Dalit feminism is evident in their repeated use of the phrases like 'us-them', 'feminism and *other political initiatives'*,[53] 'feminism and other voices', and so on. They reduce Dalit feminist thought into mere 'informant',[54] 'poetry, short stories and other forms of writing',[55] as opposite to *theoretical, academic, intellectual, scholarly* research contributing to the feminist knowledge production. This 'us' refers to the feminist scholars who are the readers as well as the writers, whereas 'them' is used to denote Dalit women. The savarna feminist writers regard Dalit women as *native narrators* or the object of their study, rather than an equal contributor to the feminist discourse. Urmila Pawar, Meenakshi Moon,

Wandana Sonalkar, Shailaja Paik, Sharmila Rege, Cynthia Stephen, Gail Omvedt, Gopal Guru, Samita Sen, Padmini Swaminathan, S. J. Aloysius, J. P. Mangubhai, Joel Lee, *et al* explicate and elaborate Dalit women's contribution in Indian freedom struggle, against sexual violence, for women's rights and education. Their writers prove that Dalit women have been the backbone of the history of feminism. But, the mainstream savarna feminists have by-passed this rectifying body of knowledge and refused to acknowledge Dalit women's contribution to gender justice. The brahmanical othering of Ambedkarite feminism signals the privileged location of savarna feminists which facilitates them to ignore, underestimate, and undermine Dalit women's efforts for nation building.

Mainstream savarna feminists appropriate the context of intersectionality for their difference based on race and location in South Asia, while they reject the same for internal differences based on caste. While Dalit feminists appreciate and celebrate intersectionality as a crucial tool for advancing gender justice, savarna feminists reject it calling it 'western' or colonial.[56] Nivedita Menon argues that the idea of being Dalit, Muslim, North-Eastern, rural, etc 'destabilizes' the political thrust of gender based issues. This position refuses to recognize the 'multiplicity' of an individual's identity and henceforth is restricted to single-axis framework. As deliberated earlier, seeing women as a homogenous category is counterproductive in this socio-cultural strata based on caste. Caste needs to be seen in its relation with gender and importantly gender must be analyzed in its concrete relation with caste. Meena Gopal and Mary E. John have put forward extensive critique of Menon's argument from a Dalit feminist standpoint position[57]. Dalit feminists regard intersectionality as 'an excellent candidate' which facilitates feminist endeavours for gender justice, recognizing the uniqueness of a particular individual situation in the broader social structure. Since Dalit non-men fall at the bottom of our society, their caste-class-gender-sexuality leaves them most vulnerable to systematic violence, exploitation, oppression, discrimination and deprivation[58]. Therefore, intersectionality helps us comprehend the exact reality which further empowers us to provide gender justice for *each and all*.

Another important problem introduced to feminist discourse is the savarna women's proliferation of the vague notion of 'Dalit patriarchy'. As discussed in my article 'Dalit or Brahmanical Patriarchy? Rethinking Indian Feminism', their attempt to refocus the question of patriarchy towards Dalit community depicts a lack of commitment to resolve and address brahmanical patriarchy.[59] It is obvious that the understanding of brahmanical patriarchy does not leave a scope of falling into the incorrect concept of Dalit patriarchy. Since savarna women feminists' approach towards gender justice is misdirected, a Dalit feminist rectification proves to be the only method to address, comprehend and smash brahmanical patriarchy. Rege's understanding of this savarna enterprise flags a brahmanical conspiracy, to reserve gender equality only for themselves and throw the baggage of caste-patriarchy on the shoulders of Dalit women alone. Thus, it is not only their caste-class location but also their intention to not work for 'real feminism'.[60] A real feminism encompasses, at least in theory, a commitment to gender equality, gender justice and dignity to each and every womxn (women, along with non-binary sexually marginalised groups). Since

patriarchy in South Asia is brahmanical in nature, only a Dalit feminist theory can offer a vantage point, with active voices of Dalit womxn individuals.

Conclusion: A Dalit Feminist Rectification

We have seen from above three sections, how caste and gender go hand-in-hand in the South Asian context which mainstream feminists fail to understand. The growing number of horrendous crimes like Hathras, Khairlanji, Bajhang, Bhanwari Devi,[61] can only be addressed from a Dalit feminist standpoint position. In all such cases, a woman lives at the most vulnerable juncture with intersections of her multiple identities. The unique kind of discriminatory aspect subjects her to violence which she may not face if she would belong singularly to any of social, cultural, economic, political, regional, categories. For instance, the Hathras fighter Manisha might have escaped rape but not murder had she been a Dalit man; she might have escaped death had she belonged to an urban 'upper middle class' family, having access to immediate medical facilities; whereas, she might have escaped both gang-rape and attempt to murder had she been a savarna woman. Therefore, our legal interjection needs an intersectional framework along with radical judicial reform (as it is over-populated by savarna men).

Our social structure of intersectional hierarchies puts a Dalit woman in situations where she falls prey to the dominant supremacist communities. 'In the absence of such critiques of brahmanical, class-based hetro-patriarchies, the political edge of sexual politics is lost. No politics committed to a caste based society can overlook sexual politics. It is therefore important to revision it rather than give it up or pose the savarna women alone as the only needy constituents of such a politics.[62] There is an utmost need to recognize the 'difference' between the lives of savarna and marginalized Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi women. The unfortunate gap in mainstream savarna feminism can only be rectified by a Dalit feminist theory, which seeks to develop a complete conceptual framework for South Asian feminist thought by lodging the Dalit question into its core cluster of concerns. I conceive this as a 'Dalit difference', which would serve as the focal point for reforming brahmanical feminism. *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader* (Routledge, 2019) initiates such development offering a departure point in feminist articulation.[63] In order to prevent the unfortunate exhaustion addressing appropriation which is prevalent more today than ever before, as discussed in the third section, a Dalit feminist theorizing must centre on Dalit lived experience and advanced by those who are the actual stakeholders.

Endnotes

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Persisting Prejudice: Measuring Attitudes and Outcomes by Caste and Gender in India

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Abstract

Nearly seventy years after India adopted one of the most progressive constitutions in the world ensuring equality for all its citizens irrespective of caste, class, race, and gender, the mind-set of its vast majority Indian remains steeped in gender and caste bias. Results from a new telephonic survey confirm persistence of conservative gender and caste attitudes in Indian society. High proportions of men and women across all social groups disapprove of women working outside their homes, consider it 'acceptable for husbands to beat their wives', and would object to relatives marrying a Dalit person. Analyzing data from the National Family Health Survey and the India Human Development Survey, it has been found that outcomes associated with these attitudes are even more conservative: a smaller fraction of women work than those who feel it is okay to step out of the house for work; a larger fraction of women experience violence in marriage than men who consider marital violence acceptable, and an even smaller fraction of people have inter-caste marriages than people who say they would not oppose such an alliance. An overwhelming majority is opposed to an inter-caste marriage with a Dalit in the family. With a few exceptions, the attitudes and outcomes we studied vary, surprisingly, little by respondent gender, caste, and religion. Dr. Ambedkar's legacy is indeed unfinished–people from all backgrounds must continue to work for the equality and dignity of women and Dalits.

Keywords

Gender, domestic violence, inter-caste marriage, religion, attitudes, India

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Introduction

In his 1951 resignation speech, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar explains that he was leaving the Cabinet because neither the Constituent Assembly nor the Prime Minister would support his draft of the Hindu Code Bill. Dr. Ambedkar's draft of the Bill would have abolished the caste system, provided legal recognition for inter-caste marriages, and allowed women to divorce their husbands and inherit property. In the speech, he states:

"To leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex, which is the soul of Hindu Society untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap. This is the significance I attached to the Hindu Code."

Unfortunately, the 'dung heap' to which Dr. Ambedkar refers still exists today. Despite his struggle for equality and dignity of Dalits and women, caste and gender discrimination are widespread. Exactly how deep is the heap? There are many ways of answering this question. One way is by studying the lived experience of Dalits and women. Personal accounts help us understand what discrimination and prejudice mean to people who experience it.[1]

Another way is by quantitatively describing the outcomes of discriminatory social processes: how many women are part of the paid labor force? How many experience violence in their marriages? How many marriages are inter-caste? A third way of understanding discrimination is to ask people to report their attitudes towards marginalized groups. In this paper, we present novel results from a social attitudes phone survey and analyze whether attitudes about women and Dalits differ by gender, caste, and religion. This way of measuring discrimination is less common, but makes valuable contributions to our understanding of the discriminatory processes.

Some social scientists may argue that when outcomes are measured attitudinal data has little to add to studies of discrimination. However, we see several benefits of using attitudinal data to complement analysis of outcomes. First, it allows us to learn directly from those who discriminate or perpetrate violence. For example, men who beat their wives might be more likely to say that they think that abuse is acceptable even if they will not admit to doing it themselves. Further, attitudinal data allows us to assess how much support or opposition those who try to change the status quo might face. For example, if social approval for marrying outside one's caste is low, from within and outside one's family (Rajadesingan et al, 2019), inter-caste couples may face difficulties getting legal approval for their weddings, or finding a place to live. Moreover, outcomes will continue to be adverse so long as attitudes persist. Once we understand the nature and extent of people perceptions, we can then try and think of interventions and policy tools to change or mitigate social perceptions and mindsets.

This paper focuses on three attitude-outcome pairs of indicators:

1. What proportion of women work for pay and whether people think women should work for pay;
2. What proportion of women experience physical violence at the hands of their husbands and whether people think it is acceptable for a husband to beat his wife; and
3. What proportion of people have inter-caste marriages and whether people say they would object if their relative were to marry someone from a Dalit caste.

For each of these pairs, responses to the attitude question cannot be seen as a direct comment on the outcomes that we study. They however reflect the prevalent

mindscape of social attitudes. The questions, which are discussed below, ask about something slightly different than the outcome. Despite these differences, analyzing these attitude-outcome pairs presents the opportunity to reflect on how attitudes towards women and Dalits remain extremely conservative, and how outcomes often change in spite of stated attitudes.

Many India observers have expected changes in social and inter-personal attitudes to follow from the country's path of economic development. Yet, as Dr. Ambedkar had observed almost seventy years ago, economic policies alone will not bring equality and dignity for women and Dalits. Although India has been on the path of economic growth--opening up its closed economy and transforming it into a liberal global one-- it is clear that much work remains to be done to end patriarchy and caste discrimination. Dr. Ambedkar's legacy is yet unfinished.

Data, Measures, and Methods

Categorization of Social Groups

With some modification, we follow the India Human Development Survey's (IHDS) categorization of social groups (Desai et al., 2012) for within-India comparisons. The IHDS categorizes Indian population as Brahmin, Forward caste, Other Backward Class (OBC), Dalit (Scheduled Caste or SC), *Adivasi* (Scheduled Tribe or ST), Muslim, Christian, or other. In the IHDS, Brahmins, Forward Castes, and OBCs are largely Hindu. Muslims and Christians of any caste background are considered Muslim or Christian. We note that IHDS did collect caste categories for Muslims and Christians, but suggests this grouping for some analyses.

The social attitudes data we use is from a mobile phone survey called Social Attitudes Research, India (SARI). Because SARI's sample sizes are not large enough to analyze people from religious groups other than Hindus and Muslims, we have modified the IHDS categorizations as follows. This, in both the NFHS and SARI data, we look at:

- Scheduled Castes (only Hindus)
- Scheduled Tribes (Hindu or Muslim)
- Other Backward Classes (Hindu)
- General caste (Hindu)
- Muslim (all castes)

We note that for international comparisons, we use data on all of India, including Christians, Sikhs, and people of other religions. People belonging to religions other than Hinduism and Islam make up only about five percent of the Indian population.

The Social Attitudes Research, India (SARI) Survey

SARI is a mobile phone survey designed by the authors to collect data from adults, ages 18 to 65. Data were collected in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Mumbai, Maharashtra, Bihar, and Jharkhand between 2016 and 2018. Respondents in each of these samples were interviewed by a person of the same sex. During the period in which interviews were being conducted in Mumbai, there were no Marathi speaking

interviewers on the SARI team. Therefore, no women were interviewed in Mumbai. For this reason, the Mumbai sample has not been used for our study.

SARI uses random digit dialing, a method that is common for recruitment of representative phone survey samples. In each place-specific mobile circle in India, the Department of Telecommunications issues a certain number of five-digit 'series' to each phone company to use as the first five digits of the phone numbers they provide to consumers. SARI generates potentially active phone numbers for interviewers by concatenating the five-digit series (listed in proportion to the number of subscribers to that phone company) with five randomly generated digits to form 10-digit mobile phone numbers. Surveyors call these numbers in a random order. Approximately half of the phone numbers generated in this way are active, as opposed to not in use, switched off, or unreachable.

At the beginning of the call, the interviewer asks the person who answers the phone to list all of the men or women in the household (depending on the sex of the respondent who is supposed to be interviewed). Survey respondents are selected randomly from the household listing by Qualtrics software. Within-household respondent selection ensures that even individuals who do not own their own mobile phones have a chance to be interviewed. In Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, and Jharkhand, most respondents take the survey in Hindi. However, some respondents choose to take the survey in local languages. Surveyors who speak Marwari, Bagdi, Maithili, and Bhojpuri interviewed respondents who did not speak Hindi. Women were more likely to be interviewed in local languages than men. In Maharashtra, most respondents answered in Marathi, but some chose to take the survey in Hindi.

Since individuals from some demographic groups are more likely to respond to the survey than others, we weight our results using statistical weights created from the population data for the state of Rajasthan provided in the 2011 India Census. Weights account for the intersection of sex, place (i.e. urban/rural), education, and age.

Table 1 gives details about the period when the SARI survey was done in each place, and the sample sizes of men and women from the social groups studied in this paper.[2] Because this paper is interested in differences by social group, we restrict the data to the afore-mentioned groups. Sample sizes for other social groups are too small to draw reliable conclusions in the SARI data. Response rates for the SARI survey range from about 20-25 percent across the six places we study. These response rates are of course much lower than for face to face surveys in India. To put the response rates in context, a study of the Pew Research Center's 2012 phone surveys in the US found an average response rate of nine percent (Kohut et al., 2012). Thus, response rates for SARI are quite high. As long as (conditional on sex, place, education, and age) those who answer the survey do not have different views than those who do not answer, the sample will accurately represent the population.

Table 1 also shows the percentage of households in NFHS that had mobile phones in 2015. This information is included to show that although some households were not included in the sampling frame because they lacked a mobile phone, the vast majority were. Further, the NFHS was conducted over a two-year period, allowing us to observe that households interviewed later in time within the same states were more likely to own a mobile phone. For instance, in Bihar, where data were collected over six months in 2015, households interviewed in the last month were nearly four percentage points more likely to have a mobile phone than households interviewed in the first month.

This suggests that coverage would have continued to increase after 2015, and would have been substantially higher when SARI data were collected.

Table 1: Details of SARI data collection

Sample Sizes					
State	**Year**	**Men**	**Women**	**Total**	**% HH Level Mobile Coverage in NFHS-2015**
Delhi	2016	685	593	1278	98
UP	2016	746	752	1498	92
Rajasthan	2017	1570	1705	3275	94
Bihar	2018	1442	1980	3422	90
Jharkhand	2018	434	521	955	83
Maharashtra	2018	906	687	1593	90
total				12021	

Further information about survey design and data collection, as well as the strategies we use to reduce non-sampling error, can be found in Coffey et al. (2018) and in the online survey documentation (r.i.c.e., 2017).

The Demographic & Health Surveys and the National Family Health Survey 2015

The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) are an international collaboration between USAID and governments and research institutions in low and middle income countries. Since the 1970s, the DHS have measured health, fertility, mortality, and gender empowerment. Because many low and middle income countries lack vital registration systems, the DHS provide the most reliable measures of fertility and mortality for some countries. The DHS data are publicly available at www.dhsprogram.com.

The international comparisons in this paper use the most recent DHS for each country shown in Figures 1 and 3. Because the DHS uses many of the same questions in every country, the results are comparable across countries. We used the DHS Statcompiler (https://www.statcompiler.com/) to compute the fraction of women in the labour force and who experienced marital violence in each country. The same sample restrictions apply to each country. For the fraction of women who are working in the last twelve months, all women (ages 15-49) are included regardless of whether or not they are married. For the fraction that experienced marital violence in the last 12 months, only married women (ages 15-49) are included.

India's DHS is called the National Family Health Survey (NFHS). The NFHS was last collected in 2015 (IIPS & IFC, 2017) and is representative at the district level for many variables. It is a multi-stage, clustered survey that collects a number of variables related to health and nutrition, including height, weight, communicable and non-communicable disease, and HIV prevalence. It also collects a number of variables relating to women's status, including their education, work, economic situations, decision-making power, and experiences of physical, sexual, and emotional violence. The NFHS 2015 collected data on work for 122,351 women (ages 15-49), and data on

experiences of physical violence for 66,013 women in the same age group who were married at the time of the survey. This includes women from all social groups.

The India Human Development Survey, 2011

The India Human Development Survey (IHDS) is a nationally representative, clustered, multi-stage panel survey of over 42,000 households which was conducted in 2005 and 2012 (Desai et al., 2012). It is a joint undertaking of the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and the University of Maryland. This is the only panel in India that collects data on household incomes and consumption expenditure amongst data on many health and social welfare indicators. It has a number of novel measures of women's status and caste prejudice. The data are publicly available at https://ihds.umd.edu/data-download. This paper uses data on married women from Hindu and Muslim backgrounds. There are 39,523 such women in the data.

Measurement of Gender and Caste Outcomes and Attitudes

We analyze three measures of outcomes, and three corresponding measures of attitudes. The outcomes are measured by the NFHS and IHDS and the attitudes are measured by the SARI survey. Table 2 enlists each question along with sample description and the response options. Although it is not noted in Table 2, the aforementioned sample restrictions with respect to categorization of social groups apply i.e., for within-India analyses, we drop individuals who do not fit into anyone of the social groups described above.

Table 2: Questions on Gender Outcomes and Attitudes

Question	Sample Description for Within-India Analyses	Response Options
Outcomes (NFHS & IHDS)		
(NFHS) Have you done any work in the last 12 months?	women ages 15-49 in all states	Yes No
(NFHS) [In the last 12 months,] did your husband ever: push you, shake you, or throw something at you? twist your arm or pull your hair? slap you? punch you with his fist or with something that could hurt you? kick you, drag you, or beat you up? try to choke you or burn you on purpose? threaten or, attack you with a knife, gun, or any other weapon?	married women ages 15-49 in all states	Yes No
(IHDS) Is your husband's family the same caste as your natal family?	married women ages 15-49 in all states	Yes No

Attitudes (SARI)		
In your opinion, should a married woman, whose husband earns a good living, work outside the home or not?	Adults ages 18-65 in Delhi, UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Rajasthan	Yes, she should work No, she should not work
Do you think it is right for a husband to beat his wife or not?	Adults ages 18-65 in Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra	Yes No
If a close relative or someone in your family married someone from a Dalit caste would you oppose it or not?	Adults ages 18-65 in Delhi, UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Rajasthan	Yes, I would oppose it/ No, I would not oppose it

Methods

Figures showing comparisons of outcomes in India to other countries present weighted proportions. Figures showing intra-India comparisons present ninety-five percent confidence intervals for proportions in order to assess whether outcomes and attitudes are statistically significant by subgroup. For both of NFHS and IHDS, we rely on the asymptotic normality of the large sample to compute clustered standard errors using an identity link function. For SARI, which has a smaller sample and is not clustered but instead is interpreted as a weighted simple sample, we compute standard errors using a logit link function. All results use population weights. For the SARI analyses, we construct population weights for the region of states for which a particular question was asked.

Results

Women's Work and Movement Outside Home

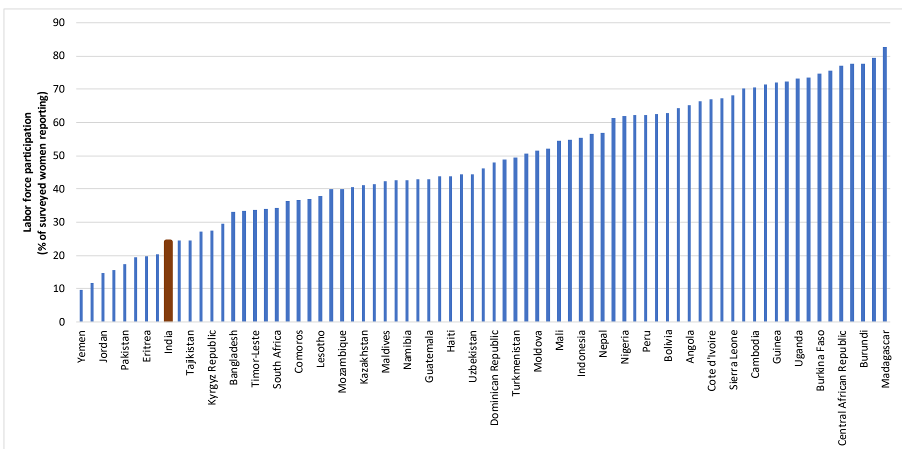

Fig. 1: Women's Labour Force Participation in India Compared with other Countries

Data Source: Demographic and Health Surveys Statcompiler.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of women in India who worked in the 12 months preceding the survey as compared to their counterparts in other countries according to recent DHS. Although different ways of estimating women's labour force participation will yield slightly different results, the overall take-away is similar to that of the papers we reviewed in the Introduction section: In India, women labour force participation is low as compared to other countries. Only about a quarter of women worked in the year before the survey. The fact that three quarters of women or seventy five percent did not work suggests large economic losses, as well as a general environment of restrictions on women's mobility and financial freedom. The work participation rate for women, as it stands now is part of a declining trend. It was thirty five percent in 2011 and now stands at around twenty three, placing India at the 12th position from the bottom in world rankings.

Does the Proportion of Women Who Work Vary by Social Group?

The presence of women in the labour force across social groups is depicted in Figure 2. On the whole the rates of participation are higher amongst Hindu women as compared to Muslim women. If we look at the differences in a regression framework, the difference in the proportion of women who work is greater when we account for the fact that Muslims are more likely to live in urban areas. Amongst Hindus, they are higher for OBCs, SCs, and STs than general caste women as well as Muslim women.

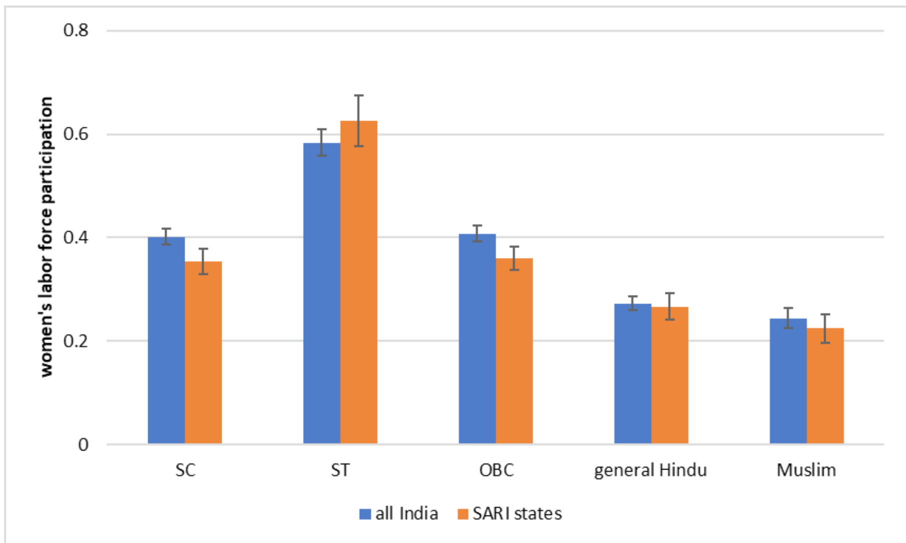

Fig. 2: Women's Labour Force Participation by Indian Social Groups

Data Source: National Family Health Survey, 2015. SARI states are Delhi, UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan.

After controlling for urban residence, we find that OBC Hindu women do not have statistically significantly different labour force participation than their general caste Hindu sisters, but the differences between SC and ST women and general caste Hindu women are substantial. Still, the raw rates of around forty percent for OBCs and SCs are lower than that of Nepal, where more than half of women work. Participation rates for ST women too are substantially higher, at approximately sixty percent. This is consistent with the prior literature discussed in the Introduction section. We note

that levels of women's work in the SARI states are similar to that in India as a whole. Women from socially and economically marginalized communities such as the SC (Dalits), ST (*Adivasis*) have had little choice but to work for wages, to supplement household incomes. This disadvantage is then visible, despite the observed secular fall in women's work participation rates (Afridi et al., 2016), in the context of rising unemployment and slowing down of new jobs being generated, in falling but still higher work participation rates of ST and SC women.

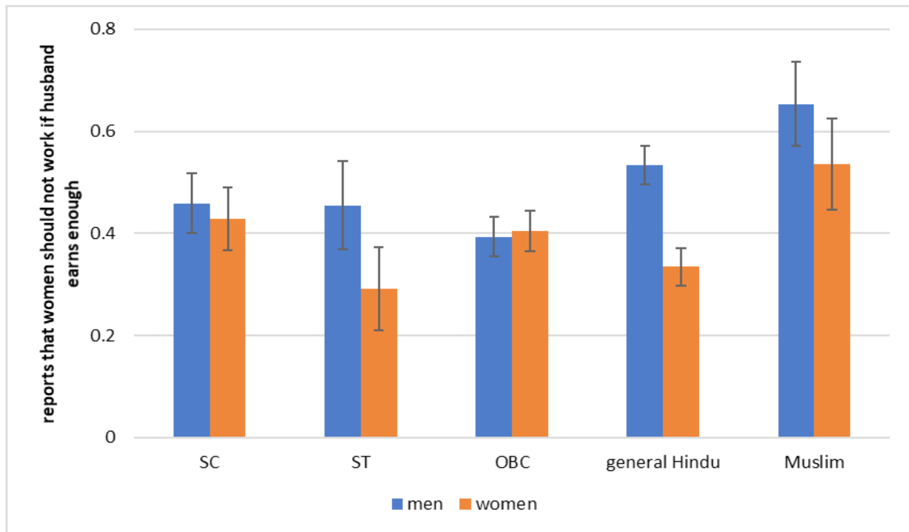

Fig. 3: Attitude Towards Women's Labor Force Participation by Indian Social Group

Data Source: SARI (Delhi, UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan)

How do Attitudes Towards Women's Work Vary by Social Group?

We note that many women from marginalized backgrounds work outside their homes due to economic necessity. However, the attitude question asked in the SARI survey refers to women whose husbands earn well. Figure 3 suggests that overall about half of adults say that women whose husbands earn well should not work outside home. There are, however, some statistically detectable differences by gender and social group. Except for OBC, for all groups, men in general have higher level of opposition to women's work outside home. Muslim men and women and general caste men have the highest levels of opposition to women working outside home. SC men and women, OBC men and women, and ST men have statistically similar levels of opposition, which are lower than Muslims and general caste men, but higher than general caste women and ST women. The only groups for which there is a gender gap in opposition to women's work outside are in the general castes and STs. When examined side by side Figure 2 and Figure 3 look almost like mirror images of each other, indicating groups where there is higher opposition to women working outside in case their husbands earn enough are also the ones that show lower level of female work participation rates. There is also some regional variation in attitudes towards women's work: people in Maharashtra are less likely to disapprove of women working outside their homes than people in Jharkhand and Bihar.

Experience of Marital Violence

More than one in five women in India report experiencing physical violence at the hands of their husbands in the twelve months before the survey (Figure 4). Although India is not the country wherein violence against women in marriage is most prevalent, it is more prevalent in India than in more than half of the countries taken up in the study. Often violence is normalized and internalized culturally as well as at an individual level and is more often than not an indication of deep-rooted intra-household, if not community and/or social patriarchal relationships.

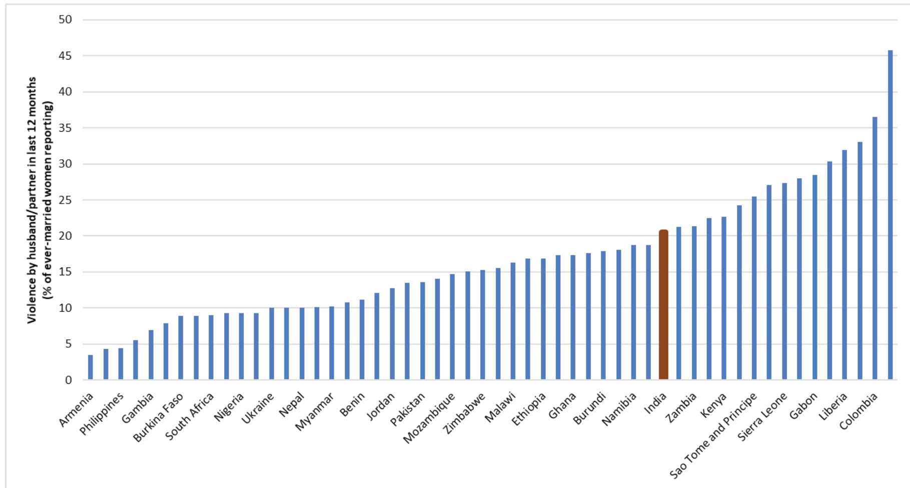

Fig. 4: Physical Violence Against Married Women in India Compared to Other Countries

Data Source: Demographic and Health Surveys Statcompiler.

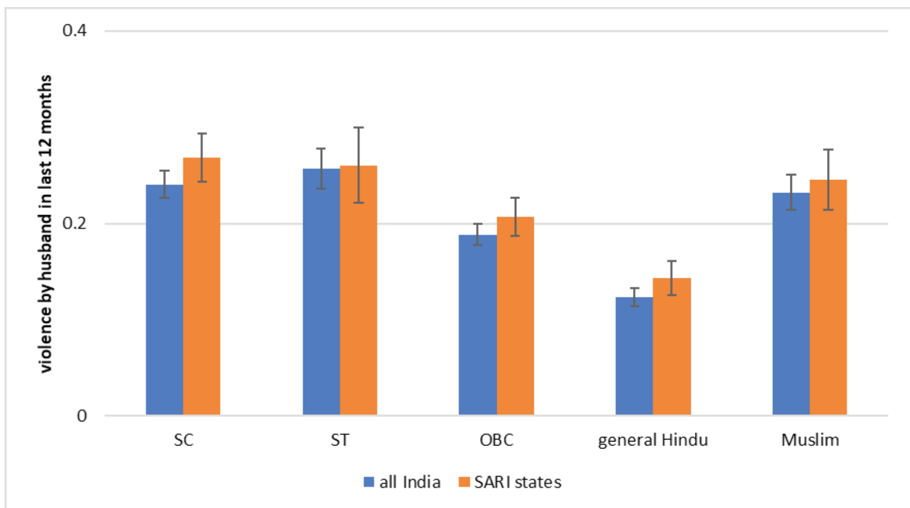

Fig. 5: Women's Experience of Physical Violence in Marriage by Indian Social Groups

Data Source: National Family Health Survey, 2015. SARI states are Bihar, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra.

Are there differences in reported violence cross social groups? Figure 5 shows that with the exception of general caste women, levels of violence are similar for

all other groups. Compared to other groups, general caste women are between five and ten percentage points less likely to report experiencing violence. Also, levels of physical violence in marriage are similar in the SARI states of Bihar, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra and in all of India.

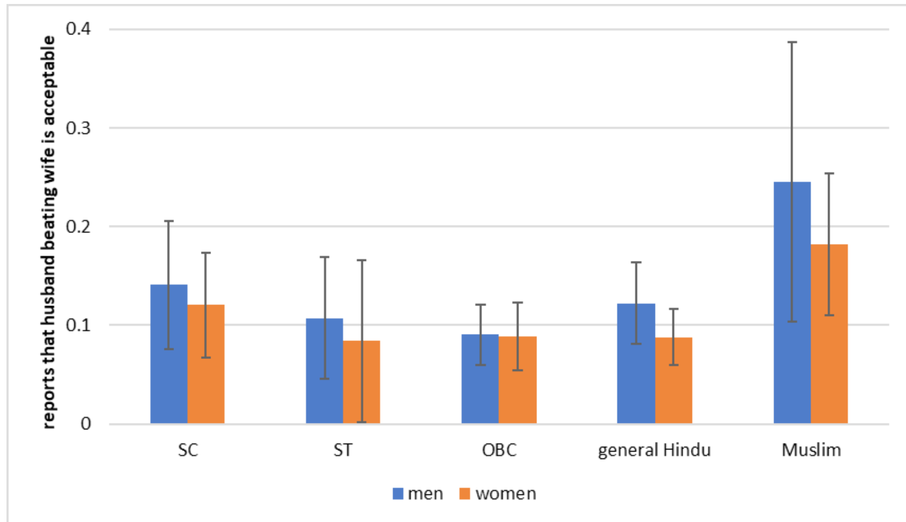

Fig. 6: Attitudes Towards Marital Violence Suffered by Women Across Indian Social Groups

Data Source: SARI (Bihar, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra)

Figure 6 shows the proportion of men and women in Bihar, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra who say that it is acceptable for a husband to beat his wife. Although data for all three states is clubbed, it is observed that the proportion of people who say it is acceptable is significantly higher in Bihar than in Jharkhand or Maharashtra. In each state, between ten and fifteen percent of both men and women say that it is acceptable. Surprisingly, there are neither any statistically significant differences in the percentage of men and women who consider marital violence acceptable, nor are there statistically significant differences across social groups. It is also notable that a smaller proportion of men say that it is acceptable for a husband to beat his wife than married women who say that they have experienced violence in marriage. This indicates that it is likely that lesser number of men and women acknowledge violence being acceptable than actually the case might be. At the same time lesser number of women accept facing violence by husbands, than actually might be the case.

Inter-Caste Marriages

Consistent with the prior literature cited in the introductory section, Figure 7 uses IHDS data to show that only about five per cent of married women in our study are in inter-caste marriages i.e. their husbands' families do not belong to the same caste as that of their parents. There is little variation across marital families of different social groups. We note that women who report inter-caste marriages may or may not belong to the broad category that they are grouped into here. Inter-caste marriages could be marriages across, say ST and General, or they could be marriages across sub-*jatis*

(sub-castes or sub-groups) within a broad caste category. They are more likely to be within the same broad group but across different sub-groups.

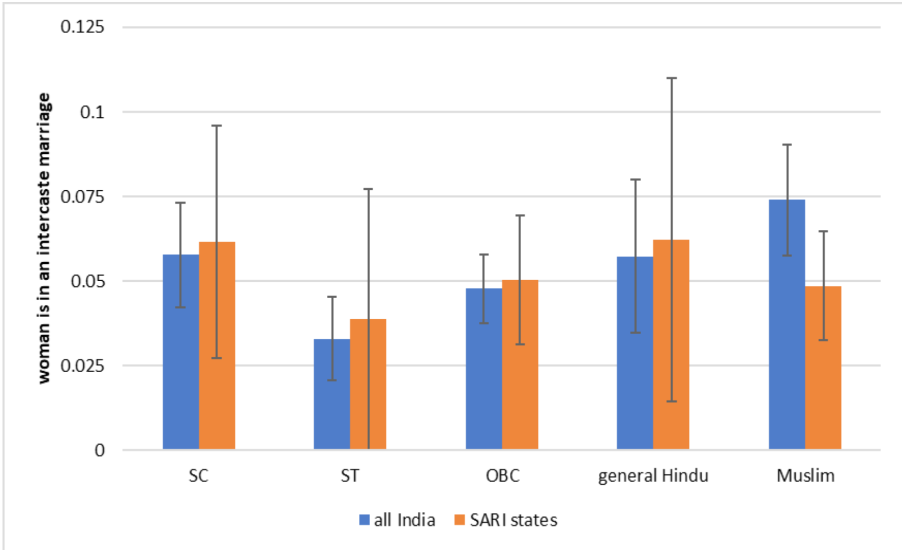

Fig. 7: Proportion of Women Who Have had an Inter-Caste Marriage

Data Source: India Human Development Survey. SARI states are Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Bihar, and Jharkhand.

The number of women in inter-caste marriages is quite low considering that the woman herself would have defined what it meant for her own natal family to be of a different caste than her husband's family. It is also likely that most of the inter-caste marriages mentioned here are not marriages between Dalits and non-Dalits. As we discuss below, future studies could expand the existing literature by asking which caste or sub-caste the woman's natal family belonged to.

Figure 8 shows the proportion of men and women in each social group who report that they would object if a relative wanted to marry a Dalit person. We do not include Dalits in this analysis because they were not asked this question. There are not large differences across social groups in the proportion who say that they would object to a relative marrying a Dalit. In every social group, women are more likely to report that they would object than men, but the differences are not statistically significant when the data are broken up by social groups. Statistical significance in part depends on sample size; when the data are not broken up by social group (so the sample size is larger), women respondents are statistically significantly more likely to say they would object if a relative wanted to marry a Dalit person. This may be because they are actually more caste conservative, or it may be because they are less aware that saying that they would object could be considered a socially undesirable answer. Among women, the proportion is approximately seventy percent while it is about sixty percent among men.

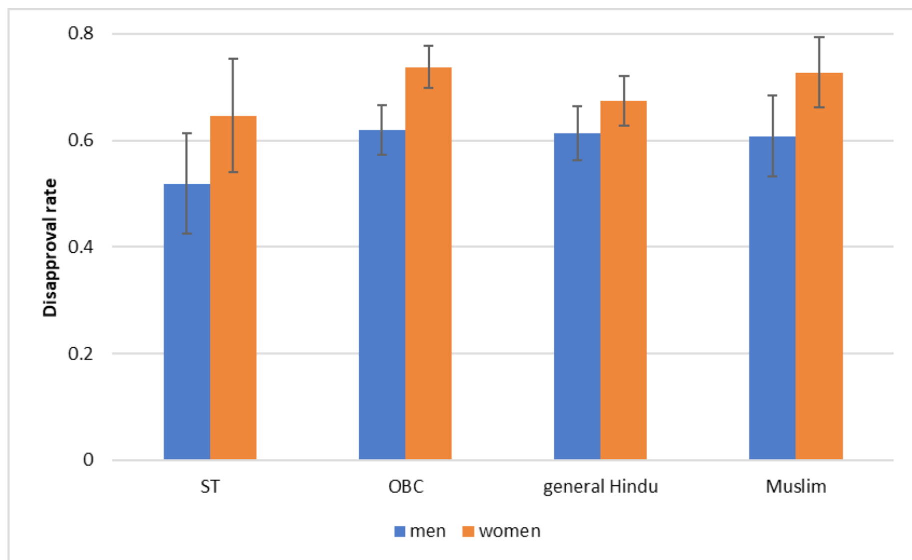

Fig. 8: Attitudes towards Inter-Caste Marriage: Proportion Who Disapprove of a Relative Marrying a Dalit

Data Source: SARI (Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Bihar, Jharkhand

This level of opposition to inter-caste marriage is quite disturbing as these perceptions are seen to be common across caste and religious identities. This lead us to the question whether this is internalization of the idea of purity and pollution across religious and caste norms and beliefs, or is it akin to a form of socially desirable normative behaviour?

Discussion and Future Research

Other studies have observed the gender and caste outcomes for which we present results. For instance, Ray et al., 2017 note the low proportion of inter-caste marriages and find that inter-caste marriage is more likely to occur if the mother-in-law of the bride is more educated. Several recent studies have documented India's low and declining female labour force participation (Chatterjee et al., 2015; Afridi et al., 2016; Klasen, 2017). Kishor & Gupta (2004), among others, have noted the high rates of violence that women in India face in their marriages.

What is novel about this study is the pairing of outcomes with social attitudes measured in the telephonic survey. The first thing that emerges from the new data is that stated attitudes towards women and Dalits are still quite conservative and do not seem to be abating at the rate we would hope for. The mismatch between attitudes and outcomes is not very large. However, stated attitudes are not as conservative as outcomes imply.

It is difficult to know exactly how to interpret the mismatch between outcomes and attitudes. Why do fewer women work than men, and why do fewer women than men say it is acceptable for a woman to work? One reason might be that even if a person has privately more liberal views, it is difficult to act on them until they are

more widely shared due to social and economic costs on acting upon them. If women who consider working outside their homes, or people who are considering inter-caste marriages face social policing by conservative people in their networks, and they don't have much support by way of economic and personal state protection, then they may not act on their more liberal attitudes.

Social desirability bias is almost certainly part of the explanation for the mismatch between attitudes and outcomes. Especially for attitudes around violence, it makes sense that some people who engage in violence would not be willing to admit it to an interviewer. Other research from the SARI data has discussed social desirability in reported attitudes and pointed to avenues for further research (Hathi et al., 2020a; Hathi et al., 2020b).

Another difficulty in interpreting a comparison of the outcome survey and the attitude survey is that they were done at different points in time. However, this is perhaps less of a concern in this context than others because there is evidence from other research that rates of women's labour force participation and that of inter-caste marriages are changing slowly. There is less research on trends in marital violence against women. We hope that the fact that there is less approval for husbands beating their wives in the SARI survey than actual reports of it in the NFHS means that such behavior has decreased in the intervening 3-4 years. However, we think it is not plausible that a three to four years time difference could explain the entire gap.

A few directions for future research emerge from this study. First, it would be useful to better understand how the phone survey medium influences results. Would it make a difference if attitudes were measured in face to face surveys?

Further data analysis could be done to better understand why rates of labour force participation are low for women. Why do many general caste women say they support women working outside the home even though it is the group with the lowest labour force participation rate among women?

Is the fact that general caste women report experiencing less violence than women in other social groups a true difference, or due to differential reporting? The IHDS and NFHS have a series of questions around the excuses that men might make for violence against women that would provide deeper understanding of violence in marriage.

Finally, the inter-caste marriage rate in the IHDS was subjectively defined by the married woman. It would provide a clearer picture of discrimination against potential Dalit partners to know how many marriages specifically between Dalits and non Dalits occur.

Despite the need for further research on all of the indicators we have included in this study, it is clear that prejudice against women and Dalits remains persistently high, and that policies are needed to support those who digress from conservative social norms, either by choosing to work, choosing who they marry, or by leaving abusive partners.

Institutional Review Board Approval

The SARI survey was reviewed and approved by The r.i.c.e Institutional Review Board (NIH #IORG0008721 under the name RICE Institute, Inc.).

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Endnotes

1 See Valmiki (2003); Faustina (2014)

2 Sample sizes in this paper differ from sample sizes given in other papers that use SARI data because for these analyses we drop individuals who do not belong to the social groups described in the section on Categorization of Social Groups.

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The Advent of Ambedkar in the Sphere of Indian Women Question

Poonam Singh[1]

Abstract

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar was a feminist at heart. Contrary to popular perception that he championed the cause of Dalits and dalit women, Babasaheb, as Ambedkar is fondly referred to, worked as a socio-political advocate for Dalit as well as upper caste Indian women concomitantly. In his quest to ensure freedom, equality, and individuality of Indian women, he resorted to the legalized mechanism and proposed sweeping constitutional provisions, famous as the Hindu code Bill, placing women at par with men in matters of inheritance and allowing them freedom to marry outside their caste. Contemplating the predicament and marginalized position of Indian women, he posited that caste and gender are intertwined. To maintain the system of caste, endogamy is a necessary condition that has an immense bearing on women. The imposition of endogamy was made compulsory by the Brahminical hierarchy, which was endorsed by Hindu religious scriptures to ensure women's sustained subjectivity within the same caste groups or *varnas*. Ironically, the Bill, in Ambedkar's own words was 'killed and died unused and unsung' following which he resigned from then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's cabinet in 1951 but the same bill was passed as four different bills between 1955 and 1956 during Nehru's second term as prime minister (Elancheran, 2018). Unfortunately, Ambedkar's contribution to the Indian women's struggle has not been given its due. This paper attempts to explode the myth of the golden age of Indian womanhood and critiques the role of women reformist organizations in nineteenth century India as well as Ambedkar's yeoman service to Indian women that has largely remained unacknowledged in public discourse.

Keywords

Ambedkar, Hindu Code Bill, Indian women, Feminism, Caste, Gender

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Introduction

Dr B.R. Ambedkar's advocacy of Indian women's rights in the Indian social system puts him on a high pedestal among liberal feminists. Perhaps no other reformer or leader has worked as ardently as Babasaheb to bring about a change in the status of Indian women and ensured freedom, equality, and individuality for them as their legal and constitutional rights. 'Just ask an educated liberal woman of India how they got their rights, irrespective of caste and creed' (Elancheran (2018). As independent India's first law minster, Ambedkar drafted sweeping constitutional provisions, in his famous Hindu Code Bill guaranteeing gender equality in laws mainly pertaining to inheritance and marriage striking at the very roots of 'graded-inequality' of the Hindu caste system. Among the provisions that he envisaged was granting women's right to inheritance and treating them equal to men: "one change is that, the widow, the daughter, the widow of predeceased-son; all are given the same rank as the son in the matter of inheritance. In addition to that, the daughter is also given a share in her father's property: her share is prescribed as half of that of the son" (Ambedkar, 2014, Vol 14, Part one, page 6)

Describing the predicament and marginalized position of Indian women, Ambedkar posited that caste and gender are intertwined. To maintain the system of caste, endogamy is a necessary condition that has an immense bearing on women. The imposition of endogamy was made compulsory by the Brahminical hierarchy, which was endorsed by Hindu religious scriptures to ensure women's sustained subjectivity within the same caste groups or not transgress caste boundaries. In fact, Ambedkar stated that he would measure of progress of a society with the progress of women. Dwelling on the significance the Hindu Code Bill, he said:

> To leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex, which is the soul of Hindu Society untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap. This is the significance I attached to the Hindu Code (Elancheran, 2018).

Ironically, the Bill was stalled in Parliament after a prolonged discussion of four years leading to Ambedkar's resignation as the country's law minister on 27th September 1951, but was passed in the form of four separate bills in 1955 and 1956 during the second term of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who had backed the Bill (Ibid).

In asserting the importance of women in society, Ambedkar outstripped his contemporaries who were engaged in nationalist movements or communal politics. He involved women in all of his programmes and asserted that true freedom of an individual lay in equal opportunities for all. Sadly however, this facet of Ambedkar's leadership as a champion of women's rights is grossly undermined. Indian feminists barring a few until very recently have failed to acknowledge Ambedkar as an intellectual who theorized on Indian women's position akin to their demands. Reference to Ambedkar often falls prey to his famous persona of being a Dalit icon only or someone who has worked to emancipate Dalits from their drudgery of lower caste identity. The systematic neglect of Ambedkar's writings is a moral assault on epistemic knowledge and ignorance towards creating a comprehensive Indian academic view.

Dwelling on the idea of Indian women question and the role of Ambedkar, this research paper's methodology is based on a close textual analysis of Ambedkarite canon with archival study and genealogical examination contouring the discourse. It is divided into four major parts. The first draws attention to the myth of the golden age of

Indian womanhood in the Vedic era. In the second part, the paper critiques nineteenth-century reformist organizations that brought some relief to Indian women but were unable to give them personhood. The third part highlights the events at the turn of the nineteenth century and arrival of Bhimrao Ambedkar on the Indian political scene. He leaves no stone unturned to address Indian women's issues irrespective of class and caste, and tried hard to enforce a legal mechanism for women's upliftment. In the fourth part, the paper points to the reluctance of upper-class/caste feminist discourse that does not acknowledge Ambedkar and his works to bail out Indian women from their struggle.

The paper also throws light on the reasons behind the potent differences in the marginalization of upper-caste women and Dalit women. The difference between them is maintained by the 'graded inequality' that is an outcome of the graded caste position of the two broad categories from which they come. To guarantee the freedom, equality, and individuality of Indian women, Ambedkar resorted to the legalized mechanism and constitutional provisions. But for his vision and relentless efforts to enforce legal guarantees for the oppressed sections, irrespective of class, creed and gender, much of the rights that upper caste women take for granted today would have remained an elusive dream.

Condition of Hindu Women in Vedic Era: The Myth of the Golden age of Indian Womanhood

The circulation of popular beliefs that Hindu women's status was as high-ranking as men during the Vedic age is often supported by citing the names of numerous women who might have acted as *Brahmavadinis* (women who composed hymns in Vedas). Names such as 'Lopamudra, Sulabha Maitreyi, Gargi Kakshivati, Dakshina Prajapathya, Vishvavar, Atreyi, Godha, Apala, Yami Vivasvathi, Romasha Svanya, Aditi Dakshayeni, Ratri Bharadwaja, Vasukra Pathni, Surya Savitri, Indrani, Sarma Devasuni, Urvashi, Shashwati, Angirasi, and Sri Laksha' (epg pathshala, n.page) are mentioned as cases in point. The extension of 'learned Indian Vedic women' myth is not just limited to their composing Vedic hymns as per the Hindu mythological stories, but they are believed to have participated in warfare, social decision-making, and had access to education as well. Such notions have become the markers of an exemplary egalitarian Indian society during the Vedic period to the extent of a fallacy that all Hindu women inhabited an honourable and respectable position in that social system.

These opinions are frequently disseminated and reified in the general perspective. To justify the rapid degradation in the post-Vedic period, regressive rigid Hindu codifications of laws and Muslim invasions of Indian territories are mentioned. However, the stringent Hindu laws which were/are made to 'safeguard' their honour, controlled women's sexuality, freedom, and economic prospects, thus curtailing their autonomy, denying them education, and restricting mobility into well-defined social spaces. As a consequence, such laws reduced their role to childbearing and motherhood, and imposed widowhood on them in the post Vedic period.

In sharp contrast to this utopian projection of Vedic women, Uma Chakravarti (1989), in her essay '*Whatever happened to the Vedic dasi*? *orientalism, nationalism, and a script for the past*' argues that glorification of learned Indian women during the Vedic age is a 'myth' constructed by western-Indian intellectuals bit by bit. The category of respectable learned Hindu women essentially belonged to upper-caste women, she claims pointing out at the end of the essay that 'slave women folk

were/are unseen/uncounted in those times more profoundly than ever' (Ibid, p.79). Chakravarti puts the spotlight on upscale propaganda of escalating upper-caste Hindu women's position in the Indian social system that was carried out deliberately in sundry stages of history. She simultaneously punctures the notion of a respectable place inhabited by the upper caste Hindu women during the Vedic period. She builds a nuanced argument while classifying Western colonizers and Indian reformists in two different groups. The first group of western scholars investigating Indian history and religious scriptures is further called the first group of orientalists and the second group of orientalists. Uma Chakravarti maintains that the first and the second group of orientalists-William Jones, H.T. Colebrooke, Max Muller, Mrs. Spier and Clarisse Bader-popularised that Indian Vedas were the basis of Indian Hindu religion wherein Hindu women occupied a dignified place. However, these were imaginative conjectures totalled by European women-Mrs. Speier and Clarisse Bader, in awe of the Indian womanhood of their self-sacrificing nature (Ibid, p 43-46). Apart from the awe-struck European women, she includes nationalistic reasons against the British colonizers to build the myth of the golden age of Indian womanhood to suit Indian proto-nationalists' purpose. 'On the one hand, European women intellectuals, Mrs. Speier, Clarisse Bader romanticized Hindu women's valour, mounting their husbands' funeral pyre in Hindu ritualistic practices. On the other hand, Chakravarty underscores that "it is in Speier's works that one notices vedic women being epitomized as… 'high' status of women in ancient India (Ibid, p 43). Chakravarti unearths such contrived endeavours and establishes her case of how the myth of the golden age of Indian womanhood was created gradually. She argues that it was also done at the convenience of social reformers who 'disregarded the Vedic dasi or slave woman as always, because "recognising her existence would have been an embarrassment to the nationalists" (Ibid, 79) 'The slave women could neither be projected as equal partners nor had adequate caste positions such as *Kshatriya* to be adorned as a unique avatar of nationalistic warrior woman against the colonizers'. Thus, Uma Chakravarti explodes the popular myth that the Indian Hindu women had a privileged status in the Vedic period and provides us with historical moments in which the construction of this myth was laid, brick by brick, by various forces of diverse locations. Interestingly, V. Geetha (Geetha, 2011, p 36) validates Chakravarti's disposition on Hindu women from Tamil regions in India. Her endorsement of Chakravarti's argument is that there was not any golden age for Hindu women in the past. She takes the argument a notch higher by applying it to Tamil language politics. Geetha underscores that Tamil women have always remained obscure in political and social lives, as Tamil and Hindi language politics have superseded their interests; thus, Tamil women's issues are systematically dissolved and excluded. Geetha says, 'Tamilness enabled men to be men, facilitated honour-bound comradeship, and cast Tamil men as worthy and aesthetically inclined political actors, it disenabled women from claiming their space in the imagined nation' (Ibid, p. 36).

Acknowledging the Plight of Women: Reformist Movements in Nineteenth Century

In the early nineteenth century, we do witness specific reformist movements in which prominent figures such as Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) along with Mritunjay Vidyalankar (1762-1819) drew attention to Indian women's wretched condition. Ram Mohan Roy sought reformist laws to stop widow immolation, popular as *sati*, dowry. He also advocated inheritance laws for women through his seminal writing

Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachment on the Ancient Rights of Female, which essentially highlighted Hindu women's inheritance rights (Ghosh, 1982, p. 375-384). In 1819, Roy started *Sambād Kaumudi* (Kar, 2013. P 3), Bengali magazine in which he vehemently attacked the sati practice - burning of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre, and established the *Brahmo Samaj* (Sanskrit: Society of Brahma) in 1828 to address social evils prevalent in those days. Apart from Hindu women's property rights, Roy also condemned child marriage, polygamy, and advocated education as a vital component to civilize human behaviour. However, Ram Mohan Roy's efforts in the sphere of women's liberation were confined to taking up the issues of child marriage, widowhood, and sati which were chiefly the problems of Brahmin caste. Therefore Ambedkar makes a distinction on recognising the shallow nature of ‘ social reformation movements in his popular essay *Annihilation of Caste* as deficient in their conception (Ambedkar, *Annihiliation of Caste*, n. page) It neither was a reform for Hindu caste system nor included non-Brahmin women, as it did not necessitate reform of caste system as an essential component of such social movements. Ambedkar recognised the selective approach of such unidirectional movements and asserted that

> It is necessary to make a distinction between social reform in the sense of reform of Hindu Family and social reform in the sense of reorganisation and reconstruction of the Hindu society… [it] has a [inadequate] relation to widow remarriage, child marriage, etc. while… [it require to] relates to the abolition of caste system. The social conference [exclusively] was concerned itself with the reform of high caste Hindu family. (Ibid, n. page)

Therefore, social movements such as Brahmo Samja, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission etc. are insufficient to address the inequities prevalent in Indian society that thrive on the archaic caste system. Another iconoclastic subversive individual was Annie Besant, who remained nonconformist in British Society and brought her revolutionary ideas to India. Nineteenth century is replete with reformist organizations led by enlightened individuals who contained ideas for Indian women liberation. Some such organizations were Arya Samaj, Ramakrishana Mission, Prarthana Samaj, and Young Bengal Movement. Barring the Theosophical Society most of these organizations had its roots in Hinduism and were progressive in a limited sense. None of them focused solely on Indian women's questions. However, Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) remained different in his ideas while conceiving the *Satyashodhak Samaj* (Truthseekers' Society) established in 1873. Jyotiba Phule ardently advocated education for women, who were kept out of the ambit of formal educational spheres in most parts of India. In 1848, he started a school for *achhut* (untouchable) girls. In 1851 he started another school for girls from all castes. He believed that the *truitya netra* (third eye) could be gained by education only. ‘This third eye will help them articulate their position as women in the Dalit community and help develop a critical perspective’ (Rege, 2016, p.15-16). Sharmila Rege (2016) draws on Phule's ideology of third eye which ‘reimagines education as the trutiya netra that has the possibility to enable the oppressed to understand and transform the relation between power and knowledge’ (Ibid). The women from Jyotiba Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule's school recognized the tangible inequality between men and women in the Indian social system; Muktabai- a young Dalit girl from Savitribai Phule's school, crusaded against the caste-based differentiation between untouchable (Dalit) women and upper-caste women in her discreet essay *About the Grief of Mahars and Mangs*. Another woman member of Satyashodhak Samaj was Tarabai Shinde wrote the famous feminist article *Stri Purusha Tulna* (A Comparison between Men and Women). These essays now have become historical archives of Indian women's intellectual interventions. Sadly,

one may observe that despite such social reformation movements way back in the nineteenth century, the status of Indian women remained as that of a dispossessed subaltern in the social system until Ambedkar brought a sharp-toothed legal system to combat adversities inflicted upon Indian women in the early twentieth century.

The Arrival of Ambedkar in the Early Twentieth Century and the Indian Women Question

Bhim Rao Ambedkar's (1891-1956) critique of Hindu culture/scriptures, Indian social system, caste order is well-known. In his preliminary attempt to understand the Indian social structure, Ambedkar wrote a seminal composition on how caste thrives in India in *Castes in India: their mechanism, genesis and development* (1916). There is no delay in recognizing how endogamy within different social groups in India is the root cause of maintaining the caste order. Nobody had speculated as cogently as Ambedkar did in his maiden attempt at conceptualizing the Indian hierarchical social order in his essay *Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development.* The interlocking system of caste and endogamy has resulted, as Ambedkar conceived, in the pernicious and despicable Indian social evil practices of sati practice and forced widowhood. Even though these practices had already been banned in the early nineteenth century, many scholars have not delved into the reasons to unravel the origin of India's evil social practices. Ambedkar undertook an unfaltering scholarly attempt to investigate the reification of the caste structure that was undergirded by the subjugation of Indian women through the imposition of strict endogamous statutes sanctioned by upper caste Indian society's rules (Ambedkar, (Vol 1, 2014) posited a plausible, logical intervention and connects sati, enforced widowhood, girl-child marriage, and endogamy as the offshoots of preserving closed caste units. Ambedkar, thus, theorized that the significant functionality of the caste system depends on the women of that caste group. This makes it imperative that in case of the unforeseen circumstance of widowhood, it has to be taken care of by constructing legal codifications endorsed by religious practices (Ibid). He thus highlighted the distinction between 'surplus man' and 'surplus woman':

> I am justified in holding that, whether regarded as ends or as means, *Sati*, *enforced widowhood* and *girl marriage* are customs that were primarily intended to solve the problem of the *surplus man* and *surplus woman* in a caste and to maintain its endogamy. Strict endogamy could not be preserved without these customs, while caste without endogamy is a fake…when I say origin of caste, I mean the origin of the mechanism of endogamy (Ambedkar, Vol 1, p 14).

Ambedkar also unearthed the intersection of gender and caste and theorized how these two feed lives into each other to maintain the status quo. The concept of Brahminical patriarchy is the popular conception of gender studies in India. Ambedkar clearly stated that gender discrimination rests on the graded caste system in the hierarchical Hindu fold. He defined the vertical caste hierarchical system and how patriarchy's impact deepens on Hindu women from the lowest caste ladder. He was perhaps, the first Indian intellectual and reformer who theorized on the implications of multi-layered patriarchy on Dalit women. He hypothesized that Dalit women are stationed at the lowest point of the vertically graded caste system that thrives on the superimposition of compulsive endogamy on exogamy.

Ambedkar also understood women's need to be included in the discussion to change their secondary status. The idea of liberation of women to obliterate gender inequality would remain an incomplete project without their participation. Ambedkar

involved women in all of his programmes and mobilized them to demand equal status with men. For Dalit women, he sought self-dependence at par with their upper-caste counterparts. Therefore, Ambedkarite teachings during the Dalit *Mahila Parishads* (conference of Dalit women) were relevant for all women across the spectrum. He (Ambedkar, Vol 17, part three 2014, p. 282-83) said:

> I made it a point to carry women along with men. That is why you will see that our [c]onferences are always mixed [c]onferences. I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved…learn to be clean: keep free from all vices. Give education to your children. Instil ambition in them. Inculcate on their minds that they are destined to be great. Remove from them all inferiority complex[es]. Don't be in a hurry to marry: marriage is a liability. You should not impose it on your children unless financially they are able to meet to meet the liabilities arising from marriage. Those who marry bear in mind that to have too any children is a crime. That parental duty lies in giving each child a better start than its parents had. Above all, let each girl who marries stand up to her husband, claim to be her husband's friend and equal, and refuse to be his slave. I am sure if you follow this advice you will bring honour and glory to yourself.

In this excerpt, Ambedkar conceptualized a gynocentric society, wherein patriarchal norms are subverted. Indian women should acquire desirable educational aspirations among their children and also function as equal partners. Asserting the importance of women in society, Ambedkar outstripped his contemporaries who were either engaged with nationalistic movements or communal politics. Such speeches at women's conferences by Ambedkar proved his mettle and pro-women rights approach that the true freedom of an individual lies in equal opportunities for all. Amongst many political and social movements initiated by Ambedkar to ensure an egalitarian society for everyone, he theorized extensively on women's position in the Indian social system. His exclusive writings regarding the development of the women in India are - *The Women and the Counter-Revolution, The Hindu code Bill, Castes in India, Manu's Madness or the Brahminic explanation of origin of missed castes, The Change from paternity to maternity: What did the Brahmins wish to gain by, Kali varjya or the Brahmanic art or suspecting the operation of sin without calling it sin, Compulsory matrimony, The Rise and fall of the Hindu women: who was responsible for it?, Progress of the Community is measured by progress of women*. These writings establish Ambedkar as one of the greatest thinkers who sympathized with Hindu women's lowly status in the hierarchical Hindu fold.

Undoubtedly, while beginning with his intellectual rhapsody of venturing into caste and interlinking it with women's position in Hindu religious system, Ambedkar powerfully initiated the deliberation on gender questions, which pointed out the exclusive nature of castes and the Hindu scripture *Manusmirti* as the compounding force behind Indian women's marginalization. Ambedkar wrote *The rise and fall of Hindu Woman: who was responsible for it*? to challenge *Eve's Weekly* (21 January 1950) article that held the Buddha responsible for Indian women's downfall. Ambedkar rebutted the *Eve's Weekly's* claim through his well-researched comparative analysis of the Buddhist texts and then came over to *Manusmriti*, thereby describing it as one the most regressive texts to allocate subservient roles to India women. The argument made by the Ambedkar was so strong that even today, *Manusmiriti's* preachings are taken as problematic and precarious for the woman question. Ambedkar was a thorough scholar; he studied ancient Hindu scriptures and stated that

> At one time a woman was entitled to *Upanayana* (seeking enlightenment or knowledge) is clear from Atharva Veda. From *Srauta Sutras* (Auxillary texts of Samaveda) it is clear that women could repeat the mantras of the Vedas, and that women were taught to read Vedas. Panini Ashtaadhaya bears testimony to the fact that women attended *Gurukul* (college) (Rege, 2013, p 125.)

However, such women were very few in numbers and those who were included in religious ceremonies belonging to the upper-caste/class positions, he had pointed. Highlighting the tyrannical rules arrayed in *Manusmiriti* to regulate Hindu women's conduct, Ambedkar pointed out the machinations of 'Laws of Manu,' which comprise an overbearing precept to control Hindu women as per the men's command. As per the statutes listed in *Manusmriti*, the Hindu women need to fall under the aegis of paternal order. It says, '"(i)n childhood a female must subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her son; a woman must never be independent. She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons" (Buhler, 1886, p 33) 'It also pictures the woman as a seductress with low morals. It says, "the nature of women to seduce men in this (world) …one should not sit in a lonely place with one's mother, sister or daughter" (Ibid, p. 11)

These are the 'Laws of Manu' that have thrust regressive conduct Indian women. Irrespective of the caste position of Indian women, such rules made by Manu are reprehensible. Such rulings become more degenerating as the caste position factored into while reckoning the class position of Indian women.

Ambedkar witnessed the impact of oppressive social conduct and patriarchy on upper-caste Hindu women in general, and the subjugation of Dalit women on multiple levels due to caste, class, and gender variables. He unequivocally opposed patriarchy, and its diverse manifestations and their pernicious bearings on Dalit women. Ambedkar's criticism of Hindu scriptures concerning theorization on upper-caste women and Dalit women in the Indian social system is an exemplary influential work which no one has done as effectively as he did. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon (2008) in the book *We also Made History: Women in Ambedkarite Movement* have collected narratives of Dalit women remembering Ambedkar as an inspirational force. These Dalit scholars did a lot of groundwork, travelled extensively across India to excavate the stories of Dalit women narrating how Ambedkar inspired them. Many Dalit women acknowledge that 'Ambedkar endeavoured to bring Dalit women into public life in a new role, as speakers and chairpersons in public meetings, as movers and seconders of resolutions, and its teachers' (Sonalkar, 2008, p 3). Every meeting for Dalit upliftment would necessarily be followed by a Dalit *Mahila Parishad* [women conference] in which Ambedkar extensively spoke on Dalit women's subjugation and its sanctification by the caste dynamics. The sociological position of Dalit women, as comprehended by Ambedkar, has also been verified by epistemological studies.

The discourse of the erstwhile mainstream upper-caste Indian feminist movements has not only disregarded Ambedkar and his works; they have also rarely accommodated the interests of Dalit women. However, there is some exceptional upper-caste women scholarship such as Sharmila Rege, Uma Chakravarti, and Anupama Rao, who bring the caste angle to resist oppressive patriarchal forces. Taking inspiration from Ambedkar, Dalit intellectuals such as Gopal Guru (1995) theorized on Dalit women's position and tried to locate the essential differences between why 'Dalit Women Talk differently' and what are the concerns that need to be kept in mind while

> 'representing Dalit women, both at the level of theory and practice, has erupted time and again in the discourse on Dalit women. Dalit women justify the case for talking differently on the basis of external factors (non-Dalit forces) homogenising

> the issues of Dalit women and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the Dalits) (Ibid, p. 2548-2550)

As a result, the mainstream upper-caste feminism in India has been countered by Dalit women who have asserted that their marginalization is unlike that of upper caste women because Dalit women are offered lower wages for fieldwork, experience unhygienic working conditions, sexual violence, which is an inherent form of caste atrocity than sexual barbarism. The plight of Dalit women becomes more poignant as they get profiled based on their caste. Dalit movement makes their gendered position more visible than their caste identity. Dalit women, in turn, prioritize their selves as members of the Dalit community first and as women later. Badri Narayan (2011, p. 69) points out that:

> For Dalit women, their Dalit identity overrides other identities and Dalit women see themselves, first and foremost, as Dalits. Being a woman determines the form and intensity of the violence and oppression which they face, primarily, because they are Dalits. The question of iniquitous gender relations within the Dalits communities gets relegated to second place for them, as they feel it is more important to liberate themselves from being looked upon by the upper castes as being socially and culturally inferior.

Therefore, sexual violence against Dalit women is a gendered form of crime and a caste-oriented one. A google search may open up a pandora's box of sexual crimes that resulted in the victims' death. Dalit women are at a juncture where the liminality of their position makes them vulnerable. Barring Ambedkar, none of the Dalit intellectuals have worked extensively for their rights or hypothesized on Dalit women's conditions and their sufferings resulting from graded patriarchy. Sadly, Dalit movements against caste discrimination have not been vocal about Dalit women's rights as they ought to. Although Dalit movements have replicated a host of upper caste normative principles to eliminate Dalit women's exploitation and warrant their safety from upper-caste men, the rules are formulated precisely as per the whims of upper caste patriarchy. Dalit women are also asked to follow strict rules and not work in public spaces to safeguard community reputation. By emulating upper-caste normative regulations and directives, there is an attempt to domesticate Dalit women, who are also now getting increasingly commodified. For instance, to prevent the exploitation of Dalit women at the hands of upper-caste landlord or community, Charu Gupta observes (Gupta, 2012, p.11):

> Chamars [untouchables from Uttar Pradesh region] of Moradabad announced that they would allow their women less liberty of movement. Chamars of Dehradun and Sahranpur started to advocate the wearing of *dhotis* by their women when cooking food and forbade them to visit bazars to sell grass. A Jatia Chamar Sabha at Meerut attended by over 4000 Chamars, passed a resolution to have their females go into *purdah* [veil]

Under the garb of such rulings to safeguard Dalit women's sexual exploitation in a casteist society, they have essentially become oppressive legal, social codifications to curb Dalit women's freedom. An onslaught of such rules on Dalit women to subvert their mobility in the public sphere is not a freedom that a Dalit woman would aspire for. These domineering codifications emulate the upper caste ethos of the *sanskritization* of Dalit women to ape the upper caste patriarchal mechanism. Rege (2013) laments the fact that '[s]ome Dalit feminists also detailed the increasing 'domestication' of wives of Dalit male activists and critically engaged the position of some Dalit men who see women's liberation as being "inauthentic" for Dalit women' (p.17).

Thus, the liberation of Dalit women remains ineffective and insufficient as they do not completely collapse into the category as lower-caste Dalits, or only as women who are equal to the upper caste women socially and culturally. They assert that Dalit women are not as privileged as upper-caste women and need to be contextualized differently. At the same time, Dalit men are criticized for limiting Dalit women's roles in Dalit households and targeted for perpetuating the patriarchy. Dalit women demystify the claims of Dalit intellectuals such as Kancha Ilaiah (2001) that the 'status of women even among the modern Dalit-Bahujan is more equalitarian than that of the Brahminical women' (Ilaiah, 2001, p 115). Such veneering statements from renowned Dalit intellectuals bring about a discomfort in Dalit women, and they counter it by emphasizing their lives in the domesticated space.

Interestingly, Ambedkar recognized the impact of caste patriarchy, caste position, and internal Dalit patriarchy on Dalit women, as he tried to bail them out from the clutches of such oppressive forces. It also seems quite probable that Ambedkar was aware of the romanticization of Dalit women's bodies. Therefore, he vehemently rejected the idea of Dalit women performing in public plays to generate capital for the Dalit upliftment programmes (Sonalkar, 2008). 'Traditionally, *tamasha*[1] was/is a despised and lowly occupation, and women have to struggle constantly to generate income for their family, preserve their honor within'.

Ambedkar disapproved of the commodification of Dalit women's bodies; therefore, they were excluded from public plays, and their part was played by men. He had said, 'I don't want the money raised by making Pawalabai dance' (Ibid, p. 30). In his Mahad Speech in 1927, Ambedkar also urged Dalit women to give up the caste identification markers and inspired them to remain neat and clean in appearance. He motivated Dalit women to relinquish the lower caste traditional way of wearing the sari and donning heavy jewellery to segregate them from upper-caste Brahmin women and mark them as untouchable women (Ibid, 2008). These are only some points that Ambedkar suggested to Dalit women. However, as a disciple of John Dewey, he knew the value of individual freedom, which was equally applicable to women of the upper caste as well. He worked for gender equality and treated women as a person; he 'emphasized, in 1938, that a woman was an individual; therefore, she too must have individual freedom' (Ibid, p.159).

Ambedkar's appeal to Indian women to develop consciousness of their humiliation is an epistemological break. Since he was an intellectual with a vision, he realized that such inspiration might fall flat unless there is a constitutional mechanism to ensure their upliftment. Thus, he laboured incessantly to design a common civil code through the Hindu Code Bill, whereby Indian women were considered an equal individual politically, socially, and constitutionally. In framing the Hindu Code Bill, he proposed a complete overhauling of the Hindu social system. The Bill sought to codify the legal mechanism to address various laws concerning men and women. It sought to alter the order of succession and designed new laws on maintenance, marriage, inter-caste marriages, divorce, adoption, and minors and their guardianship. Emphasizing on women's position and the need to guarantee freedom, equality, and dignity to them, he framed the rules of the abolition of the birth right to property, half share for daughters, conversion of women's limited estate to absolute estate, the abolition of caste in marriage matters, and adoption and the principle of monogamy and divorce (Ambedkar, Vol 14, part one, p 5-11). Ambedkar identified so much with the Indian women's cause that he resigned from Nehru's Cabinet when the conservative members rejected the Bill. 'Introduced in the constituent assembly on April 11 1947, the bill was moved by the select committee on Apr 9th, 1948 which was followed by four

years of debate and remained inconclusive. In his own words "killed and died unused and unsung"' (Elancheran, 2018). Eventually, the Hindu Code Bill was passed in Parliament in 1955 and 1956 as four Hindu Code Bills viz. The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, The Hindu succession Act, 1956, The Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act 1956 and The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act 1956. The upright political position which Ambedkar took for Indian women is unprecedented. He vehemently put his foot down for women's inheritance laws-an idea still accepted as a strange in the Indian social system. Ambedkar wanted to make inheritance laws skewed in favour of Indian women almost a century ago. Since he was, what Gramsci would call, an 'organic' intellectual, he knew women's social upliftment was not possible only by sermons or ideal preaching. Chakravarti, in *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2006), makes a logical intervention that Ambedkar critiqued castes as he was 'able to go much further in their understanding of women's oppression' as he had the epistemic privilege of coming from the marginalized sociological position. Thus, he understood that Indian women's emancipation could not come from change of heart only; political/constitutional exigency was as crucial as the social awareness about women's autonomy.

Upper Caste Women's Reception of Ambedkar on Indian Women Question

In 2016, the Sahitya Akademi[2] organized a national seminar on *Gandhi, Ambedkar, Nehru: Continuities and Discontinuities*. The fourth session on the second day of the seminar was committed to 'Women and Equality,' chaired by Rukmini Bhaya Nair and a panel of contemporary women scholars. It provided an opportunity for me to listen to these three noted Indian women scholars' perspectives and their articulation of Gandhian, Nehruvian and Ambedkarite standpoints on Hindu women in Indian culture. The first two speakers from Dalit background were quite vocal about Ambedkarite influence on Hindu women and seemed quite compelling in their recognition of Ambedkar's works. One of the speakers said 'equality means equal freedom for women too, which entails rights and respect for women at domestic space and in the public spaces.' Besides equal economic and political rights, she said 'equality has to be sought in social and cultural spaces as well. And for all this to happen, we need not only changes in the law but also our mindsets, attitudes, and cultural practices.' She concluded her paper with the words of Babasaheb Ambedkar that equality 'for us is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is battle for freedom. It is the battle of reclamation of human personality' (Keer, 1990, p. 351). Another renowned Dalit speaker also tried to map a similar trajectory of women empowerment in the views of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar vis-à-vis the Hindu women's position. However, I was interested in the third speaker's intention to recognize Ambedkar's contribution towards the upliftment of Indian women as she hailed from an upper-class stratum of Indian Society and had written extensively on gender issues. To my surprise, she spoke only of Jawaharlal Nehru and Gandhi, and omitted Ambedkarite vision on the subject altogether. It is evident that Gandhi has influenced Indian women on the spiritual level, and Nehru, through his egalitarian propaganda, preached the same. However, Ambedkar engineered the legal mechanisms to bring about the required substantial change in the uneven position of Hindu women in Indian society through the constitution. If upper-class women intellectuals do not acknowledge his gender-egalitarian endeavours, what can be expected from the non-academic Indian women? Ambedkar's selective exclusion from women empowerment movements and omission

of his prodigious works regarding partition, economics, and finance is a strategy to reduce his persona as a Dalit icon only.

Indian feminists, until very recently, have failed to acknowledge Ambedkar as an intellectual who theorized on Indian women's position akin to their demands. Reference to Ambedkar often falls prey to his famous persona of being a Dalit leader only or, someone who has worked to emancipate Dalits. The very mention of Ambedkar and his works can prompt anyone to readily sketch him out as a messiah for Dalits. His popularity as a Dalit icon has overshadowed his generic contributions to alter the status quo. It has become almost impossible to extract Ambedkar out of this frame. Since there is not much recognition of Ambedkar's works for women's emancipation, his writings regarding the Indian women's upliftment are not in circulation as potently as his caste-related writings are. The caste-related writings such as *Annihilation of caste* (1935) and *Who Were the Shudras?*, *Untouchables: who were they and why they became untouchables*? are readily available in bookstores or have also been a part of the pamphlet culture of Dalit identity quest.

Although Dalit women have been vocal about Ambedkar's influence on their lives, that remains in a limited scope of education or their lived experiences of atrocities. After having read the Hindu Code Bill, one may say outright that Ambedkar was a radical maverick who fought against the dominant upper-caste social structures and dispensed with women's questions as well. He was a person with multiple visions; one who ventured into all possible fields to eradicate inequality and cement a just society. Ambedkar's writings' systematic neglect is a moral assault on epistemic knowledge and ignorance towards creating a comprehensive Indian academic view. Disregarding Ambedkar's works on Indian women becomes increasingly problematic when the so-called feminist writers do not acknowledge him as one of the prominent protagonists in comparison to Gandhi Gandhi and Jawahar Lal Nehru in the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, Ambedkar is remembered mainly for championing the untouchables' cause, critiquing the hierarchal caste system, and faintly considered a feminist. Ambedkar's progressive approach to bringing about essential changes in women's position in India is commendable because without providing a concrete solution to gender inequality, the upliftment of women would have remained a theoretical construct. Considering Ambedkar's works and political provisions for Indian women, Ambedkar unarguably qualifies as the first feminist of independent India who worked extensively for the rights of both upper-caste women and Dalit women.

Conclusion

Many Indian intellectuals often take pride in asserting that Indian women's position was as high as men during the Vedic age. The deterioration in their situation is attributed to Manu's regressive codifications in the Hindu religious law book *Manusmirti* in the post Vedic period and later, to curtail their freedom in the wake of Muslim invasions to protect their honour. These rules became so stringent that Hindu women were burnt alive on their husbands' funeral pyre. *Purdah* (veil) system, child marriage, enforced widowhood are/were some of the inhumane practices sanctioned by the religion. However, women were/are not a homogenous category. The positions of women are also determined by the caste-groups they belong to.

The most pathetic situation was/is of the women belonging to lower caste groups or Dalits. They have always remained obscure in mainstream Indian feminism. While not many upper caste intellectuals and historians have looked deep into their

absence from literature, Uma Chakravarti focuses on their omission and in the quest exploded the myth of golden age of Indian women in Vedic period. The references and examples of prominent women intellectuals of Vedic Age, she argues, hailed from the upper echelons of the society. The modern day mainstream feminists also barring a few have ignored the issues of Dalit women. They also tend to ignore Ambedkar's contribution to their cause as a crusader against patriarchy. The legal provisions Ambedkar made for women are mainly beneficial to the upper class/caste women, as inheritance laws could only be practised for wealthy women. Dalit women mostly come from lower economic backgrounds. Divorce law is also most beneficial to upper class/caste women, as in Dalit communities, women are not bound to remain widows and allowed remarriage. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that although there had been many reformist movements in the nineteenth century to ameliorate the plight of Indian women; however, no one attempted to understand the root cause of the oppressive state of Indian women sanctioned by the Hindu religious scriptures such as *Manusmriti*. Ambedkar conducted a vital study in this regard in his very first essay, *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development,* and observed that strict endogamy over exogamy was primarily to control and curtail the freedom of women. Such theorization paves the way to understand the concept of a graded patriarchal system in which caste patriarchy is paramount, and it recognises sexual exploitation of Dalit women. The remedy to bring about change in Indian women's position, as suggested by Ambedkar, lies in legal mechanism and constitutional provisions and not mere lip service. Attaching jurisprudence to Indian women's rights is unique to Ambedkar and remains unparalleled in the history of the nation. Ambedkar was an extraordinary intellectual and a feminist who tried to ensure equal status for Indian women from all walks of life.

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Endnotes

1 Traditional form of Marathi theatre

2 India's state-funded organization for promotion of literature

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Leisure, Festival, Revolution: Ambedkarite Productions of Space

Thomas Crowley[1]

Abstract

This article analyzes the town of Mahad in the state of Maharashtra, using it as a lens to examine protests and commemorations that are inseparable from Ambedkarite and Neo-Buddhist transformations of space. A key site of anti-caste struggle, Mahad witnessed two major protests led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in 1927: the claiming of water from *Chavdar Tale*, a tank located in a upper caste neighbourhood; and the burning of the *Manusmriti*. These events are commemorated every year with large-scale festivities. The article analyzes the ways that these protests and festivities have worked to produce a distinctly Ambedkarite space, one that is radically counterposed to hierarchical, Brahminical productions of space. Exploring the writings of Ambedkar and more recent Ambedkarite scholars, and putting these texts into dialogue with the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre, the article contributes to a growing international literature on the spatiality of caste. The Navayana Buddhism pioneered by Ambedkar has been analyzed in terms of its ideology, its pragmatism, and its politics, but rarely in terms of its spatiality. Drawing on Lefebvre helps flesh out this spatial analysis while a serious engagement with neo-Buddhist practices helps to expand, critique and globalize some of Lefebvre's key claims.

Keywords

Ambedkar, Lefebvre, Mahad, neo-Buddhism, festival, revolution

Introduction

The market town of Mahad sits on a small plateau in the foothills of the Sahyadri mountains in the western Indian state of Maharasthra. During the monsoon, heavy

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rains wash down the hills and seep into the ground, recharging the ponds and tanks that were historically the main water supplies for the town but are now used primarily for leisure and recreation. The most famous of these water bodies is *Chavdar Tale*, located just north of the main market road, surrounded on all sides by upper-caste households. This site is now recognized as foundational to the modern anti-caste struggle, memorialized for the day in 1927 when Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and thousands of other Dalits drank water from it in defiance of caste strictures. Every year on March 20, thousands of visitors – or perhaps more accurately, pilgrims (cf. Zelliot, 2011) – descend on Mahad to commemorate that transformative day.

This article is an exploration of Chavdar Tale's shifting political and affective geographies, and of the complex links between geography and religion. In the Ambedkarite calendar, March 20 is known as *Kranti Din* –the Day of Revolution. As Soumyabratta Choudhury (2018) has argued, the Mahad satyagraha, with its emphasis on the equality of all humans, was a revolutionary event of global importance that placed Ambedkar in a line of radical egalitarian thinkers spanning from ancient Greece to the present day. And yet today, the space around Chavdar Tale seems most notable for its everydayness, its ordinary use by people of all castes in what remains a caste Hindu-dominated neighbourhood. Is Chavdar Tale still, then, revolutionary? Or have such spaces become commercialized, commoditized, and sanitized, as some critics have argued? (cf. Rege, 2008).

The article approaches these questions by turning to the speeches and writings of Ambedkar and more recent Ambedkarite scholars, and putting these texts into dialogue with the spatial theories of the French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre. A prolific author, who produced pioneering analyses of a wide range of contemporary processes, from capitalism's colonization of everyday life (Lefebvre, 2014), to the increasing centrality of urbanization (Lefebvre, 2003b), Lefebvre has been particularly influential in elaborating a critical analysis of space and its role in both reproducing and contesting social hierarchies. In his book *The Production of Space* (1991) and other works, Lefebvre theorizes space not as a passive backdrop to historical events but as an actively-produced, hotly-contested, contradiction-riven realm of thought, praxis, and everyday experience.

Such theorizations resonate with the small but growing body of literature on the spatiality of caste (Rege, 2008; Guru, 2012; Chairez-Garza, 2014; Lee, 2017; Gorringe, 2018). This literature has sought to recover neglected spatial elements of Ambedkarite thought and practice, and to explore how the spaces of caste can be theorized in a more explicit way. For instance, Sharmila Rege (2008, p. 17) notes:

> Space and spatial strategies of appropriation, deployment and control have been of crucial significance in maintaining hierarchical relations of caste. The Ambedkarite movement has contested this through claiming the right to public water resources, temples, and educational centres by dropping negative rights to spaces such as 'watan' and denouncing the 'space' within Hinduism.

Several theorists of caste have been drawn to Lefebvre (1991) because his ideas help conceptualize how 'every society… produces a space, its own space' (p. 31); further, in hierarchical societies, the production of space inevitably involves the creation of centers and peripheries – evidenced, in the Indian context, by the literal spatial marginality of Dalit *bastis or* colonies, typically situated outside village limits or on marginal urban land.

Guru (2012), for instance, appreciates Lefebvre's argument that space is often actively produced with the goal of 'controlling people in finite, enclosed and divided sites' (p. 78). Along similar lines, Lee (2017) invokes Lefebvre's argument that ideologies are ineffective unless they are inscribed in particular spaces, through particular spatial practices (p. 470), while Gorringe (2018) draws on similar passages in Lefebvre to suggest that such dominant ideologies are also resisted through spatial practices.

These invocations of Lefebvre have, for the most part, remained fairly general, relying on his broad arguments about the importance of space for the (always contested) reproduction of social relations. In contributing to this emerging conversation, I am particularly interested in Lefebvre's specific reflections on leisure and the revolutionary potential of the festival. While Lefebvre's writings on these themes may illuminate particular aspects of Mahad's history and its present, I suggest that the unfolding events in Mahad also enable us to question some of Lefebvre's more linear and teleological assumptions and to thus expand his theories in important ways. Specifically, Ambedkarite spaces, when codified as sacred, complicate Lefebvre's suggestions about the withering away of religious space, while opening up new possibilities for transformative politics.

In the following sections, I begin with the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927, exploring why it is accorded such significance in the Ambedkarite tradition, how it resonates with previous revolutionary events, and what a Lefebvrian perspective might contribute to our analysis. I then turn to more recent history, including the use of Chavdar Tale for everyday leisure and for more spectacular bi-annual events, which both support and subvert Lefebvre's theorizations and expectations regarding the evolution of spatial politics. Finally, I reflect on what it might take for the festive nature of the space to more fully fulfill its role as a site of revolution.

An Anti-Caste Revolution?

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre (1991) offers several suggestive remarks about the creation of centers and peripheries, which have great salience for the analysis of Mahad. Lefebvre argues that 'Each period, each mode of production, each particular society has engendered (produced) its own centrality'; however, within particular societies or even particular urban spaces, 'centrality is movable' (p. 332). Further, centers are not produced *ex nihilo* but are built upon previous complexly-intertwined inscriptions upon space. Lefebvre famously compares space to a flaky pastry, in which 'social spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another' (p. 86).

Certainly, Mahad – in 1927, and in the present day – is a particularly concentrated point of intertwined social spaces. For centuries before the satyagraha, Mahad was an urban centre in its own right, as a market town for its surrounding hinterland and (until recently) as a port on the Savitri River, connecting the interiors of Maharashtra to the Arabian Sea. But in the beginning of nineteenth century, Mahad was increasingly pulled into the orbit of the expanding, industrializing city of Bombay (now Mumbai).

Mahad emerged as a revolutionary hub in the 1920s because of such larger relations. As Gail Omvedt (1994) has asserted, Bombay Presidency was the 'most industrialized and the most politically and sociologically vigorous of provinces of British India' (p. 139). In the Presidency, the 'vigorous village economy linked to a

turbulent industrial metropolis was a unique configuration… Such linkages provided the main social foundation for the broad democratic movements of Maharashtra' (p. 141). Flows of migrants to Bombay from Mahad and surrounding areas led to an exchange, not just of money and jobs, but also of activism, revolutionary ideas, and strategies for political organization.

The Konkan region surrounding Mahad had a history of anti-caste activism before the satyagraha, in part due to the presence of Dalits who had served in the British military and thus, had accessed some degree of social mobility (cf. Omvedt, 2011, p. 7). Several anti-caste leaders from this region organized the March 1927 event and convinced Ambedkar (whose ancestral village was in the Konkan, and who by then was based in Bombay) to preside. Initially, the organizers of this programme were not planning for revolutionary action. Their aims were more modest: to convene a meeting of activists and politically conscious Dalits in Kolaba district (present-day Raigad district). Organizers were energized by the turnout – around three thousand people came from around the district – and, on the penultimate night of the conference, they began discussing the possibility of drinking from Chavdar Tale as a way to end the event on assertive note.

Conference attendees found out about this plan only as the final speeches were ending, and one of Ambedkar's main allies proposed that the assembled crowd march to Chavdar Tale and drink its water. As Ambedkar (1989, p. 249-250) himself narrates:

> The Hindus who had exhorted them to be bold and begin fearlessly to exercise their rights, instantly realized that this was a bombshell and immediately ran away. But the effect upon the untouchables was very different. They were electrified by this call to arms. To a man they rose and the body of 2,500 untouchables led by me and my co-workers marched in a procession through the main streets. The news spread like wild fire while crowds thronged the streets.

After marching through the central streets of Mahad, Ambedkar and thousands of others drank water from Chavdar Tale. The organizers then returned to their guest house and the conference participants begin to arrange for their journeys back home. During this lull, a priest from a nearby Hindu temple started spreading rumors that the conference attendees were going to try to enter the temple. A group of upper-caste men gathered and began beating up the conference attendees with sticks. Twenty were seriously injured, and dozens more were wounded. Only the intervention of Ambedkar, with grudging help from local law enforcement, brought the violence to an end. The success of the initial action was thus clouded by the violence that followed.

Ambedkar returned to Bombay and began to consider next steps. After consulting with other anti-caste leaders, he decided to launch a satyagraha demanding that 'untouchables' have the right to drink from Chavdar Tale (which by this time should have been their legal right, given a resolution in the Bombay Assembly opening publicly-funded infrastructure to all individuals).

The satyagraha culminated in a December gathering in Mahad, attended by roughly ten thousand people. By this point, Ambedkar had recognized the potentially revolutionary significance of the event, and began to ascribe more importance to the March conference and the continuing fight to drink water from Chavdar Tale. In a speech on December 25, Ambedkar compared the Mahadsatyagraha to the French Revolution, and specifically to the formation of the National Assembly in June 1789. Ambedkar argued that, just as that Assembly dissolved the system of three hierarchical

'Estates' in France, the Mahad satyagraha sought no less than dissolving India's hierarchies, in the form of the varnashrama system (Teltumbde, 2016, p. 207-8).

Following this speech, Ambedkar joined some of his supporters in burning pages from the *Manusmriti*. This was more than just a book burning; the group staged an exuberant mock cremation for the legal text, with 'untouchable' priests and holy men brought on stage to perform funeral rites for the regressive tome. Specifically, Ambedkar and his co-organizers read out and burned the parts of the text that related to the social exclusion of women and lower-caste groups, and the violent punishments prescribed for those who transgress orthodox bounds of caste and sex.

But the satyagraha had a somewhat anti-climactic end. After intervention by the courts and imperial administration, Ambedkar and his colleagues decided to call off the planned march to Chavdar Tale, and instead to pursue the case through the legal system. The case dragged along for much of the next decade, eventually making its way to the Bombay High Court. After many appeals and delays, it was finally decided in Ambedkar's favour in March 1937.

However, by this time, Ambedkar had already become disillusioned with the case. A year and half earlier, on October 12, 1935, he had suggested that it was time to end to the Mahad satyagraha, as well as the ongoing Kalaram satyagraha for temple entry, since they had failed to budge caste-Hindu public opinion (cf Omvedt, 2004/2013, p. 106). The very next day, he gave his famous speech at Yeola, arguing that the only real option for Dalits was conversion, declaring 'I will not die a Hindu'. The resolution passed at the Yeola conference emphasizes the connection between the intransigence of caste Hindus, the decision to end the 'satyagraha at the Kalaram Temple in Nasik and at Chowdar Tank in Mahad' and the conclusion that Dalits should make their 'own society independent of the so-called touchable class' (Zelliot, 2004, p. 149-150).

Revolutionary Antecedents of Mahad

Given the way that the protest petered out, scholars like Anand Teltumbde (2016) have questioned how apt it is to compare it to the national-scale (not to mention successful) French Revolution. Teltumbde's larger critique is useful for situating the limits of the Mahad satyagraha, but it is also possible to read Ambedkar's speech less literally. In his speech, Ambedkar invoked the French Revolution in a particularly rhetorical way – to emphasize the norms of liberty, equality, and fraternity – rather than making a detailed or literal comparison to the historical events of Europe in the late eighteenth century.

This is not to say, however, that historical comparisons of revolutionary events are not fruitful. Especially if one is attentive to the different conjunctures in which they occur, a comparison of such events has the potential of illuminating important elements of their unfolding, their successes, their failures, and their legacies. Again, Lefebvre provides one potential lens for doing so, given his attention to the spatiality of revolutions. Specifically, Lefebvre's in-depth analysis of the Paris Commune of 1871 provides fertile grounds for 'relational comparison' (cf. Hart, 2016) with the Mahad Satyagraha. The Commune, a radically egalitarian body that governed France's capital for less than two months before being brutally repressed, has been a touchstone for theorists and practitioners of radical democracy, socialism and anarchism, from those alive at the time, including Marx and Kropotkin, to later theorists like

Lefebvre. Strikingly, some participants in the Commune, notably the socialist leader Benoît Malon, saw themselves as part of a global struggle for freedom that included events like the 1857 Indian uprising against British rule (cf. Ross, 2015, p. 33).

Continuing this global conversation, we can understand both Paris in 1871 and Mahad in 1927 as urban revolutions. Both strove to reconfigure the sedimented hierarchies of urban spaces as part of larger revolutionary projects. In his analysis of the Paris Commune, Lefebvre brings particular attention to the way in which the communards made claims to centrality – not just politically, but spatially. Lefebvre later theorized such claims under the guise of the 'right to the city.' As he wrote, 'The right to the city is thus the right to *be*—to be an integral part of the city… The right to the city is a right to produce that centrality—the right not to be marginal' (Mitchell & Villanueva, 2010, p. 671; emphasis Lefebvre's).

For Lefebvre, the Paris Commune must be situated in the urban context of Second Empire France, when Baron Haussman demolished centrally-located working-class neighbourhoods in order to make way for his famous boulevards and other urban renewal projects. Lefebvre sees the Paris Commune as a strategy of the expelled working classes, who take advantage of the political chaos of the Franco-Prussian wars to return to the Parisian city centre, and enact a radical, creative expansion of their claims to spatial and political centrality.

Seen in this framework, Dalits drinking from Chavdar Tale can be seen, not as a return to centrality, but something perhaps even more radical: a bold new claim to centrality, defying a caste system that had relegated 'untouchables' to the literal and symbolic margins for more than a millennium. In an article reflecting on the Mahad experience, Ambedkar (1989, p. 248) highlights the centrality of Chavdar Tale, noting:

> Mahad is a business centre… The Untouchables either for purposes of doing their shopping and also for the purpose of their duty as village servants had to come to Mahad… The Chawdar tank was the only public tank from which an outsider could get water.

The right to drink water (both symbolically and literally central to human existence) is thus connected to the ability to access water in a central business location; this gives a particular spatial resonance to Ambedkar's well-known claim that the Mahad satyagraha's purpose was 'to establish that we are also human beings like others'(Teltumbde, 2016, p. 207).

Though Dalits' claim to centrality in Mahad in March 1927 was even shorter-lived than the Paris Commune, it is also rightly looked up on as a radical break from the past, in part because of its spatial boldness – as Ambedkar noted, even the *savarnas* (so-called 'upper' castes) who initially supported the March programme ran away when they heard about the radical direct action being planned. Lefebvre's reflections on the spirit of the Paris Commune could just as easily describe the impromptu decision to drink from Chavdar Tale, and the electrifying effect it had on the assembled crowd: it showed 'a basic will to change the world and life as it is, and things as they are, a spontaneity conveying the highest thought, a total revolutionary project' (Lefebvre, 2003a, p. 189).

If we include the December 25, 1927 burning of the *Manusmriti* as part of a longer wave of activism in Mahad, then even more parallels emerge between Mahad in 1927 and Paris in 1871. In both cases, the destruction of symbols of the old was seen as a key act in laying the ground for the new. The communards targeted several structures built by Haussman, including the prefecture of police. As cultural critic Gavin

Grindon notes, Lefebvre does not see the 'destructive' acts of the Paris Commune as merely vandalism. Rather, 'Against Haussmann's urbanism, [Lefebvre] recalls [this destruction] as a positive creative act, the necessary first stage of revolutionary urbanism'(Grindon, 2013, p. 215). In a similar way, the burning of the *Manusmriti* was both subversive and creative, a light-hearted, mocking critique of caste law, and an invitation to create new ways of living.

In both cases, too, there is an intertwined critique of religion and gender, or rather the way that particular religious doctrines are employed in the service of patriarchal practices. Kristin Ross (2015) has emphasized both the anti-clerical flavour of the Paris Commune and its liberatory gender politics – one of the first steps of the Commune was to establish a Women's Union. Similarly, burning the *Manusmriti* was a skewering of caste's religious justifications, as well as its gender hierarchies. Even today, some Ambedkarite women's organizations celebrate December 25 as *Mahila Mukti Diwas* (Women's Liberation Day). As both historical events show, spatial politics are inextricably entwined with ideologies of both religion and gender, and all of these threads must be followed in tracing the potential implication of liberatory movements.

The immediate result of both these events, however, was not liberation, but violent repression – the savarna attack on Dalits, and the much larger bloodshed of the Paris Commune in which the French army brutally killed thousands of communards. The different scales of the violence also reflect the different scales of the events and the spatial configurations that underlay both their emergence and their repression. The Paris Commune was only possible because of the power vacuum caused by the Franco-Prussian War. And once the Commune formed, it existed in a more or less constant state of siege. It was a centralized urban space cut off from an indifferent or even hostile countryside, with the French state consciously closing off all points of communication between town and country. This spatial vulnerability – alongside the perceived threat of the Commune on a continent-wide scale – led to its brutal extermination, as the Prussian state released French prisoners of war for the express purpose of crushing the Commune (cf. Marx, 1933).

The geography of Dalit struggle, on the other hand, was much more variegated, as Dalits faced oppressive social and spacial structures in villages, small towns and big cities alike. Despite the later centrality of Bombay to Dalit activism, anti-caste organizing was not confined to the metropolis. Early twentieth century activism, often led by military pensioners, took place mostly in villages and smaller towns, including Mahad; the 1927 Mahad satyagraha was something of a turning point, since much of its organizational energy came from Bombay.

In short, the movement had both allies and enemies at multiple scales. Negotiation between these scales allowed events like the Mahad satyagraha to emerge, but the saturation of caste hierarchies at multiple scales also provoked violent backlash to the satyagraha – not just at the event itself, but with the threat of savarna economic boycotts when the Dalit protesters returned to their places of residence, including potential seizure of their lands (cf. Rao, 2009, p. 79). The violence of savarna reaction led Ambedkar to term it a 'religious war' (Rao, 2009, p. 84). But, to use Gramscian terms, this was more a war of position (made up of many small, 'molecular' aggressions and assertions, dispersed over multiple spaces and times) than the concerted war of manoeuvre that ended the Paris Commune (cf. Gramsci, 1971, p. 110).

Events and Aftermaths

Ambedkar's 1935 decision to end the satyagraha and advocate conversion suggests a certain disillusionment with the struggle of Mahad, spurred by his recognition of the intransigence of savarna socio-spatial claims to superiority. The Commune's bloody end too suggests the brutal intransigence of the European bourgeoisie. Arguably, capitalism, casteism, and patriarchy have only become more entrenched since the repression of these two moments of revolutionary festivity. What then happens after the 'failure' of a movement? Or rather, what does it mean to see the aftermath of these events as more than just a failure? Here, I am inspired by Kristin Ross' (2015) reflections on the afterlives of the Paris Commune, or what she terms 'not the memory of the event or its legacy… but its *prolongation*, every bit as vital to the event's logic'(p. 6).

How has the Mahad satyagraha been prolonged? One could argue that the initial announcement of conversion – and Ambedkar's decades-long search for an appropriate conversion strategy – emerged in part out of his reflections on Mahad and the reaction the satyagraha provoked. Further, in the Mahad protests, one can detect the seeds of arguments Ambedkar would make in later works, particularly in his famous undelivered speech, *Annihilation of Caste*.

In this work, Ambedkar draws his argument to a close by making a distinction between religions based on principle and religions based on rule. Referencing the Vedas and the Smritis (with *Manusmriti* not named, but clearly implicated in the latter category), Ambedkar (1979a) states, 'What is called Religion by the Hindus is nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibitions. Religion, in the sense of spiritual principles, truly universal… is not to be found in them.' He continues: 'To put it in plain language, what the Hindus call religion is really law or at best legalized class-ethics. Frankly, I refuse to call this code of ordinances, as Religion' (p. 75).

Ambedkar's earlier burning of the *Manusmriti* is a foreshadowing of this argument. As a practical enactment of his rejection of religion-as-rule, Ambedkar's mock-cremation ceremony for the text highlights the gendered injustices of religious law – a theme that extends back to Ambedkar's (1979b) earliest writings on caste, which emphasize how caste endogamy is maintained by controlling women's sexuality. The protest also underlined the explicit and implicit ways that legal orders buttress casteist productions of space.

It is notable that Ambedkar wrote *Annihilation of Caste* in 1936, just a year after calling off the Mahad satyagraha and calling for conversion, and months before the Mahad case was finally decided by the Bombay High Court. Following this case in court over the course of a decade, Ambedkar would have witnessed the strategy of his savarna opponents, who claimed that Chavdar Tale was akin to private property because it abutted a temple, and hence was the domain of the upper castes. As Rao (2009) notes, 'The distinction between, and the conflation of, sacred and civic space was creatively mobilized by caste Hindu plaintiffs'(p. 84). It is clear, then, that Ambedkar's fight against religion-as-rule does not apply only to texts like the *Manusmriti*, but to his contemporaries' attempts to meld savarna religious sensibilities and British-style property law.

Thus Ambedkar's reflections on the continuing struggle in Mahad likely informed his arguments in *Annihilation of Caste* and his calls for conversion out of Hinduism, which finally culminated in his conversion to Buddhism in 1956, months before his death. The reverberations of this action carry into the present day, and have shaped the continuing political and religious significance of Chavdar Tale.

Commemorating Kranti Din

In one of her last publications, capping a career of pioneering scholarship on the Ambedkarite movement, Eleanor Zelliot (2011) draws our attention to the Ambedkarite pilgrimage circuit that emerged in the decades after Ambedkar's death. Zelliot emphasizes the importance of mass gatherings with fixed dates over the course of the calendar year, as a way of commemorating, renewing, and strengthening the Ambedkarite movement. While Zelliot focuses on three pilgrimage sites, Rege (2008) gives a fuller accounting, listing 'December 6 at *Chaitya bhoomi* in Mumbai, October 14 at *Diksha bhoomi* in Nagpur, January 1, at *Kranti Stambh* in Bhima Koregaon, and March 20 and December 25 in Mahad'(p. 16).

The title of Zelliot's article, 'Connected People,' is a nod to Anne Feldhaus' book *Connected places: Region, pilgrimage and geographical imagination in India* (2003), which traces the sacred geographies of various Hindu pilgrimages in Maharashtra. Zelliot's title implies that the Ambedkarite movement is creating an alternative geography, one that crucially inscribes neo-Buddhist symbols and activities on the broader landscape. Zelliot suggests that the gatherings at Nagpur are the largest – the one commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism drew roughly one million people – but all the gatherings have neo-Buddhist overtones, with monks and nuns singing Pali chants, and a wide availability of Buddhist literature.

While some scholars (cf. Teltumbde, 2018) have questioned the focus on Ambedkar icons and religious symbolism at the expense of more material issues, others have argued that the symbolic is not necessarily divorced from the material, and that particular Ambedkarite symbols are also part of larger spatial struggles. As Gorringe (2018) asserts, 'The icon of Ambedkar is open to various uses and interpretations. It is neither inherently radical nor necessarily an empty symbol. Its import, in sum, rests on the meanings that it is made to bear and how it is presented'(p. 337). Gorringe's conclusion resonates with the findings of other scholars (for instance, Tartakov, 1990; Jaoul, 2006; and Jain, 2014), all of whom underscore the important spatial politics of Ambedkarite iconography; Jain (2014) particularly emphasizes the materiality of Ambedkarite statuary and monuments in a way that troubles an easy symbolic-material divide.

Certainly, the danger of appropriating Ambedkar should not be brushed aside, especially given the current push by right-wing nationalist forces to use Ambedkar to back a project which Ambedkar himself vehemently opposed: Hindu Raj. But an analysis of the continuing salience of Mahad can suggest the tensions and ambiguities in the popularity of Ambedkarite symbols and spaces.

There were small commemorative gatherings in Mahad even during Ambedkar's lifetime, but large-scale annual celebrations of the Mahad satyagraha began in earnest on the event's fiftieth anniversary, March 1977. As Teltumbde (2018) argues, it was around this time that Prakash Ambedkar emerged as a figure who challenged the political establishment. The powerful sugar baron Sharad Pawar – soon to become Chief Minister of Maharashtra – began to prop up Ramdas Athawale as a way to divide the Dalit movement and channel Ambedkarite energies in a less threatening direction. Athawale began to take a major role in organizing the yearly celebrations in Mahad, and Sharad Pawar's government helped to fund a major renovation of Chavdar Tale, which included draining part of the tank to make room for a park and a function hall.

This space, however, has a life of its own, which has developed over the years, and which cannot be reduced to Pawar's calculating intentions. The park around Chavdar Tale is a bustling place that combines aspects of leisure, sociality, and the sacred. Lovers amble around the park's lawn. Kids run around shrieking while their parents follow behind them at a leisurely pace. Groups of old men sit huddled together. Teenagers pose with each other and take selfies.

But in this everyday space, the marks of Ambedkar and of neo-Buddhism are clearly visible. At one of the main entrances, there is a decorative gateway that bears a remarkable resemblance to the gate at the ancient Buddhist stupa in Sanchi – a design also replicated in the neo-Buddhist Dikshabhoomi in Nagpur. The gateway is adorned with elephants and topped with an Ashoka Chakra (Figure 1). At the end of the park is an entrance to a walkway that leads to the centre of the pond. Here, on a diamond-shaped platform, is a statue of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his signature suit and tie (Figure 2). Visitors must take off their shoes when entering the walkway, as if entering a temple, while the park's watchman keeps a careful eye on those who come and go.

Figure 1: Stupa-like gate at the entrance to the Chavdar Tale park

Given the centrality of leisure in present-day uses of the Chavdar Tale park, it may be useful here to turn to Lefebvre's reflections on leisure. Just as Teltumbde warns of the dangers of appropriating Ambedkar, Lefebvre highlights the dangers of leisure as a means of co-option. He understands 'the case against leisure' well; that 'leisure is as alienated and alienating as labour; as much an agent of co-optation as it is itself co-opted; and both an assimilative and an assimilated part of the 'system' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 383). That is, the 'system' allows us leisure so that we can return to work and serve the system better, refreshed. But Lefebvre does not stop on this pessimistic note. For him, the space of leisure ' is the very epitome of contradictory space' (p. 385).

No matter how planned it is, it allows the body – disciplined by the division of labour and the monotony of the work routine – to reassert itself. Hence, concludes Lefebvre (Ibid p.385):

Figure 2: Ambedkar looms over visitors to Chavdar Tale

> The space of leisure *tends* – but it is no more than a tendency, a tension, a transgression of 'users' in search of a way forward – to surmount divisions: the division between social and mental, the division between sensory and intellectual, and also the division between the everyday and the out-of-the-ordinary (festival).

This provocative conclusion can be connected in several ways to the park abutting Chavdar Tale. Especially if one includes the adjoining function hall as part of the leisure area, the space certainly bridges the divides Lefebvre mentions – as kids run around the park, and lovers sit close together on the benches, activists meet inside the hall to plan upcoming protests and discuss the day's news. Political chatter spills out of the hall too, animating the conversations of the older men lounging and smoking *bidis*.

The space, with its strong Ambedkarite presence, bridges other divides as well, most notably caste divides. Though explicit residential segregation has lessened to some extent in Mahad, it still – like most Indian towns – bears strong traces of its casteist residential history, with upper castes more likely to live near the center of town, and hence to Chavdar Tale. The park, with its Buddhist gateway and Ambedkar statue, is clearly marked as a space that is friendly to Dalits, and many of the park regulars are fixtures from Ambedkarite political parties and social groups. But it is not an exclusively Dalit park – townspeople from across castes make use of its green space, helping to bridge longstanding social and spatial divisions.

Perhaps Lefebvre's most suggestive argument, though, is that the space of leisure can help undermine 'the division between the everyday and the… festival.' He seems to be referring to the festive nature of leisure spaces, and the way that they can – at least for a time – overturn the hierarchies and rigidities that rule our life. In the case of Chavdar Tale, though, the connection between the mundane and the spectacular is much more literal and direct: the everyday space of the park is transformed every March 20 and December 25 into a massive festival, and its connection to the attempted anti-caste revolution is renewed and reinvigorated.

The Ambedkarite Festival, Through and Beyond Lefebvre

The festival-as-revolution is a key figure in Lefebvre's thoughts, a concept that evolved with his writings on culture, politics and space from 1924 to 1968, skillfully summarized by Grindon (2013), who synthesizes many of Lefebvre's writings that are not yet available in English. Lefebvre was inspired by urban uprisings like the Paris Commune and the student- and worker-led protests, occupations and strikes that engulfed Paris and other parts of France in 1968, as well as by folk festivals like the ones he observed during his childhood in rural France. In addition to their claims of centrality, and their (temporary) overturning social hierarchies, festivals were also inspiring sites of cultural production.

Lefebvre fastidiously documented the folk festivals and cultural celebrations that took place during the Paris Commune, and included this as an appendix of his book-length study of the Commune. He also distanced himself from those, on the Left and Right alike, who saw the communards as essentially lumpen. Grindon (2013) describes this as 'Lefebvre's valourizing recognition of social movements as having discrete cultures and values, rather than being the unruly absence of culture'(p. 215). Thus Lefebvre suggests that the literal claim to (spatial) centrality in 'festivals' like the Paris Commune are accompanied by cultural claims to visibility and participation.

These observations about subaltern festivities find resonance in the scholarship of Sharmila Rege, perhaps the most attentive English-language chronicler of Ambedkarite festivals. In her popular and academic writings, she has worked to overturn the complacent middle-class judgment that infused much English-language writing on Ambedkarite festivities. Like Lefebvre, she argues that the revelers she has chronicled did not represent 'the unruly absence of culture,' but a defiant and well-developed counter-culture.

As Rege (2008) notes, 'The usual middle class 'common sense' of the annual Ambedkarite gatherings is that these events are irrational/emotional and cause civic problems related to traffic and hygiene' (p. 16). Against this, Rege shows that the festivals have 'become a mode in which critical memory and history of the Dalit movement is reiterated, reinterpreted, and reindexed'(p. 16). Like the Paris Commune, these festivals re-imagine both the practicalities of everyday life and their symbolic expression.

Against the common middle-class charge that these festivals have just become crassly commercial, Rege suggests that the varied commerce at these events – from the selling of Buddhist literature to the hawking of food and to advertising of Ambedkarite music cassettes alongside raucous performances – are indicative of 'cooperative building efforts among Dalit communities'(p. 17). She is particularly sensitive to the ways in which Ambedkarite counter-publics spread through innovative, playful, and widely-distributed cultural forms.

In a way, this reads like an extension or confirmation of Lefebvre's (1991) assertion that we must embrace the 'vast store of non-formal knowledge embedded in poetry, music, dance and theatre'(p. 407). However, Rege's documentation and explanation of Ambedkarite cultural practices also pushes Lefebvre's theories, and suggests some of its limits.

To elaborate this point, it is necessary to delve into Lefebvre's theorization of space. Despite Lefebvre's (1991) sensitivity to the complex layering of space – the way, for instance, that 'nothing disappears completely' from social space, but 'continues to underpin what follows'(p. 229) – his overall argument in *The Production of Space* at times slips into Hegelian teleology, with history moving through the production of different spaces with an implausible dialectical neatness.

He speaks of 'the great dialectical movements that traverse the world-as-totality and help define it' (p. 218), and these three moments are linked to broad historical developments: first, a broadly agricultural 'moment,' in which production is 'still respectful of nature' and 'distills the sacredness of elements of it into religious… edifices'; second, an industrial moment, centred on accumulation, marked by abstractions, signs, and the sundering of space from time; and third, projected into the future, a moment of space and time, and of production and nature, reunited (p. 218).

This maps onto another dialectical movement that Lefebvre traces: from absolute space to abstract space, and finally (through transcending the contradictions of abstract space) to differential space. Lefebvre describes absolute space in terms of the religious or the sacred, the way that 'a part of [agro-pastoral] space is assigned a new role, and henceforth appears as transcendent, as sacred (i.e. inhabited by divine

forces), as magical and cosmic'(p. 234). Such spaces often become the organic centre of emerging societies. But, Lefebvre suggests that in the broad historical sweep of time such spaces are all but swallowed up by the rationalizing logic of abstract space, the space of quantity, efficiency, capital. However, like capitalism as a whole, abstract space is riven with contradictions; we have already seen Lefebvre referring to spaces of leisure under capitalism as profoundly contradictory. These contradictions can give us glimpses of what Lefebvre calls 'differential space,' which will accentuate the positive differences that abstract space seeks to paper over, while at the same time restoring 'unity to what abstract space breaks up'(p. 52).

The suggestion, then, is that absolute space is superseded by abstract space, which in turn is superseded by differential space. Though, by Lefebvre's own admission, traces or layers of previous spaces remain, Lefebvre's neat account leaves little room for the re-emergence or re-valorization, for instance, of absolute (sacred) space, or potential merging of absolute and differential space. Looking at the Ambedkarite calendar of festivals, though, disrupts the neat linearity of Lefebvre's schema. It produces a vision of space that actually accords better with Lefebvre's more nuanced reflections on the intermingling and overlapping (the pastry-like nature) of complex social spaces.

First, given the prominence of neo-Buddhism in these festivities, it is difficult to argue that 'absolute space' withers away, and becomes a mere substratum on which other, more dynamic types of space are then built. The journey from one festivity to the other – from Bhima Koregaon to Mahad to Nagpur to Mumbai and back – is a neo-Buddhist pilgrimage, which can be read in Lefebvrian terms as the inscription of a new kind of absolute space on a hitherto Hindu-dominated landscape. This regional inscription also has concentrated nodes in places like the function hall outside Chavdar Tale, where, in the week leading up to the March 20 celebrations, the Bhartiya Baud Mahasabha leads a 10-day intensive session for the propagation of Navayana Buddhism. Here, we see something like a merging of absolute space and differential space.

Similarly, the monuments built around Mahad, to commemorate the Chavdar Tale action and the burning of the *Manusmriti*, do not fit easily into any one of Lefebvre's spatial categories. Lefebvre discusses monuments in the context of older societies, which have not yet been dominated by abstract space. For Lefebvre (1991), these monuments are not just tools of power, but also spatial modes of generating consensus by offering 'each member of a society an image of that membership' (p. 220). Appealing both to the senses and to the intellect, monuments project power and wisdom in such a way that 'the element of repression in it and the element of exaltation could scarcely be disentangled' (p. 220).

The monuments of Mahad are clearly of a different type. Lefebvre, in his discussion, presumes some sort of unity of the society in question, whereas the public life of Mahad is marked by fractures, particularly along caste lines. Further, while these monuments may be a display of power, they are clearly of power from below – of contesting a long history of monuments that consolidate caste Hindu rule. In a sense, then, these monuments too bridge absolute and differential space. And though these

Mahad monuments are present throughout the year, they do not seem to have the more implacable solidity of traditional monuments. They are truly activated only twice a year (Figure 3), and thus have an unusual circular temporality that Lefebvre associates more with the body than with monuments.

Finally, the cultural production highlighted by scholars like Rege bears some resemblance to folk cultures lauded by Lefebvre, but suggests different spatialities, and perhaps more significantly, different temporalities. Lefebvre's specific invocations of folk culture are generally from the French countryside, from particular creative modes that Lefebvre sees as slowly being wiped out by the abstract space and its commodified culture. The cassettes highlighted by Rege, on the other hand, are transformations and reinventions of older cultural forms, and are also unabashedly commodities. As Rege (2008) notes, 'old forms of publicity like the community *bhajan* came to be thematically reformulated,' (p. 17) initially in the form of Ambedkari *jalsa*, and then in the widely-distributed cassette. These involved both the reworking of old artistic forms and the embrace of new styles (including, increasingly, electronic music) and new content (notably neo-Buddhist themes). These genres continue to be transformed, as the recent proliferation of Ambedkarite YouTube videos suggests.

Fig. 3: The monument commemorating the burning of the *Manusmriti*, abandoned for most of the year (especially during the monsoon, when the grounds often flood)

Return of the Revolution?

Despite this cultural efflorescence, and the festiveness celebrated by Lefebvre and Rege in different ways, it is clear that a festival in itself does not necessarily usher in

a new era of revolutionary change. In fact, though the middle classes may complain about the inconvenient crowds at Ambedkarite events, they have long been part of the accepted routine of the Maharashtrian year. The elites might grumble about them, but they hardly think them subversive or transgressive. If the festival inevitably dissolves back into everyday life, and everyday hierarchies, does it prefigure a future it can never actually realize?

Lefebvre, in his own time, realized the challenges of seeing the festival as a revolution. He muses: 'Up until now, the principle of Festival has stood for a divorce from life… Is this life's fate?'(Grindon 2013, p. 209). He thus recognizes the need for 'demonstrating how we may resolve the age-old conflict between the everyday and tragedy and between triviality and Festival' (Ibid, p. 212). He was aware that this was no simple task. A 'bureaucratic society of controlled consumption,' as Lefebvre (1984, p. 60) calls it, excels at appropriating, domesticating, and repurposing movements and cultural forms that originally seem transgressive.

How, then, to 'formulat[e] a revolutionary plan to… resurrect the Festival and gather together culture's scattered fragments for a transfiguration of everyday life?' (Ibid, p. 38). Questioning the idea that an eternal festival will simply emerge of its own accord, Lefebvre asks, 'Would it betray the revolution to… remember the questions left unresolved by the great revolutionaries: "What is the period of transition and change? What does it consist of?"' (Grindon 2013, p. 219).

Lefebvre clearly thinks that formulating a master plan for revolution would be counterproductive, as it would smother the very differences that a revolution-as-festival should liberate. Emphasizing the importance of spatial specificity, Lefebvre (1991) suggests the need for 'a challenge to central power from the "local powers", in the capacity for action of municipal or regional forces linked directly to the territory in question'(p. 382). Invoking the Gramscian language of hegemony, Lefebvre notes that such strategies must take careful account of 'the relative strength of socio-political forces' in specific cases (p. 382). Refusing to recommend particular 'plans'or 'programmes,' Lefebvre insists on following 'the road of the "concrete," [which] leads via active theoretical and practical negation, via counter-projects or counter-plans. And hence via an active and massive intervention on the part of the "interested parties"' (p. 419).

What does all this mean for Mahad? First, it means that the festivals at Mahad, or on the Ambedkarite circuit more generally, cannot be analyzed in isolation. They must be seen as particular moments in larger, complexly-configured and rapidly-shifting sets of social and political relations. As argued above, the initial Mahad satyagraha became possible due to increased flows of people, ideas, money, and activism across the Konkan and Bombay in an age of rapid political and economic change.

Arguably, the wave of radicalism – especially in terms of the anti-caste movement – peaked in the 1930s, for a multitude of political, economic, and social reasons (cf. Omvedt, 1994, p. 192). There have been other waves of Dalit assertion since then; the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s are a striking example. However, the Dalit Panthers (like the Republican Party of India before it) splintered into countless factions. Today, there are signs that a new nation-wide wave may be gathering force, from the massive protests

and demands for land redistribution following anti-Dalit violence in Una, Gujarat (Teltumbde, 2017), to the rise of the Bhim Army in Uttar Pradesh (Sethi, 2016), to the widespread protests triggered by the death of Rohith Vemula in Hyderabad (EPW, 2016), to the emergence of new forms of struggle regarding Ambedkarite festivals in Maharashtra.

The latter happened most violently in the case of Bhima Koregaon, a celebration commemorating the defeat of the notoriously casteist *Peshwas* at the hands of the British, with Dalit support. For many years, this festival was seen as a routine part of the cultural landscape, gathering support from all political parties in the area. On January 1, 2018, however, the festival turned violent, with Hindutva gangs targeting Dalit participants. This led to a state-wide strike called by Prakash Ambedkar, who the political establishment had tried to sideline decades ago. This strike was successful, especially in Mumbai, highlighting the continued radical connections between town and countryside in Maharashtra. It also led to an intense state-led backlash against Dalit leaders and activists.

The event also had national ramifications that continue to reverberate. The day before the Bhima Koregaon celebrations, a group of progressive, Left and Dalit activists organized an event called the Elgar Parishad, which described the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the broader Hindu nationalist movement as the 'new Peshwas.' The event featured speeches by those representing the new national-level Dalit upsurge, including Rohith Vemula's mother, the national president of the Bhim Army, and a major leader from the Gujarat protests, Jignesh Mevani.

The event clearly rankled the state. Instead of investigating the role of Hindutva leaders in fomenting the Bhima Koregaon violence, the state has instead used Elgar Parishad as a pretext to arrest many activists under draconian anti-terrorist laws. The ferocity with which the state has cracked down on participants in these events suggests their unease with a possible national-level realignment of caste politics (cf. Crowley, 2018).

Although Mahad has not become the political flashpoint that Bhima Koregaon has, there are still indications that it is becoming more politically charged. Activists are beginning to look at the Mahad Satyagraha and its commemoration through a more pointedly political and confrontational lens. On March 20, 2018, a group of activists and civil societies figures commemorated the Mahad Satyagraha with a march which they called 'Shivrai to Bhimrai,' which traversed the route from Shivaji Maharaj's seventeenth-century Raigad Fort to Chavdar Tale in Mahad.

In part this was a symbolic attempt to quell the tensions between Marathas (who largely claim Shivaji as their community figurehead) and Dalits (who have a similar relationship with Ambedkar). These two groups are often in conflict at the village level, in both economic and social terms. The Bhima Koregaon clashes largely played out along the Maratha-Dalit axis, with Marathas rallying to the Hindutva side.

The organizers of the Shivrai to Bhimrai march were wagering that another alignment is possible. Drawing on an anti-Brahminical tradition that goes back to the theories and activism of Jotirao Phule, these activists claim that the most important social cleavage is between the upper castes and classes vs. all the rest (including both

Marathas and Dalits). While local-level clashes often take the form of Maratha vs. Dalit, this hides the dominance of Brahmins and other upper-caste groups in urban areas and also in the ownership of businesses and property.

The march also sought to unify the various RPI factions and Dalit groups whose celebration of the Mahad satyagraha has become increasingly fractured. In recent years, major Ambedkarite leaders have erected separate stages for their Mahad commemorations, creating a clear spatial analog of the ideological and political divisions between them. But the youth from various factions joined the Shivrai to Bhimrai march, and insisted it end with a programme on one stage.

Will such attempts at suturing a new unity, both amongst Dalits and amongst non-Brahmins more broadly, be successful? It is, of course, too early to say. Activists face serious challenges in dealing with the very real Maratha-Dalit conflicts on the ground, while also reorienting the 'common sense' of Maharashtrians toward a different kind of caste/class analysis. Further, the role of religion in this new strategy is ambiguous. Its proponents clearly reject a polarizing Hindutva, but at the same time, in an effort to draw Maratha support, they downplay the equation of Mahad with Buddhism, arguably undercutting a powerful facet of new egalitarian productions of space. But perhaps the Shivrai-Bhimrai march can be seen as a new kind of pilgrimage, inscribing a space of non-Brahmin power and symbolism that can exist alongside neo-Buddhist circuits.

In this new phase of Dalit assertion, we can hope that, after a lull in which Ambedkarite festivals appeared to be routinized and defanged, they may re-emerge with a new political charge, echoing the pattern described by Lefebvre (1991): 'sudden uprisings followed by a hiatus, by a slow building of pressure, and finally by a renewed revolutionary outburst at a higher level of consciousness and action - an outburst accompanied, too, by great inventiveness and creativity'(p. 419).

As Lefebvre himself notes, such a pattern is far from certain. Further, given the way that Ambedkarite counterpublics trouble some of Lefebvre's neater dialectical progressions, we should be cautious of too easy an invocation of revolutionary transcendence. But inventiveness and creativity have surely been hallmarks of the Ambedkarite movement, and they stand as reminders that the revolution may yet be festive.

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Tathagata Buddha Songs: Buddhism as Religion and Cultural-Resistance Among Dalit Women Singers of Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

This paper intends to understand music as a form of cultural expression that has enabled mobility to Dalit-Bahujan and their cultural production. This cultural production can be seen in the form of popular songs that are widely circulated among Dalits and is part of their religion, identity, as well as a cultural assertion. Tathagata Buddha songs, which this paper studies, has been specifically enabling for Dalit women as it gives them not only a sense of religiosity but it also opens them to the possibility of rationalizing their beliefs and practices. The paper will bring up an ethnographic account of some of these Dalit women singers and look into some of their composition and songs that have a specific invocation to Gautam Buddha and of political icons like Babasaheb Ambedkar, whom they revere. A study of Tathagata Buddha songs and *Bhimgeet* can provide an insight into how music has departed from being just an aesthetic sensibility to a language of resistance against the oppressive caste order. The paper also explores the material dimension of Tathagata Buddha songs understanding its circulation, production, and platforms through which these are popularized.

Keywords

Tathagata Buddha, songs, Dalit, resistance, women, Bhimgeet.

Introduction

Cultural-resistance is witnessed particularly among Dalit women in various popular forms and practices. The emergence of *Tathagata Buddha* songs[1] can be seen as a form of resistance because its spread, popularity, and acceptance are

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marked in a particular moment of history that is the conversion of Dalits into the fold of Buddhism on October 14, 1956.[2] The conversion by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar made Buddhist philosophy accessible to the masses not just with the sense of religiosity but as a belief of social emancipation. Omvedt (2003) has argued that for Dr. Ambedkar religion was close to the Durkheimian perspective on religion that is something which is 'a binding force for social relationship' (p.260). The act of taking up Buddhism for Dr. Ambedkar was not just a religious or a moral goal, but it was deeply rooted in restoring human dignity. The emergence of Buddhism particularly post-conversion witnessed a new cultural wave, in which musical practices like Tathagata Buddha songs gained widespread mass appeal.

Tathagata Buddha songs refer to a set of singing practices, hymns, and other musical performative dimension that is particularly dedicated to Buddha, his preaching and the sense of emancipation[3] that the emergence of Buddhism imbues. The widespread circulation of *Tathagata Buddha* songs is particularly popular among Dalit women who are active producers as well as the recipients of these songs. This paper seeks to understand the meanings that *Tathagata Buddha* songs have in the lives of Dalit women and how their everyday life-world is influenced by these songs. Further, the paper explores the different dimensions of *Tathagata Buddha* by looking into its form, content, and practice. It traces the emergence of these songs and earlier forms of cultural resistance that were witnessed during the *Bhakti* movement. It also engages with some of the *Tathagata Buddha* songs that are popular in North India and the influence these have on the life-worlds of its followers, particularly the Dalit women.

Musical practices in Uttar Pradesh: Emergence of Tathagata Buddha Songs

Music has been an important cultural aspect that has been the voice of cultural-resistance and assertion. While there have been different genres of music that have been popular across India, in Uttar Pradesh the popular genres of music are *Ragini*, *Birha*, *Parody* music, *Alha* music, and so on. The association of these genres has a deeply entrenched association with Dalit lives. For instance, the singing of Birha is closely associated with Dalits' everyday lives. Jassal (2012) has discussed the Birha folk singing practices through which Dalit women, in particular, have expressed themselves. Most of these genres of music have constantly been reworked with the socio-political movement. For instance, a very popular Dalit singer in North India, Kishor Kumar Pagla, is a very well-known Birha singer. Similarly, the Alha genre of music, popular in the regions of Kannauj, has also engaged with the production of 'Bhimgeet.'[4] Women are actively engaged in singing Alha songs particularly on occasions like marriage. With the socio-political-cultural revolution, the composition and style of singing Alha songs has seen considerable changes. For instance, Seema Azad is a famous Alha singer who has sung Bhimgeet and Tathagata Buddha songs in Alha style.[5]

The practice of Tathagata Buddha songs is particularly popular among converted Buddhists, who have adopted *Navayana Buddhism*[6] as their religion. Many of the songs that are produced are largely reworked in the musical genres which are popular in Uttar Pradesh. These songs are also chanted as part of *Katha Pathan,* a cultural performance in which the life and philosophy of Buddha are read out in public visibility. One of

the very famous works of this *Katha Pathan* is done by Dr. Angane Lal in his popular collection titled *Adivansh Katha*. The 'practice' of Katha Pathan begins with rituals such as placing *peepal* (sacred Fig) leaves and other Buddhist artefacts at the prayer dais or platform.

Tathagata Buddha songs and its production in the regions of North India largely reflect the contestations that these new-forms of popular music are creating along with the existing forms of popular music. With socio-political awareness, Dalit-Bahujan people are increasingly taking up Ambedkarite practices and Buddhist tradition. The growing popularity of Tathagata Buddha songs reflects the widespread influence and reach of Dr. Ambedkar's conversion ideology in Uttar Pradesh.

Locating the history of Cultural-Resistance

Bhakti (devotion) movement[7] has been an important vantage point to understand socio-cultural-resistance. The emergence and growth of the Bhakti movement can be traced from medieval period saints Chokamela to Eknath, Tukaram, and Kabir. Each of these strands of Bhakti tradition had witnessed different kinds of musical traditions and practices. These included the singing of Kabir's *Bijak* (compilation of verses), Chokamela's *abhangas* (devotional poetry), Tukaram's *Kirtan* (devotional songs), etc. These Bhakti traditions had a unique influence on women in particular.

The Bhakti movement has given different meanings, particularly to women in terms of how they perceived Bhakti tradition. Karwe (1998) while trying to explore the concept of sacred, has looked into what Lord Vithoba[8] meant for the women in Pandharpur. Vithoba is addressed with different familial relationships like mother, father, friend, lover, and so on. There is a degree of closeness with which he associated. Within Bhakti tradition, is a stage of devotion known as '*Madhur Bhakti*'[9] in which devotees associate themselves with Rukmini and look upon their Lord Vithoba with the affection and devotion associated with Radha-Krishna kind of relationship. It thus throws light on the relationship the people of Pandharpur have with Lord Vithoba, that of love and reverence.

However, Dhere (2011) has argued that such reconstruction of religious tradition and practices surrounding the emergence of *Vitthala* or Vithoba as *Vaishnava* deity happened later during the early medieval period during the Wakari movement.[10] In his translated work by Dr. Anne Feldhaus, Dhere has argued that a study of musical practices[11] shows that Vitthal was 'Buddha' and that calling him Vishnu *avatar* (reincarnate) or Krishna was to 'vedicize' (*Vaidikikaran*) Vitthal through ritual prescription and Sanskrit hymns. Notwithstanding the debate on the origin of Vithobha or Vitthal, it is also important to look upon how the Bhakti tradition and its musical practices were some of the early forms in which Hindu casteist traditions and practices were challenged.

Chokhamela, belonging to the Mahar community was an important *Bhakti* saint of the thirteenth-fourteenth century. His devotional songs known as *Abhangas* discussed the concept of untouchability, besides discussing the piety of a devotee or *Bhakta*. Zelliot (1980) has argued that the discussion on Chokemela's abhangas often ignores the untouchability dimension that he had explicitly despised in his songs. Ranade (1961) says that Chokemela's abhanga by discussing the practice of untouchability gives legitimacy to modern ideas of justice. Similarly, Eknath's *Bharuds* (songs) also reflects on the everyday conversation in village life. These compositions describe the

position of Mahars in Maharashtra, thereby reflecting upon the life of Dalits as it existed then.

Other musical traditions in Bhakti can be drawn from Saint Tukaram's emphasis on kirtan as a means of liberation and attainment of divine bliss (Manuel, 2001). Kirtan as a genre of devotional musical tradition also has an important place among Chaitanya[12] followers. Another response to the oppressive Brahminical caste structure was questioned in Kabir's poetry,[13] known as *Bijak*. Hess (1983) while looking into *Bijak*, which is also the sacred text among *Kabirpanthis* or his followers, has argued about the 'upside-down language' used. The poems are 'absurd, paradoxical, crazy, impenetrable, and yet they purport to be meaningful' (Ibid, p.314). It is significant to understand here that the 'upside-down language' structure provides an alternative way to question the existing social order. Hess has argued that this cryptic tradition is also found in the Hindu and Buddhist '*Siddha'* tradition in the twelfth century. For Kabir, the usage of 'upside-down language' was an allegory to departure from the existing order, and reaching to newer possible meanings. Thus, the significance of poetry to develop an alternative meaning was possible as we see in Kabir's couplets. Such construction of alternative meaning opened newer possibilities of questioning prevailing caste structures.

Buddhism in Popular Culture

Buddhism has a rich history of art and architecture. These art forms are witnessed in rock-cut halls, Chaityas (prayer hall or shrines), and Viharas (monasteries). Art has an important function of giving identity and is thus, an important part of the culture. The emergence of Navayana Buddhism has its sense of aesthetics that has renounced the existence and worship of any form of God. Thus, the emergence of Navayana Buddhism has witnessed a newer sense of aesthetics that has floated across Dalit-Bahujan culture. Tartakov (2012) looks into Navayana Buddhism as having a much clearer vision than Theravada Buddhism and is simpler in practice. The Navayana tradition has seen significant changes from the earlier forms. For instance, in a conventional Navayana practice, a pair of Ambedkar and Sakyamuni statues would be erected. Dr. Ambedkar came to be known as *Maitreya* Ambedkar. The changes in the interpretation of the imagery of Buddha are also seen. The re-interpretation of Buddhist imagery will engage with the disappearance of Buddhism and with its reemergence in Dalits' practice of Buddhism.

Buddhist culture is being made to seep in the Dalit community by way of wide circulation of popular music forms, distribution of Buddhist pamphlets, prayer books (*Buddha-charini*), Buddha images, artefacts, etc. This new popular image of Buddha is different from the traditional representation that had a more lavish and luxurious representation. For instance, Tartkov (Ibid) discusses that most of these contemporary Bodhisattva imageries are followed with the representation of Dr. Ambedkar which is simpler and more realistic. It is denied any superficial form of decoration. Such changes in the representation can be termed as 'revolutionary' as these changes have been instrumental in re-shaping the Dalit community's psychology towards their orientation to social and material life.

Buddhism in popular music has been accepted by people not as a monastic order but as a form that largely reflects their cultural thought process and their resistance to the traditional practices of caste-based humiliation and exclusion that Dalits have been

subjected to. The paper will further look into Tathagata Buddhist songs in their form and content and discuss the reception of these songs by Dalit women in particular and what these songs mean to them.

Music as Resistance

Music and its performance are significant in spreading a message, which would otherwise have not been accessible. Since it involves the element of 'popularity' it is widely accepted. Friedman (2013) talks about the poem '*We shall overcome*' which became the emblematic poetry of the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. He said in one of his speeches that he is not going to stop singing

> We shall overcome because I know that truth crushed to the earth shall rise again. I am not going to stop singing 'We shall overcome' because I know one day the God of the universe will say to those who won't listen to him, I am not a playboy. Don't play with me. I will arise and break the backbone of your power'. I am not going to stop singing, 'We shall overcome' because 'mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He's trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. Glory hallelujah, his truth is marching on.[14]

Thus, one finds that *We Shall Overcome* was not only the song but within that song was a deeply entrenched idea that was imbued.

Similarly, there are other songs like *We Are the Champions* in the 1970s to mark the gay rights movement. The sense of resistance in music was not just about its lyrics but it was also reflected in its performative dimension. Woldu (2013) has looked into the performative dimension of rap music and how the feminine rap music through its exquisite dressing brought wreck to the dominance in hip hop. For instance, Queen Latifah, who was the first rap dive made her presence felt in the male-dominant rap through the 'aggressive style.'

Discussing the genre of rap, Beighey (2006) has also argued that political rap has become a form of resistance through which the Black community has shed-off their alienation. It is a response to the sub-cultural alienation that they face within the larger mainstream culture. The rap form has a deliberate use of language and expression through which it has tried to call attention to their exploitative historical experiences. Beighey's study has thematically looked into several forms of exploitation like criminal justice discrimination, racial genocide conspiracy, lost economic opportunity, educational bias, mass media misrepresentation, police brutality, health care inequality, and so on. Against this backdrop, rap music has become an important instrument to question and resist mainstream media stereotyping. For instance, Beighey in her work has discussed how within the Rap music genre black men are represented as having paramilitary outfits which yields them powerful symbol as well as it reworks on the kind of racial stratification (Ibid).

Thus, music as an art form has constantly tried to capture the spirit of resistance, as it can be traced from Bhakti tradition to contemporary resistance practices of groups like *Kabir Kala Manch* (Kabir art platform) or Youth for Buddhist India. Such a form of resistance was particularly popular among the colored in America, with the emergence of the Hip-Hop 'subculture.' For instance, Bell Hooks (1995) has argued: 'art constitutes one of the rare locations where acts of transcendence can take place and have a wide-ranging transformative impact' (p. 8). She argues that 'there is a need to understand and appreciate the work of a black artist as it is since it carries with it a sense

of culture that is unique to it. The production of art forms is an essential component of resistance during black liberation struggles. However, such production of an art form is often debased and appropriated, which makes it lose its meaning.' Hooks (Ibid) has presented her apprehension for the commodification of 'blackness' and black culture, which is distancing it from its real essence of struggle and resistance. Firth (2007) has argued on similar lines while discussing popular music. While discussing features of popular music, one of the distinguishing features he refers to is the sense of 'possession' that popular music enjoys. It belongs to an identity and a culture. It has the potential to create a sense of identity that people associate with.

The Emergence of Tathagata Buddha Songs

The emergence of Tathagata Buddha songs in Navayana Buddhism gained popularity, particularly post-independence, following the Dalit conversion led by Dr. Ambedkar on October 14, 1956. The uniqueness of Tathagata Buddha songs as popular among Navayana Buddhist lies in its 'practice.' Unlike traditional devotional songs in other communities, Tathagata Buddha songs are not just for spiritual quest, but contain a deeper social message of equality and fraternity drawn from Buddha's life. Many of these songs are in the form of chants of three lines (trisarana). For example,

Buddham Sharnam Gachami (I go to the Buddha for refuge)
Dhamam Sharnam Gachami (I go to Dhamma for refuge)
Sangham Sharam Gachami (I go to the Sangha for refuge)

It is significant to discuss here that in most of these songs of Navayana Buddhism, Gautam Buddha is referred to as 'Tathagata' and not as 'Lord' Buddha. Joshi (1969) has discussed that the epithet 'Tathagata' has its root in two words 'Tatha+Agata'[15] which means the arrival of the enlightened one or the one who has attained Nibbana. The term 'Tathagata' traces its roots from Pali rather than the Brahminical notion that considered Buddha as god or 'avatar' of Lord Vishnu. Thus, the very term 'Tathagata Buddha' song is distancing itself from any of the mythical origins attributed to Brahminism.

Many of the Bhakti songs can be referred to as 'Pop Bhajan', which is discussed by Manuel (2001, p. 109). These 'Pop Bhajan' songs of the 1980s were associated with vocalists like Anup Jalota and Pankaj Udhas. They were like contemporaries of renowned *ghazal* singers, whose styles were adapted in devotional songs. Their style became very popular and thus got highly commercialized over a period of time as a result of wide scale marketing. If one looks into the new popular form of music that is emerging particularly among the Bahujan community, these 'pop-bhajans' are getting replaced with Bhimgeet and Tathagata Buddha songs. These new popular forms are rich with historical and cultural narrative. The viewership of these songs is rising and they are actively entering popular imagination.

When one particularly looks into Tathagata Buddha songs, they are not the traditional protest songs, but are largely devotional in nature centered on the practices of Navayana Buddhism. Their historical narrative responds against caste oppression and the contribution of Babasaheb. Most of these songs are widely circulated on many of the Youtube channels such as *Samata Awaz*, *Awaz India*, *Bahujan TV*, etc and social media too. In most songs, the images of Buddha are invariably portrayed along with those of Dr. Ambedkar. This iconographic representation of Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar

reflects the significant cultural change in the presentation of 'Pop Bhajans' of the Dalit-Bahujan community in the form of Tathagata Buddha songs and Bhimgeet.

These songs, especially their form, appear similar to 'Pop Bhajan' of the 1980s that Manuel had discussed in his work. Most of these songs that circulate in western U.P. have musical adaptations from mainstream Bollywood songs or mainstream Bhajans and *Aarti*.[16] Manuel (2001) has argued that such adaptations are done largely to popularize and spread circulation. However, besides commercial logic, it is also driven by the 'creative resignification process' (Ibid, p. 140). This 'resignification' can largely be understood in terms of the changes that are done in the content of Tathagata Buddha songs. For instance, if the mainstream Bhajan has an Aarti dedicated to a god, these songs will have a similar form but the lyrics will be about Buddha and his Dhamma. Such adaptations enable a widespread circulation of these songs while ensuring that it largely represents the culture and practices of the Dalit-Bahujan communities besides giving them a distinct 'social' space.

The emergence of 'social' space has been particularly enabling for the Dalits as it has given them a cultural alternative by 'de-caste(ing)' themselves from the Hindu social order (Wankhade, 2008, p. 55). The emergence of Tathagata Buddha songs has thus given a cultural alternative to Dalits to re-assert their identity in a manner that has enabled them to transgress their 'fixed' identity under the Hindu caste order. The emergence of a new cultural space is relevant, as it has allowed Dalits to come out of their traditional roles and identity, and take up newer roles and meanings that have empowered and recognized them.

Meanings of Tathagata Buddha songs

Tathagata Buddha songs and Bhimgeet thus have given a sense of emancipation for many of the Dalit women singers like Dharmacharni Pragya Kirti, Shweta Sakhya, among others. These new adapted forms of popular music have literally changed the underlying tenor of traditional Bhakti songs. By reworking on lyrics of those songs which largely drew from Hindu mythology, the Dalit neo-Buddhists have used the Tathagat Buddha songs as an expression of resistance by imbuing in them historical and social messages.

Many of these Tathagata Buddha songs sung by Navayana Buddhists not only have invocations of Buddha but also of other social reformers who are revered within the Dalit community. Even the reverence shown towards Tathagata Buddha is with specific reference to the Brahminical social order that Buddha had questioned towards the fourth century BCE. The songs have specific reference to social exclusion which Dalit community has faced and the sense of emancipation that Tathagata Buddha songs often imbibe. The songs often re-work the content that highlight the Buddhist philosophy and discuss global goodness. One of the popular songs has the following lyrics.

Buddha ne Sansar jagaya (Buddha has awakened the world)
Samata ka hai Phool Khilya (Enabled the blooming of the flower of equality)
Hum to tere gyan ko apnye hai (We have embraced your teaching)
Hum diwane, hum diwane, (We have fallen in love with you)
*Hum diwane, Hai tere..(*2)* (We have fallen in love with you) **2*
Tumhare bina jag suna pada hai (Without you the world is deserted)
Aao pyare Gautam tera asara hai (Oh affectionate Gautam we seek your support)

Ye araz thukra mat dena (Please don't reject our request)
Akar tum gyan batna (Come and enlighten us)
Hum to iss duniyake bahut satye hai (We have been persecuted in this world)
Hum diwane, hum diwane (We have fallen in love with you)
Hum diwane hai tere. (We have fallen in love with you)[17]

The songs convey a deep sense of reverence for Buddha and his teachings are particularly invoked in most of them. Many of these songs have words like *karuna* (compassion), *pragya* (wisdom), *sheel* (modesty), which are propounded as desirable traits of human behaviour in Buddhist philosophy. The songs are in the existing form of 'pop bhajan' and have been re-worded into Buddha *Bhajans* (hymns) with parallels drawn from mainstream religious literature with titles like *'Buddha Amritwani', and 'Buddha Stuti*.' Many of these new popular songs also use the music and form of mainstream Bollywood songs to ensure that they become popular and widely circulated. The viewership of these songs has been rising over a while with support of social media platforms like YouTube, WhatsApp, mobile music, and popular music websites like Ganna.com, Savan Music, etc.

The Buddhist songs are more than being purely spiritual nature. They embody a worldview that has an agenda of social justice, equality, and compassion. Bradley and Bhatewara (2013) term this Navayana Buddhist tradition as 'practical spirituality' by which the humanist aspect of Buddhism is placed at the centre of Buddhist philosophy instead of abstract or other-worldly religious philosophy. Most of the songs popular as '*Buddhacharni', 'Vandana Sutra Pathan, or 'Buddha Vandana'* have been re-invented in a way that accommodates Navayana Buddhist philosophy and tradition. The production of such songs is actively taken up by organizations like Karuna Trust, The Triratna Buddhist Community, Youth for Buddhist India,[18] among others. The thrust of Buddhism in these platforms is largely development-oriented. The aim of one such organization Youth for Buddhist India (YFBI) is to spread Buddhism and social consciousness among Dalits. Baudhcharya Shanti Swaroop Baudh, who is the founder of YFBI says that through cultural and musical performances, YFBI aims to spread the rational and humanist approach among the youth of the country.

In North India, particularly Uttar Pradesh, many of these songs are circulated by way of booklets written by Shanti Swaroop Baudh, Budh Sangh Premi, Shayar Devidas Gulde, S. K. Roshan, Bhikhu Pragya Deep, and others[19]. Dalit women have also been active agents in the production of these songs. Many poets and singers like Premlata, Shobha Baudh have published booklets of their songs.

An Account of a Buddhist Singer from Uttar Pradesh

The significance of devotional music in the form of Tathagata Buddha songs in U.P, which has a significant 20.7 per cent Dalit population (MoSJE)[20], can be understood in terms of its widespread popularity and circulation. This paper presents the case of a fairly popular Dalit singer, Pramita Gautam *aka* Dharmacharni Pragya Kirti, from Hapur in western U.P. Her voice is representative of many local voices for whom singing Bhimgeet and Tathagata Buddha songs has been an act of resistance and a means of empowerment. The ethnographic account of singers like Gautam's represents the microcosm through which the larger voices of resistances can be understood.

Gautam or *Dharmacharni* Pragya Kirti has undertaken a formal education and training in Buddhism under Triratna Buddha Mahasangha,[21]Nagpur. She and her

husband are members and activists of *Bharatiya Boudh Mahasabha*. Born and married in U.P., she discusses her commitment to Buddhism: 'Spreading the meaning and philosophy of Buddhism is the single goal of my life and I am willing to overcome all my hurdles in the path of spreading Buddhism.' Her speeches and songs, several of which she has herself composed, reflect the Buddhist philosophy and ideals of Babasaheb Ambedkar. For her songs are the medium through which she can 'express her reverence and commitment to Ambedkarism.'

She recalls that her inclination to Buddhist songs in terms of writing the lyrics and singing, developed particularly after she was conferred the title *Dharamacharni* at a seminar of the organization. Her style of singing is parody, which she considers is a powerful medium to connect with a larger audience. Showing the diary in which she has written her songs, she declares her plans to get them published with a sense of pride.

What has she gained as a Buddhist and as a singer? Buddhism, she says, has enabled a dignified position for her in society, and the songs gave her public recognition. 'Whenever I go to any of these cultural programmes, I do not book hotels. People are so much willing to host me at their residence. They know me because of my songs and have a deep sense of respect for what I am doing for the Dalit-Bahujan community', she says with a sense of gratitude.

Regarding her childhood, she recalls that she was interested in singing and would often accompany her father to Kabir Kirtan *sabhas* (gatherings), where she would recite from Bijak. It was towards her middle school that she got inclined towards Bhimgeet. Her inclination towards Babasaheb is an 'expression of reverence' she has for Dr Ambedkar, about whom she came to know through her father. 'My father told us, "Babasaheb is the one who has done everything for us, he has given us a respectful place in society."' As a child, she often faced exclusionary practice by some teachers, which moved her further towards her commitment towards Ambedkar's mission. Further encouragement came when she sang her first song on Babasaheb Ambedkar in school and received appreciation from teachers of her community in particular. They further took her to different cultural platforms organized around Babasaheb's Mission. This further motivated her to sing on occasions like Babasaheb Jayanti (birth anniversary celebrations), which later became her passion.

When one particularly tries to understand the significance of these Buddhist songs in the lives of Dalit women, one finds that these have played an important role in reworking their identity and position in society. This change in the status of Dalit women singers has been particularly possible because of the Buddhist philosophy, which is based on the principles of equality, including that of gender, in society. Also, Buddhism does not have a stratified society based on caste; nor has it scriptures like *Manusmriti* that relegated women to a secondary position in society. The Dalit women who accrue to this Buddhist philosophy and are engaged in its cultural spread and promotion, have a dignified status in society.

Coming back to Pramita Gautam, she acknowledges a sense of solidarity nurtured with other Dalit women during the course of her singing career. The process of singing for her was has also been about capturing a public-sphere that she would have otherwise not gained access to due to the practice of 'purdah' (veil) that women in rural areas are usually supposed to practice.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the history of songs of resistance (against the caste system) since the emergence of the Bhakti tradition until the emergence of Navayana tradition of Buddhism in post independent India. From medieval saints like Chokhmela, Eknath, Tukaram and Kabir, to the Dalit neo-Buddhists today; all have relied on the power of music and poetry to successfully voice their concern against the darkest practice of social exclusion in Hindu religion. Their songs of resistance against the graded inequality of the caste system find echo in the musical practices of Dalit Navayana Buddhists, who have drawn inspiration from the rich musical tradition of Bhakti movement to carve out a distinct cultural space for themselves.

This paper has studied the emergence of Tathagata Buddha Songs, Bhimgeet and similar musical productions in the Dalit-Bahujan community in Uttar Pradesh as a powerful tool to awaken social consciousness and cast off their dehumanizing caste identity under the Buddhist order.

Conversion to Buddhism has enabled the Dalit community to challenge the exploitative caste practice that has scriptural sanctions within Hindu tradition. These songs have worked differently for Dalits, especially women, as it has enabled them to question the authority of Manusmriti that gave them a demeaning position in society. These songs also have their cultural significance in that they have allowed the Dalit community to re-work and re-imagine their identity with a sense of dignity.

The musical renditions of Tathagata Buddha songs or, Bhimgeet may not be as popular as the 'Pop-Bhajans' of the 1980s. However, with the growing socio-cultural revolution these new-emerging forms are significantly creating a 'contested space' with the existing popular forms. This cultural contestation and resistance are reflected through the everyday lifeworld of prominent Dalit women singers like Pramita Gautam, Malti Rao, Shweta Shakya, Seema Azad, Taranum Baudh, Sanghamitra Gautam, Baudhmitra, among others who are both producers and consumers of such music. The microcosm of their lifeworld, in which these musical practices are situated somewhere, explains the meanings and significance of Tathagata Buddha songs for them.

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Endnotes

1 Tathagata Buddha songs, used in this paper, refer to a set of musical practices that are centered around preaching, life, and philosophy of Tathagata or Gautam Buddha.

2 Dr. B. R. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1956 along with his 3,65,000 followers in Deekshabhoomi, Nagpur. Eventually, Buddhism was embraced within Dalit communities at different moments in history. The rise of new anti-caste movement in the1970s and 1980s saw the conversion to Buddhism also among OBCs and some upper caste intellectuals (Omvedt, 2003, p. 266). Some of these names included Rahul Sankrityanan, Periyar, Lalai Singh, Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu, among others.

3 Dr. Ambedkar considered the emergence of Buddhism as 'a greatest blow to Brahamanism' (BWAS, Vol.3, p. 268). It was 'emancipating' because it loosened the Brahmin stronghold and control over state and religion. Thus, the sense of emancipation within Buddhism was rooted from the very beginning, as a counter-revolution to hegemonic structures established by Brahmanism.

4 Bhimgeet is a generic term used for musical songs and practices dedicated to Dr. B.R.Ambedkar and other Dalit-Bahujan leaders who have dedicated their lives for the cause of Dalit-Bahujan social emancipation.

5 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9fDCRJRpK4 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjazd35FhR4 accessed on September17, 2020.

6 Navayana Buddhism is a new form of Buddhism, taken up particularly by Dr. Ambedkar during his conversion. Omvedt (2003) argues that Navayana Buddhism was the 'revival' of Buddhism particularly towards the twentieth century. She has argued that Ambedkar's mass conversion was a 'Buddhist Renaissance' which was an assertion of reclaiming Dalit

dignity. Thus, a sense of social emancipation was deeply embedded in the emergence of Navayana Buddhism. Tartakov (2012) hasdiscussed the uniqueness of Navayana Buddhism in terms of its representation in popular art, imagery, and its public visibility. He has argued that symbolic meanings around Navayana Buddhism are drawn from the everyday lived reality of Dalit lives. It is very much unlike other religious practices were rules of sacred and profane are followed.

7 The term 'Bhakti' in Bhakti tradition is also contested. Hawley (2015) has argued that the very idea of 'Bhakti movement' was formulated only in the twentieth century and it was largely influenced with the existing wave of nationalism. He argues that there was no single strand of 'Bhakti' as was popularly constructed rather each of the so called 'Bhakti tradition' had its unique history.

8 Vithoba of Pandharpur, is discussed in Dhere's writings as a folk god who deified in the city of Pandharpur, Maharashtra. He is also called Lord Vitthal, a form of Lord Vishnu or Krishna. The musical tradition of *'Abhangavani'* is dedicated to Vitthal of Pandharpur. In contemporary times some of the popular tracks of Vitthal's*Abhanga*are *Gyanba Tukaram, Pandharpuras Yave Re, Yei Ho Vithale* etc. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQ_XZEoTmkgaccessed on September 17, 2020

9 Devotion to the Lord is considered to have four stages: Dasya(servitude), sakhya (friendly), Vatsalya (paternal) and Madhur (sweet). Madhur is the ultimate sweet relationship. For details see Sindhwani(2011)

10 Warkari movement is a religious movement in Maharashtra state within the Bhakti tradition associated with the devotees of Vitthala or Vithoba.

11 Dhere (2011) has argued that many of the musical practices, before they became popular, were sung in Madha regions (Solapur district) of Maharashtra.

12 Fifteenth century saint in Bengal.

13 Kabir was a fifteenth century Bhakti saint from the Julaha (weaver) community in Uttar Pradesh.

14 "To Minister to the Valley" address Feb 23, 1968. p. 21. King Papers.

15 Braj Lal Joshi says Tathagata means 'one who has arrived (*Agata*) at the timeless Nibbana in the same way (*Tatha*) just as the Enlightened Ones of former ages (pubbakehisammasambuddhehi) had attained to it.' (Joshi, 1969, p. 65).

16 Aarti refers to the prayer offered to God in a rhythmic pattern.

17 Singer: Shweta Shakya https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GV5Vic457i4&list=RDGxkGsZcSYqc&index=2

18 Shanti Swaroop Baudh was the key figure in the establishment of Youth for Buddhist India. He was associated with Ambedkarite movement particularly in North India. It aimed to promote youth and give them platform to express their art and culture. Along with Hari Bharti, the mission of Youth for Buddhist India was 'to make an institution dedicated to make India Buddhist'. The platform witnessed art forms and musical performances dedicated to Babasaheb and Tathagata Buddha. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQeQt_cYuMg&t=1599s access dated 17th September, 2020.

19 The booklets were written with a sense creating a sense of awareness of what Buddhism is meant and the reason one needs to embrace it. For instance, in one of the popular booklets *Adivansh Katha* by Dr. Angane Lal, discusses different myths that have belittled Dalit figures.

20 Union (Federal) Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, New Delhi.

21 A socio religious organization that preaches the philosophy of Buddha and his life. It also confers titles like Dharmachari, Bhante, Anagami, etc.

Article

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Ambedkar, Lohia, and the Segregations of Caste and Gender: Envisioning a Global Agenda for Social Justice

Anurag Bhaskar[1]

Abstract

Dalit women face acute marginalization as a result of multiple and intersecting inequalities in terms of caste and gender. This is reflected adversely in their less representation, lower literacy and life expectancy levels, and other human indicators, compared to upper caste women. Focus on these multiple forms of marginalization has been missing from the mainstream anti-caste and gender equality discourse and has led to a rise of Dalit feminism. Despite the emphasis on the nexus between caste and gender by equality icon Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, reactions to the emergence of Dalit women's movement as distinct from the mainstream upper caste-class led women's movement and male dominated autonomous Dalit movement have been 'notoriously negative'. However, the Dalit women's movement must be seen as giving a fresh perspective to their struggles and experiences. This paper critiques the Dalit movement as well as the feminist movement, and adds to the 'Dalit feminist standpoint' by introducing it to the ideas of a prominent non-Dalit social leader Ram Manohar Lohia, who had spoken against the crippling effects of the caste-class-gender-race nexus. This paper envisions a broader social justice agenda by reading the ideas of Ambedkar and Lohia together.

Keywords

Dalit feminism, intersectionality, caste-class-gender nexus, gender, caste, race, marginalization

Introduction: Multiple Forms of Marginalization

A 2018 report of the United Nations found that the average *Dalit* (erstwhile untouchable castes) woman in India dies 14.6 years younger than her higher caste

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counterparts (Indian Express, 2018). The UN report, titled, 'Turning promises into action: gender equality in the 2030 agenda' revealed that a woman's caste in India can increase her exposure to mortality as a result of factors such as poor sanitation and inadequate water supply, and health care. The report further stated that the life expectancy among Dalit women is eleven years lower than that of higher caste women despite experiencing identical social conditions like sanitation and drinking water. The clustered deprivations faced by Dalit women were summarized by the report thus:

The likelihood of being poor is greater if she is landless and from a scheduled caste.[1] Her low level of education and status in the social hierarchy will almost guarantee that if she works for pay, it will be under exploitative working conditions (*Ibid)*.

The observations made in the report are just an example of the impact of the multiple and intersecting inequalities of caste and gender on Dalit women's literacy, life expectancy, and other human indicators (Mantri &Jayarajan, 2018). Focus on these multiple forms of marginalization has been missing from the mainstream anti-caste and gender equality discourse and has led to a rise of Dalit feminism. This separate stream of feminism scrutinizes the mainstream movements with a lens of skepticism and criticism, and places Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as the central figure for the women's movement in India (Rege,1998 &2013; Paik, 2009 & 2016). This paper, while discussing the foundations of Dalit feminism and the critique of mainstream feminist and Dalit movements, attempts to make an addition to the 'Dalit feminist standpoint' (Rege, 1998) by introducing it to the ideas of *caste-class-gender* nexus propounded by Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia — a radical leader whose ideas of social justice have been ignored even by the anti-caste movement (Yadav, 2012; Kumar, 2017; Bhaskar, 2018). Combining the ideas of Ambedkar and Lohia, this paper envisions a broader social justice agenda in a global perspective. In any case, the author does not make a claim on 'behalf' of Dalit women, rather poses as their ally.

Dalit Feminism: Foundations

Dalit feminism has emerged as a separate movement for social equality and justice (Masoodi, 2018). It aims at 'eradicating all forms of violence, intolerance, hierarchy and discrimination in the society' (Margaret, 2010). At the beginning of the 21st century several groups of Dalit women came up across the country 'trying to assert their identity and openly talking about the *intersection* of caste and gender' (Sharma, 2016; Paik, 2009, p. 39). Intersectionality[2] recognizes that individuals can face discrimination on the basis of multiple and intersecting identities (Crenshaw,1989,p. 149; Campbell, 2016, p. 3).

Gopal Guru (1995) justified the emergence of a separate struggle of Dalit women by listing two factors (p. 2548): 'external factors (non-Dalit forces homogenizing the issue of Dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the Dalits).' The mainstream feminist movement is the external factor which, in making claims for women solidarity at both national and international level, 'subsumes contradictions that exist between high caste [women] and Dalit women' (*Ibid*, p. 2549). These contradictions manifest in subtle forms of caste discrimination practised by 'upper caste upper class women against Dalit women in the urban areas and resorting to slander of Dalit women in rural areas' (Ibid). Moreover, feminism in India—essentially of the upper caste middle class woman's making—came to be identified as a universalized female experience. Guru has questioned the 'hegemonic impulses

of Indian feminists' to speak for Dalit women (*Ibid*). This assertion found support in other scholarly works. Sharmila Rege has argued that the *savarna* (upper caste) feminists have invisibilized and excluded the experiences, struggles, and leadership of Dalit and*Adivasi*(indigenous) women (2018, p. 39). Shailaja Paik also noted that the upper caste-led Indian feminist movement, since colonial times, 'has been unable to critically engage and confront inequalities of caste of community implicit in that subject or its worlds' (2009, p. 41).

The internal factor—the mainstream male dominated Dalit movement— by refusing to acknowledge the comparatively privileged location of Dalit males denied Dalit women an independent expression of assertion and identity. Anandhi and Kapadia (2017) state that 'formal Dalit politics totally ignores Dalit women's micro level politics of becoming as well as their struggles to collectivise and to address their multiple oppressions' (p. 121). The 'male sphere of Dalit politics' considers women's political struggles to be entirely marginal to the 'more important' male-led politics of Dalit rights and social justice (*Ibid*). In her work based on everyday experiences of Dalit women, Paik (2014, p. 79; 2009, p. 43) notes that these women face 'double discrimination': by society (public discrimination) and at home (private discrimination). According to Paik, the reaction of some Dalit men to feminism (in general) and Dalit women's feminism (in particular) has been 'notoriously negative,' and they regard Dalit feminism as a 'powerful deterrent' to the growth of an autonomous dalit movement (2009, p. 42). The personal accounts of several Dalit women activists and writers also speak about patriarchal structures within the Dalit community, which force its women to extreme marginalization (Paik, 2014, p. 75).

Both these factors set forth the problematic tendency to treat gender and caste as mutually exclusive categories of analysis and experience. Such a framework tends to not only theoretically erase and distort the struggles of Dalit women, but it also dilutes the conception of discrimination. In the words of Rege, 'a masculinization of dalithood and a savarnisation of womanhood' led to 'a classical exclusion of Dalit womanhood' (1998, p. 42). The collective aspect of Dalit women, when reduced to being oppressed just for being either a Dalit or a woman, thus created a dearth of discourse onclustered deprivations around caste, class, and gender.

Responses to the 'Mainstream'

Advocating the necessity of a distinct Dalit feminist discourse, Guru (1995) argues that direct experiences of discrimination and struggles of Dalit women lend an authenticity to their claims —something which is lacking in the mainstream feminist narrative (p. 2549). Echoing Guru, Rege (1998) states that Dalit women should 'talk differently'. However, she cautions that a 'Dalit feminist standpoint', which 'may originate in the works of Dalit feminist intellectuals', cannot 'flourish if it is isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups' (p. 45). It must 'educate itself about the histories, preferred social relations, the utopias, and struggles of the marginalized' (*Ibid*). Rege further suggests that non-Dalit feminists should adopt a Dalit feminist standpoint by 'losing and revising the voice of the mainstream savarna feminist thought'. This would not only authorize the non-Dalit feminists to speak 'as' or 'for' Dalit women but they can 'reinvent' themselves as Dalit feminists (Ibid). Adding to the discourse, Ritu Sen Chaudhari (2016) stresses upon 'the responsibility of feminist theories to address questions concerning caste experiences' and the 'implications of

such discourses on the experiences of the Dalit woman' (p. 1). Chaudhari, however, differs from the 'reinventing' approach of Rege and calls on the 'elite feminists' to critique the 'self' by deliberating upon 'the implication of non-dalit feminism in the making of Dalit woman' (*Ibid*, p. 11). She asks the mainstream feminists to consider how the elite woman posed herself as against [the Dalit woman], and 'read how the Dalit woman has been produced, as an "other" (of the non-Dalit woman), through the experiences of the non-Dalit woman' (Ibid). In agreement with Rege (1998), Paik (2009, p. 45) conceptualized a radical Dalit women's movement and argued for 'a porous struggle', in which the mainstream (upper caste-class led) feminist movement, Dalit men, and other political parties who share their interests support the endeavors of Dalit women. Paik thus pointed: 'It is only by understanding the contradictions and complexities inherent in Dalit women within various structures, by looking at their local context and constitution, that Dalit men and upper caste middle class women [would] devise effective political challenges and action' (Ibid).

These critiques of the 'mainstream' highlight the constant need to engage with an alternate approach of addressing gender and caste simultaneously.

Ambedkar, Lohia, and the Intersectionof Caste and Gender

Despite the emphasis on the intersection between caste and gender by Ambedkar and later by other social reformers like Lohia, the mainstream Dalit movement has failed to provide a separate discourse on safeguarding the rights of Dalit women. Ambedkar's theory of caste clearly identifies linkages with the subordination of women (2019, pp. 5-22). Ambedkar stated that the patriarchal control over female sexuality was an essential component for the purpose of reinforcement of the caste system. He theorized that women have been used as a medium to perpetuate caste system by citing the specific examples of *sati* (the practice of widow immolation on the funeral pyre of her husband), enforced widowhood (prohibiting widow remarriage), and pre-pubertal marriage of girls. Ambedkar believed that the caste-gender nexus was the main reason behind the oppression of lower castes and women and that it had to be uprooted. He thus became a 'passionate campaigner for an important feminist principle, namely women's right to control their own sexuality and to determine their own choices in marriage' (Kapadia, 2020: p. 10). Ambedkar also supported female leadership in the grassroots women's organizations and movement, which evolved from the participation of women in his movement alongside men in 1920s to creation of autonomous organizations of women in 1930s and political organizations of women in 1940s (Sonalkar, 2014, pp. 20-34). During his speech at the Mahad *satyagraha (non-violent protest)*, he directed the attention of Dalit women to the specificities of women subjection and oppression due to caste and their subordination as 'women' and as 'Dalit' (Paik, 2009, p. 42).

Considered by some scholars (Yadav, 2012; Kumar, 2010; Bhaskar, 2018) as an ideological successor to Ambedkar, Lohia propounded a deeper approach to address the deprivations created by caste, class, and gender. The author is reading the ideas of Lohia along with Ambedkar for two specific reasons. First, after Ambedkar, Lohia remains one of the few prominent leaders in independent India who made a strong theoretical case for annihilation of caste. Between 1955 and 1958, Lohia made extensive contacts with major anti-caste movements, socio-political organizations and leaders of the scheduled castes and the backward classes in north, west and south India,

including Ambedkar, Periyar and R L Chandapuri (Kumar, 2010). Second, the social justice movement would be strengthened by including the radical ideas of non-Dalit leaders like Lohia, who have made important contributions to the anti-caste discourse.

Lohia contributed significantly to the 'formulation of an inter-sectionalist approach for understanding the inequalities, exclusions and exploitations in the power system of contemporary India' (Kumar, 2010: p. 64). According to Lohia (1953), 'All those who think that, with the removal of poverty through a modern economy, [the segregations of caste and gender] will automatically disappear make a big mistake. Poverty and these two segregations thrive on earth other's worms.' He further said: 'All war on poverty is a sham, unless it is, at the same time, a conscious and sustained war on these two segregations' (Ibid). Lohia propounded a theory on the 'seven revolutions of our time' (Kumar, 2010, p. 66), which identified the main aspects of inequality, each of which deserved to be addressed in its own sphere and simultaneously. Out of the seven revolutions, four pertained to aspects of inequality within a society – *gender, caste, class* and *race*. His analysis of social inequality in India focused on the trio of caste, class, and gender. Lohia conceptualized a direct link 'between revitalizing Indian society and giving equality to women in all spheres of life' (Ibid, p. 66). His theory of simultaneous revolutions emphasizes upon the autonomy of the various dimensions of social life that required revolutionary transformation (Yadav, 2010, p. 99). Lohia's approach thus underlines that the concerns of Dalit women are not subservient to the Dalit movement and should not be left unaddressed. These concerns have to be addressed simultaneously along with the thrust for caste equality. Furthermore, Lohia's approach goes beyond the isolated approach of 'class' and 'gender', which the upper caste-class feminists in India have relied upon. The ideas of Lohia can facilitate the upper caste feminists and Dalit men to realize that the question of gender and caste cannot be dealt separately, while ignoring their intersectional impact.

A focus on the relationship between caste and gender, as emphasized by both Ambedkar and Lohia, also highlights the repercussions of treating gender and caste as mutually exclusive categories in the contemporary intellectual, institutional, and legal discourse. For instance, among the Dalit movement and initiatives — from academicians to politicians — the 'prominent single factor' (Kumar, 2010, p. 64) approach (caste-centric) seems to have been more prevalent than intersectional perspectives. When the 'Smash Brahminical Patriarchy' issue arose out of a poster in hands of Twitter CEO (Dhanaraj, 2018), Kancha Ilaiah Shephered (2018) compared patriarchy among Dalits with Brahminical patriarchy, and declared that the latter is 'more oppressive and undemocratic'. Ilaiah backed his statement by giving examples such as 'there has always existed the right to remarry among the Shudra/ Dalit/ Adivasi cultures' and that the 'Shudra/Dalit/Adivasi culture and heritage reflect a democratic man-woman relationship'(Ibid). Contrary to the assertions of Ilaiah, Paik has questioned the postulate of considering Dalit women as'somehow more free than high caste women' (2009, p. 39). According to her, the struggle of Dalit women against sexism of Dalit men is intrinsic to their identity (Ibid: p. 45). Furthermore, while critiquing the usage of the term 'Dalit patriarchy' in feminist discourse, Sunaina Arya made an important assertion that the patriarchy prevalent among the Dalit men is a manifestation of 'Brahminical patriarchy' itself (2020, p. 223; Chakravarti, 2018: p. 34). Both Paik and Arya endorsed Guru's internal critique (1995) of patriarchy in Dalit politics. Any manifestation of Brahminical patriarchy among Dalit men cannot be even remotely justified on the ground that it is lesser evil than Brahminical patriarchy. Paik's and Arya's response highlight the limitations of the 'single-factor' approach.

Another example can be found in some form of socio-economic mobility among the Dalits. The male migration-related mobility continues to confine Dalit women to agricultural wage work—with 'no ownership, real or titular, of the land' (Masoodi, 2018).Women of the lower castes in agrarian situations remain largely ignored (Paik, 2009, p. 40). Moreover, of the 1.2 million manual scavengers in India, about ninety-five to ninety-eight percent are Dalit women (Kumar and Preet, 2020). These issues and concerns are not reflected in the policy discourses because of the caste-centric 'single factor' approach.

Furthermore, when a Dalit woman is sexually assaulted by upper caste men, it is not just a case of male violence or criminality. The factor of her caste also needs to be considered, wherein the Dalit women are targeted in order to 'teach a lesson' to the Dalit community (Irudayam, Mangubhai & Lee, 2006, p. 9). This crucial understanding of multiple forms of marginalization was missed by the Supreme Court of India in its judgment, Shakti Vahini vs. Union of India, 2018 on 'honour killings.' The court considered 'honour killings' as a gender-based crime, while ignoring the caste angle in such cases. Therefore, the 'mainstream' discourses must consider an intersectional approach of marginalization. As Shreya Atrey (2019) has argued, intersectional discrimination should exist as a unique category in discrimination law.

The Dalit feminist movement, which focuses on 'intersectionality', is thus deeply rooted in the Ambedkarite and Lohiaite thought of self-assertion, transcending the caste identity markers. Addressing the connection between social identities and patriarchy expands the feminist project (Roberts, 1993, p. 37). Moreover, it also enables to broaden the conception of discrimination in the legal discourse.

Global Agenda for Social Justice

The approach of Ambedkar and Lohia can help the Dalit feminist movement to frame a broader social justice agenda. Lohia's ideas call for a global discourse on simultaneous addressing of several aspects of inequality — in particular, *caste, class, race*, and *gender*. This theory also resembles the struggle of black women in the United States, which is also much broader than the general categories that the anti-discrimination discourse provides. In an incisive analysis, Crenshaw (1989) argued that:Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men (p. 149).[3] Similar to experiences of Dalit women in India, she stated that 'black women were failed by anti-racist campaigns that focused on the experiences and needs of black men, and feminist campaigns led by and focused on the experiences of white women' (Smith, 2016, p. 73). In Brazil, Afro-Brazilian feminists have been at 'the forefront of efforts to integrate an intersectional perspective in international human rights discourse and feminist practices' (Franklin, 2011, p. 142). They have focused on the development of stronger transitional coalitions, by highlighting the 'similarities of black women's experiences across national borders and have looked to initiate cross-border dialogue on the interconnected nature of their struggles' (Ibid, page 152). The objective of such transnational collaborations has been 'to affirm the development of a black feminist identity through social activism, offering women an autonomous forum to cultivate and strengthen their struggles against sexism and racism in their individual countries and across the region" (Ibid).[4] The 'internationalist vision' displayed in such initiatives has 'encouraged cooperation among black women and increased awareness of the

common concerns of health and economic, and personal security faced by the black population' (Ibid).

Lohia's ideas conceptualize building up of global or transnational alliances to tackle intersectional inequalities based on *caste, race, gender*, and *class*. Like alliances built up by Afro-Brazilian women with black women of other countries, Dalit women can also join these alliances to form larger social movements. These alliances need not be formed by a person's race, caste or gender, but on the basis of common contexts of struggle against specific exploitative forces (Elkholy, 2020) or what Paik calls "margin to margin" solidarity (2014, p. 75). Such a transnational exercise can encourage 'the creation of wider social communities and the sharing of memories, histories, and even institutions' and forge a broad feminist, anti-patriarchal, anti-caste, and anti-racist framework (Paik, 2014, p. 92-93).The feminist initiatives in different countries can engage with such alliances to form cross-cultural coalitions against injustices and inequalities. It is then that the mainstream feminists 'can better work with, and not for, women (and men)' suffering social disadvantages (Elkholy, 2020). Dalit feminists can make concerted efforts with other feminist and social movement actors who seek to challenge racial, caste and gender injustices across the globe.

Conclusion

The narrative of Dalit women's movement today needs to be shaped by recognizing and learning from their struggles from its beginning, and recounting the path it has traversed. The Dalit feminist groups that challenge caste and patriarchy are questioning structural changes. Their fight should be welcomed. In 1995, Guru observes that independent assertion of Dalit women should not be viewed by Dalit men as divisive (p. 2549). The journey and struggle of Dalit women only shows that Guru's statement is of equal import even today. While Rege calls up on the savarna feminists to reinvent themselves as Dalit feminists, an equal burden lies on Dalit men too. The male-dominated Dalit discourse has to be conscious of the concerns of its women. Dalit men have a heavy responsibility that they do not subsume 'gender' under the 'caste' collective. The struggle for equality must be consistent. In furtherance of the legacy of Ambedkar, the question of caste has to be addressed along with the intersectional impact of gender and caste. The mainstream savarna feminists and male dominated Dalit movement should engage with the intersectional approach of Dalit feminism. It would only strengthen the fight for caste and gender equality. By including the radical ideas of a non-Dalit leader such as Ram Manohar Lohia into its fold, the social justice movement can forge a broader social justice agenda. This would also increase the appeal of the anti-caste social justice movement. The emerging global discourse on caste-race nexus (Paik, 2014; Wilkerson, 2020) will be comprehensive only with the inclusion of the nexus of *caste, gender, class*, and *race*, as Lohia had emphasized. While building transnational alliances across different regions of the world, the initiative to address intersectionality of caste and gender can begin from home. Dalit intellectuals made a move by supporting the initial judgment (Indian Young Lawyers Association vs. State of Kerala, 2018) of the Supreme Court, which permitted the entry of women between age group of ten and fifty years in the Sabarimala temple.[5] The upper caste-class feminists can reciprocate the cause for equality by endorsing political reservation for Dalit, Adivasi and Other Backward Classes women in the pending Women Reservation Bill in Parliament.

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Endnotes

1 Scheduled Castes is a legal categorization denoting castes or groups that are at the bottom of the Indian social hierarchy. They were considered untouchables and denied all rights and privileges in pre-independent India.

2 American scholar Kimberle Crenshaw is credited with coining the term 'intersectionality' in her 1989 article. In India, the nexus between caste, gender, class, etc. was explored by both Ambedkar and Lohia in their respective writings between 1915 and 1960.

3 Crenshaw made an important analysis: 'Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination—combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as black women.'

4 The cited article discusses one of the impacts of transnational alliance of black women as follows: 'Women representatives from thirty-three countries, including Brazil, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Honduras, hold regular regional forums to discuss the specific issues encountered by black women, including high rates of HIV/AIDS, land displacement, exclusion from political office, and the far-reaching impact of neo-liberal economic mandates on their social and economic livelihoods.'

5 The judgment is at present under review before a nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court.

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Speaking is Healing: Dalit Women Gain a Voice through a Charismatic Healing Movement in Nepal

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Abstract

The concept of voice has been central to Dalit studies as well as in other studies such as feminist, subaltern, and social movement studies. These studies have conceptualized voice as an expression of agency and empowerment. They have paid more attention to voice's agentive capacity, and have thus ignored the materiality of voice; for example, the act of speaking itself. Based on my ethnographic fieldwork on a charismatic healing movement called *Sachchai* (truth and/or reform) participated predominantly by Dalit women in Pokhara, Nepal, this article examines why even ordinary acts of speaking—irrespective of the content—matters so much for marginalized women. Dalit women mainly join *Sachchai* to heal their illnesses and sufferings and address other everyday problems. Nonetheless, the testimonial and Bible speeches they deliver in *Sachchai* devotional meetings during the processes of healing allow them to build their confidence and to learn to speak. The ability to speak—as ordinary as telling their name in public, speaking to a stranger or a government official, holding a microphone—becomes a remarkable achievement for these women. The speaking itself is considered as the evidence of healing from their illnesses and suffering. This article, thus, argues that paying attention to speaking itself is crucial for a fuller understanding of voice. While focusing on the act of speaking, this article does not undermine Dalit *Sachchai* women's agency; rather it intends to expose the plight of Dalit women, for whom just uttering their name in the public is a great feat.

Keywords

Voice, charismatic healing, Dalit women, caste, gender, Nepal, *Sachchai*

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Introduction

Dressed in clean clothes, her hair combed, and face slightly made-up, Asha[1] came to her parents-in-law's house one Saturday morning in the summer of 2016. Asha entered the house and fetched a loudspeaker, electric cables, batteries, and a few microphones to the backyard where she cleaned the apparatus with a piece of cloth and checked the sound. A little while later, Asha's husband arrived, and while she was talking to me, he cleaned the backyard of the house and positioned the loudspeaker, connected it to the microphone with cables, fetched a few benches and chairs, and unrolled a plastic carpet on the ground.

Soon women started arriving one by one, holding their babies and with toddlers in tow. About thirty in number and belonging mostly to low or Dalit castes, they sat cross-legged close to each other on the carpet, with a Bible on their laps. The women had gathered, as I later learned, for a weekly *satsang* (devotional gathering) of a charismatic healing movement called *Sachchai* (truth and/or reform). Asha led and managed the branch of the movement in her village. The *satsang* ran for three hours during which the women prayed, sang *bhajans* or hymns, narrated *gawai* (testimonies), and delivered *bachans* (edifying speeches), all of which were amplified by the loudspeaker, and could be heard several hundred meters away. More than anything else, what astonished me was the confident and fluent speeches of these women, who are mostly illiterate farm labourers, and housewives. Until a few years ago they would even hesitate to talk to a stranger or, to talk in a public place. A barely literate and a low-caste woman, Asha, herself spoke for about an hour.

She again showed up at the house later that evening for some work with her mother-in-law. She was eager to hear my impression about the *satsang* and, particularly, the speech she had delivered in the morning. I said her speech was nice. 'I had seen you capture the video of my speech. Does it look good?' asked Asha. She was interested to see the video, and after watching it, she said she felt a bit embarrassed to see herself on video. She compared herself now and six years ago when I first met her: 'You know I used to be shy even to talk to you. Now I can speak with anyone and before any number of people.' Asha told me that her ability to speak holding a microphone was the biggest achievement in her life.

Why has the ability to speak holding a microphone—irrespective of what they say—become a significant achievement for Asha and thousands of other Dalit women, who have embraced *Sachchai*? Is their speaking at these gatherings a medium of communicating with God? Or, does it represent something else? What does it tell us about the predicament of Dalit women in contemporary Nepal? In this article, I am going to show why the act of speaking itself, rather than 'voice' as it is usually understood by scholars in the sense of agency and empowerment, is significant for marginalized people such as Dalit *Sachchai* women. For lay observers, *Sachchai* women's speaking through a microphone might seem nothing extraordinary. However, both caste and patriarchy[2] have muted and continue to mute not only Dalit women's political expression and power, but also the sound of their voices.[3] Therefore, if we examine activities at *Sachchai* through Nepal's historical and cultural contexts, Dalit *Sachchai* women's speaking looks meaningful.

The purpose of this article is two-fold. First, building on the theories in religion and media studies that consider media such as the religious speaking in *Sachchai* as serving communicative functions, I am going to show how religious speaking can

itself be an end goal, and not a medium. Scholars of religion and media take media, particularly religious sounds such as loudspeakers, music, and speeches, as a form of mediation or a communicative genre (De Vries, 2001; Hirschkind, 2006; Meyer, 2010). For example, Birgit Meyer (2010, p. 750-51) considers the role of media in Pentecostalism as 'aesthetic persuasion.' The persuasive role of Dalit *Sachchai* women's edifying speeches cannot be denied. But my ethnography shows that speaking through a microphone, for them, is not just a means of expression, but is an end in itself –a way of realizing dignity and self-respect. More than just using a microphone and giving speeches as a medium through which empowerment may be achieved, they gain a voice through the very act of speaking.

Secondly, building on the recent literature that criticizes dominant conceptualizations of voice and pays attention to the materiality of a voice or the sound of a voice (for example, Dunn & Jones, 1994; Hirschkind, 2006; Taylor, 2009; Weidman, 2006), this article will show how paying attention to the act of speaking itself, the sound of a voice and sound technology such as microphone can enhance our understanding of voice.

In the pages that follow I first briefly introduce the *Sachchai* movement in Nepal. I then explore, in the next section, how Dalit *Sachchai* women learn to speak in *Sachchai satsangs*. I show how women build their confidence to speak in various ways such as through the power of the divine that they receive, and the social and emotional support they get from fellow women believers, and the community of listeners *Sachchai* provides. In the succeeding section, I explain the symbolic meaning that holding a microphone carries for these women. Microphones symbolize prestige and empowerment for these women. Thereafter, I will dwell on what speaking means for *Sachchai* women. I will also seek to explain how and why they consider their speaking as evidence of their healing from illnesses, pain, and suffering. I conclude by explaining why giving attention to the acts of speaking enhances our understanding of voice.

The *Sachchai* Movement in Nepal

This article is based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2016 and 2019 on a charismatic healing movement called *Sachchai* in the city of Pokhara and its surrounding villages in Nepal. I observed hundreds of *Sachchai satsangs*, listened to hundreds of testimonies, held in-depth interviews with 50 women 'believers' (mostly Dalit women), and had informal conversations with dozens of them. There are many competing groups within the *Sachchai* movement, with at least half a dozen groups in Pokhara alone. My fieldwork focused on one group, the largest group, of the movement called *Ishwariya Bhajan Mandal Sachchai Kendra* Nepal (Divine Psalm Ministry *Sachchai* Centre Nepal). This group alone has more than one hundred branches across the predominantly Hindu landlocked country in the Himalayas.

Sachchai is a relatively new religious movement, one among various competing faith-based organizations/movements in Nepal.[4] It started at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and then rapidly expanded across towns and villages in the country. *Sachchai* now has hundreds of branches and hundreds of thousands of followers in Nepal.[5] Nepal's social, political and economic contexts in the last two decades provided fertile ground for *Sachchai*'s rapid expansion: the decade-long Maoist civil war ended in 2006 and Nepal became a secular state and the period

after the war was marked by extreme political instabilities, huge international labour migration of men, dire lack of public goods and services, and, most importantly, rising domestic violence against women.

Sachchai has particularly appealed to women. More than ninety percent *Sachchai* believers were women.[6] Women also have a significant presence in leadership positions in the organization. Among women believers, those from low-caste and poor backgrounds constitute the majority. In my conversation with them, some non-believers, especially upper-caste women, characterized *Sachchai* as a 'low-caste religion.' Such characterization and the overwhelming majority of Dalits in *Sachchai* had primarily aroused my research interest in *Sachchai.* The attendees at Asha's branch where I happened to observe for the first time during my fieldwork were mostly Dalit women. During the course of my fieldwork, I observed a gradual increase in upper-caste women's presence in the movement, but not in the *satsang* at Asha's branch. And, by the end of my fieldwork, upper-caste women had a significant presence in *Sachchai*. Yet, Dalit women still held the majority: they led a significant number of *Sachchai* branches and the majority of leaders in the movement were Dalit women. The *Sachchai* group which I studied, *Sachchai* Kendra Nepal, was started and led together by a Dalit man and his upper-caste Brahmin wife, both in their late thirties.[7]

Fig. 1: A *Satsang of Sachchai* Kendra Nepal. Pokhara, 2019

Sachchai claimed to address the problems of its believers such as illnesses and diseases, pain and suffering, household economic difficulties, family fights and misunderstandings, children's poor performance in school exams, poor productivity of crops and cattle, and so on. Yet, the majority of women mainly embraced *Sachchai* for three key reasons: healing their illnesses and diseases, repairing relationships with their husbands, and improving their household economic status. Bible study, speaking

in tongues (glossolalia), belief in the Holy Spirit, and prayers were key elements of addressing the problems. Although *Sachchai* believers studied the Bible, they denied that they were Christians and disliked being associated with any form of Christianity. Sachchai believers were allowed to hold on to their previous religious and cultural practices, rituals and festivals.[8] But the believers were discouraged from worshipping Hindu gods, visiting temples, shamans, and oracles.

Learning to Speak

To my question of what was the biggest achievement of *Sachchai*, nearly every Dalit *Sachchai* woman (including leaders and ordinary believers) I spoke with, either said they 'learned how to speak', or 'became able to speak' through *Sachchai*. When I further asked what they specifically learned, the responses were varied: Some said they now had confidence to talk to strangers, others said they could now confidently introduce themselves to strangers, to high-status persons, or in public gatherings, and still others said they could now deliver a speech at a public gathering. Before joining *Sachchai*, they said they feared speaking both at home and in public. Many of them said they did not even know how to tell their name (*nam bhanna ni aaune thiyena*). So, for many of these women, even speaking out their name through a microphone and just uttering some words before an audience was a great achievement.

Their admission that they could not say their name was not just symbolic. It had literal meanings, for two reasons. First, I assume that the understanding of what is a proper introduction was largely shaped by Nepal's development discourse. In my own observation, women's literacy classes held in the 1990s would teach them to introduce themselves. I recall how my mom, who was then in her sixties, practised introducing herself. Second, many of my interlocutors felt uncomfortable just to pronounce their name in public. I asked Maya why. Like the majority of Dalit *Sachchai* believers, she did not go to school and her formal name was seldom used by her family and in her village. Everybody in her family and village called her by the nickname *kanchhi*, a name commonly given to the youngest daughter in a family. *Kanchhi* was not considered a proper or formal name, but since Maya mostly engaged in domestic work, she did not need to use her official name. And, whenever she had to introduce herself to a stranger, Maya would find it uncomfortable to use her formal name. People in villages were called through names derived from kinship relations. Instead of using her proper name, a woman would be referred to as someone's daughter, or as someone's wife, or as someone's mother, or as her birth rank in the family. This is still widely the norm in Pokhara and surrounding villages. Additionally, Dalits often used to get derogatory names mostly drawn from their caste and other features such as skin colour, height, and weight.[9] One recent anecdote shows how just being able to speak is still important for Dalit women. Punam Yadav, (2016) who conducted fieldwork in the early 2010s among women of her native village in southern Nepal said that, 'Women of this lower caste community, whose names were hardly known to anyone, are now introducing themselves by their own names. … This is the community where women were banned from going to a literacy class just a few years ago (p. 164).

Just being able to speak was not only important for Dalit women but also for upper-caste women. Saubhagya Shah (2018) conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the

late 1990s among members of Women Development Section, a women's organization in Eastern Nepal formed and supported by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization. In evaluating the impacts of the project, he writes (p.206):

> When asked to identify the most significant contribution of the WDS for local women, the activists invariably say that it provided a forum where they could find their voice. *Haimi lai kam se kam bolna sakne banayo*—it made us at least able to speak—this is how they evaluated the project's impact. Before they had their organization, the women say, they did not know how to speak in public and that they were shy and hesitant to take up public issues.

Shah notes that although the project aimed to support women from low-income households, women's learning of how to speak was an important byproduct. This anecdote shows how even upper-caste women[10] could not speak in public and how they required many years of external, international organizations' support to learn how to speak.

Nonetheless, *Sachchai* women now had become more confident about speaking with strangers. During my fieldwork Dalit *Sachchai* women readily accepted my request for a conversation and an interview with them. I met and interviewed many of my interlocutors outside their homes, in restaurants, tea shops, and in their businesses. They were much franker and more forthcoming than I had expected. A few women initially showed some hesitation by conceding that they did not how to talk (*kura garna aaudina*). But eventually, as they spent more time with me and became more comfortable, they spoke very well. Otherwise, an average Nepali woman, as I observed during my visits to Pokhara, would remain hesitant to speak to a stranger, especially a male. Many Dalit *Sachchai* women mentioned their interaction with me as an example of their confidence in speaking that they achieved through *Sachchai*. They acknowledged that they would not have had such confident conversations with me had they not embraced *Sachchai*.

How did *Sachchai* help to boost women's confidence and to learn and practise speaking? First, speaking was central to *Sachchai*'s healing process. Slogans such as 'testimonies are medicine' (*gabaile dabai hunchha)*, and 'the more one speaks, the more an evil spirit is hurt *(jati bolyo uti dusta lai polyo),* that *Sachchai* women often invoke, highlight the importance of speaking in *Sachchai* healings. Every *satsang* participant got an opportunity to narrate their testimonies, conduct prayer meetings, and sing songs. Additionally, unlike in some Pentecostal groups,[11] *Sachchai* offered women leaders and believers (including Dalits) an opportunity to give edifying speeches. In every *satsang*, at least half a dozen women volunteered to narrate their testimonies, give edifying speeches, and sing devotional songs. Even when a woman was holding a prayer session or singing a song, she would usually deliver a brief speech. A typical *satsang* sequentially comprised the following activities: an initial prayer conducted by a woman; one or two bhajans; five to seven testimonies by different women; one or two devotional songs; five to seven edifying speeches by different women; one or two devotional songs; edifying speeches by both main and deputy leaders of the branch, one or two devotional songs; and a final prayer by one woman, and lastly one or two devotional songs. The *satsangs* were held thrice a week in the centre (central place

or hub) and twice a week in most branches. Many women in Pokhara attended all the weekly *satsangs* at both places. Speaking at the centre's *satsang* that was usually attended by about 2500 to 3000 believers was considered a remarkable achievement for any *Sachchai* woman believer.

Second, *Sachchai,* with its empathetic listeners, provided a community of social and emotional support to comrades in turmoil. The emotional support from fellow believers became crucial for building confidence for a newcomer. Believers encouraged a hesitant woman to take the microphone and speak to the audience. When a woman would finally stand up to speak but mumbled, or could not find words to speak, or could not hold the microphone properly, those sitting near her helped. They would hug a trembling woman and provide physical support, help her to hold the microphone, and guide them on what to say next. When a lady could not speak, she would often, as I observed, tell her testimony to another woman who, in turn, conveyed it to the audience. The audience did not deride a mumbling woman. Instead, they provided emotional support by cheering and applauding every word or sentence that she uttered. Thus, the love, care, and support a woman received from fellow members helped build her confidence in her ability to speak.

Sachchai women thus, found a community of listeners, who heard their speeches compassionately and identified with them. These women told me that they had never been heard by anyone in their families and neighbourhoods, and that they had finally found some people in *Sachchai* who heard them. Having someone who hears one's pain and suffering is healing itself. But theoretically, as scholars have argued, an act of speaking becomes unsuccessful if it is not heard in the intended way. With regard to her famous question, 'Can the subaltern speak?' Gayatri Spivak (1992) points out the importance of subaltern voice being heard: 'When you say cannot speak, it means that if speaking involves speaking and listening, this possibility of response, responsibility, does not exist in the subaltern's sphere' (Spivak, 1992, p. 42). She suggests that even if subalterns speak, they are not heard. Spivak's assertion rings true when *Sachchai* women said they were not heard by anybody, even when they spoke.

Thirdly, Dalit *Sachchai* women said that they spoke in accordance with God's instructions and support. God was supposed to speak through the believers' mouths, and every word a believer uttered was supposed to be God's word. In a way, this is both an acceptance of paternalism as well as an articulation of the embodiment of voice that transcends gender. Additionally, God was a key source of inspiration, confidence, and legitimacy for the things that the women said when they spoke. One day, I asked Asha how she learned to speak in *Sachchai satsangs*. She answered, 'God has told us, "You [woman] can speak. You Dalit women can speak. I have chosen you to speak. So, don't fear my children. I am here to help you." She claimed that her new God, Jesus Christ, had chosen Dalit women because they were the most oppressed people in society, and he wanted to begin his mission of social transformation with Dalit women. According to Asha, her speech was 'directed' by God. Believers, during their speeches, would generally make a disclaimer that whatever was spoken was according to God's will, not their own will. When a woman stood up for the purpose of speaking, but mumbled or could not find words to speak, it was interpreted by the other believers that God did not want her to speak at that moment. She was consoled by saying that God would

bring her the words later when he wanted to speak. The burden of speaking was placed on God, and this served as an effective tool both to encourage women to speak and to legitimize what they said.

Sachchai women equated their speaking with that of a child who has just begun to learn the language. They considered themselves as children of God and their embracing *Sachchai* as a new birth into the divine world. 'How long has it been since you became a child of God?' they often asked fellow believers. Thus, a *Sachchai* believer was supposed to learn and practise speaking the 'new language.' God was believed to be teaching them how to speak in the same way as parents teach their children how to speak. 'I am just a five-year-old child of God. How does a five-year-old child speak? You know it. My speech is like this.' This was how some women would relate their progress in learning to speak to fellow members in *satsangs*. Such statements were a modest expression of praising their own speaking skills while acknowledging that they were still on the learning curve. *Sachchai* women often characterized their past saying, 'In the past (in the earthly life), we were dumb. We had mouths, but we could not speak.'

What do these women speak in the *satsangs*? *Sachchai* women usually explain the pain and suffering they underwent, the status of their healing, and encouragement to other women based on their experience and learning. Those who give an edifying speech, additionally explain passages from the Bible. They pick a passage and explain it based on their understanding and life-experience, with examples and illustrations. They implicitly critique the sources of their suffering and pain, the structures of power and domination, and injustice and oppression they had to undergo—but all from a divine perspective. They explain their illness, pain, and suffering as consequences of the influence of an evil spirit. As Evans-Pritchard's famous insight about Azande belief in witchcraft (1937) reminds us, blaming an evil spirit for their illnesses, pain, and suffering does not mean that they do not know the real cause. The women's speeches revealed that they knew it very well. Even I am aware of this fact, and my analysis has focused on what they think, say, or claim. However, I choose to focus on what they valued and why.

Holding the Microphone

We now discuss the significance of the microphone in this movement. 'You all will speak through this microphone one day,' asserted a *Sachchai* leader in a *satsang*. Believers raised their hands above their heads and clapped in agreement. The leader solicited the believers' responses to her series of questions: 'Do politicians have the exclusive right to speak through a microphone?' 'No.' 'Do men have the exclusive right to speak through a microphone?' 'No.' 'Do educated persons have the exclusive right to speak through a microphone?' 'No.' 'Everyone can speak through a microphone.' 'Yes. Everyone can.'

The leader, then, raised the microphone and said, 'this microphone belongs to you all, come grab it and speak.' She urged her fellow women believers to abandon their fear, to build confidence, and to speak through the microphone in *Sachchai satsangs*. Reminding them what God said about fear in the Bible, she explained why fear was the main source of suffering and why one should abandon fear in order to heal. In the

Sachchai worldview, evil spirits can easily hurt those who are weak and full of fear, and such evil spirits are only defeated by being strong and confident. Thus, the leader assured fellow believers that their fear of speaking would vanish one day and that they too would be able to come forward and grab the microphone. For *Sachchai* women, speaking through the microphone symbolized courage, confidence, and power—the main weapons for defeating evil spirits. Being able to speak through a microphone was considered a sign of healing.

Furthermore, by invoking the idea that it is also the right of women, illiterate, and common people to speak through a microphone, the leader indicated the symbolic power of a microphone. For the leader and other believers, the microphone symbolized prestige and empowerment. It follows that women who had similar educational, economic, and caste backgrounds to those of the majority of *Sachchai* women, but who were denied access to microphones, were denied prestige, status, and power. Outside of *Sachchai*, speaking through a microphone was a privilege mostly enjoyed by men, especially educated men and politicians. Public meetings in Pokhara, and in Nepal in general, are generally held in a highly hierarchical fashion. Seating is arranged in such a way that high-status guests are seated on special chairs on an often-elevated dais while others are seated at ground level. Those seated on the dais are called upon to sit in an order based on their ranks. The order of who speaks first and who speaks next is also determined according to a person's status or rank based on occupation, official position, and so on.[12] The lowest-ranked person speaks first while the highest-ranked person speaks at the end of the meeting. Hierarchy is occasionally contested resulting into controversies and fights. Thus, any public meeting in Pokhara serves as a platform to display status, prestige, and power. Speaking through a microphone while standing on a dais before an audience has given a sense of worth, status, and prestige to *Sachchai* women.

This 'status symbolism' of microphone in Nepal may be one reason that *Sachchai* women initially felt uncomfortable while speaking through a microphone. During my fieldwork, I observed that many women are hesitant to go to the dais and tell their testimony through a microphone in *Sachchai satsangs*. They would refuse to do so despite repeated requests from *Sachchai* leaders. They rather chose to tell their testimonies from the floor level without a microphone, confessing that they would feel shy about speaking through the microphone.

One day, I visited a Dalit *Sachchai* woman, Kalpana, in her garment stall in a market complex. We talked about her testimonial speech that she had delivered the previous week in an 'international' *satsang* held in Pokhara. Brimming with self-pride, she said, 'since I addressed such a big crowd attended by such "big" persons, there is nothing now that I may not be able to do. I think I can do whatever tasks I may need to do' (*aba maile garna nasakne bhanne kei kura chhaina. Je kura pani garna sakchhu jasto lagchha*). The *Sachchai Kendra* had organized an international *satsang* in the summer of 2018 in Pokhara. It was attended by more than twenty thousand *Sachchai* believers and leaders from across the country and from India and the USA. Nepal's Deputy Prime Minister cum Health Minister was the chief guest. Kalpana delivered her testimonial speech in the *satsang* which became proof of her courage and power. That courage and power is not just related to her speaking. She believed that she could now solve or deal with any kind of problem she may encounter. She was given just five minutes to deliver her testimony. But for her speaking through the microphone for

those five minutes became her greatest achievement and the evidence of her inherent courage and power.

Speaking through a microphone, therefore, held special significance for *Sachchai* leaders and believers. They stressed upon not just their ability to speak but to speak through a microphone. "*Mike ma bolna sakne bhaye*" (I was able to speak through microphone) was a response many women gave me when I asked them what they gained through *Sachchai*. During my conversations with them, *Sachchai* leaders and ordinary believers often spoke with pride about their abilities to speak through a microphone and considered such speaking as proof of *Sachchai*'s legitimacy. 'Did you see how women in *Sachchai satsangs* speak through microphone?' *Sachchai* women often asked me. Some non-believers with whom I interacted also appreciated the confidence of *Sachchai* women to speak through microphones. Even die-hard critics of *Sachchai* admitted this as a great achievement for *Sachchai* and its Dalit women believers. An upper-caste Hindu man who was a vocal critic of *Sachchai* and had posted a video on YouTube accusing *Sachchai* for supposedly 'Christianizing' Nepal attributed the popularity of *Sachchai* among women to 'illiteracy, poverty, and foreign money.' These are common allegations of upper-caste Hindus against *Sachchai*. Admitting that his wife had also briefly embraced *Sachchai*, he cited two genuine reasons for attraction of women toward *Sachchai*. One reason, he claimed, was *Sachchai*'s declaration of caste equality which appealed to low-caste women. The other was '*Sachchai*'s offering of respect to women by giving them microphones.' He however said that women should not 'convert to Christianity' just for having the opportunity to speak through microphones.

Fig. II: A Dalit *Sachchai* Woman Giving an Edifying Speech in a Branch's *Satsang*. Pokhara, 2019

Microphones did not just amplify sound to make a speaker audible to the audience. And, they did not just symbolize confidence and empowerment as discussed. They also served aesthetic functions that *Sachchai* leaders and believers did not explicitly acknowledge. On the one hand, the theatrical and entertaining sound produced by the microphones and loudspeakers served as a means to attract believers. Loudspeaker sounds in *satsangs* were often deafeningly loud. When I asked Asha why she used the microphone in her branch even if the audience could hear the orator without the speakers, she simply answered that her sisters, i.e. fellow women believers, liked to speak through the microphone. Although she did not mention it, one possibility is that the *Sachchai* speakers actually liked the aesthetic function of the loudspeaker's sound. This aesthetic function of sound in charismatic healing movements such as Pentecostalism has been well acknowledged by scholars.

On the other hand, the loud sound produced by the loudspeakers served as a tool to reach out to non-believers. The aesthetic function of sound and speeches that scholars such as Birgit Meyer (2010) noted also helped to attract non-believers, especially in Nepal where reaching out to non-believers in other ways was challenging given the stringent anti-conversion and anti-proselytizing laws.[13] In other words, the highly amplified sound and emotional speeches served as a tool for evangelizing. This could be one reason why the volume of the loudspeakers was kept high and why the loudspeakers were positioned facing outward from the *satsang* buildings. Most *Sachchai* buildings were not sound-proofed: some centres did not have any wall or, were not adequately walled, and others were half-walled. *Satsangs* in many village branches were held in courtyards. In any case, the sound from the loudspeakers easily escaped through the sastang venues so that *Sachchai* women's neighbours and other strangers could hear they said. A loudspeaker might be essential in larger *satsangs* to make the speaker's sound audible to the entire audience, but it may not be required in smaller meetings. Yet, microphones and loudspeakers were used even when an audience could listen to a speaker without a loudspeaker. Yet, most of the village branches, attended by less than 30 or 40 believers, used loudspeakers. Additionally, *Sachchai* branches held their annual congregations mostly in public places, often attended by lots of people. I observed an annual *satsang* of a branch in Kathmandu which was held in a public lawn at the middle of a busy intersection. The fence around the lawn, in every direction, was tightly packed with a public audience and people from shops and houses around the lawn were also watching the *satsang*.

Speaking is Healing

'God made me able to speak standing before you all, this is my biggest testimony.' I heard many women say this in *satsangs* when they stood to speak about their experiences or give edifying speeches. Initially, I could not make a sense of this claim. Some women said they had been so severely ill that they never thought that they would ever again be able to stand on their own or be able to utter words. 'But when I heard more of these testimonies and paid close attention to what they said about their illnesses after they had recovered, I began to understand why they considered their speaking in the *satsang* as proof of their healing,' said one of them. These women had been rendered virtually speechless and silenced by their families and societies, especially when they had conflicts with their husbands and in-laws, or when they had health issues, mainly depression. They had been ostracized, had no confidence

to speak and no one listened to them. This was why speaking at a *satsang* to an eager audience came to be cherished by them.

Even when women were not seriously ill or did not have conflicts in family, in a Hindu family in Nepal a married woman is not usually allowed to speak out her mind or talk to her neighbours and share her feelings and family issues with them. A husband's family would fear that she would reveal family secrets to neighbours and relatives. Also, a mother-in-law would not want her daughter-in-law to spend time talking to her husband, lest she would wean him away and stop supporting the family financially if he got close to his wife (see Bennett, 1983). Des Chen (1998) details how a married woman—known as *bhauju* in Nepali—whose husband lived in India, was not allowed by her mother- and father-in-law to talk with her neighbours. The married couple's daughter always accompanied the married woman to ensure that she would not disclose any family matters or suffering inflicted by the family to her neighbours. Bhauju was a middle-caste woman and Bennett's interlocutors were upper-caste women. But the patriarchal norms that restricted bhauju and upper-caste women from speaking with others had equally permeated Dalit lives as well. Kalpana, the Dalit *Sachchai* leader whom I introduced earlier, told me that she was similarly accompanied by her husband's family members when her husband was living abroad. She said that her father-in-law neither gave her letters her husband sent to her, nor told her when her husband called for her on the phone. Furthermore, her in-laws used to get angry when she spoke to any men or women in the village. Thus, a married woman in the Nepalese society seldom had a chance to talk with others, let alone share her suffering and pain.

One main reason why many women joined *Sachchai* was the isolation they faced as a result of abuse and violence from their husbands and their families, severe illness (mostly depression), and their ostracization from family and neighbours. Many *Sachchai* women characterized their condition as equivalent to a bug that lives in a swamp (*naliko kira*): 'My life was like a bug that lives in a swamp, no one cared about me. I was discarded and ostracized by my family,' they would say in their testimonies.

I again refer to Asha's example, which shows how speaking was significant to her in light of social and family ostracizations and her long battle with depression. Asha became seriously ill for seven years after she gave birth to her third child. She suffered from what is called depression in medical terms, but Hindu astrologers and shamans suggested that she had been possessed by a goddess (*devi chadeko)*. She accepted the diagnosis of the shamans and proceeded by building a temple in her home, observing strict fasting, and performing worship. Her neighbours accused her of being a witch and cut off interactions with her. She was ostracized from her family and neighbours and was treated like dirt.

Then Asha heard of *Sachchai* and attended a satasng. When she saw other suffering women speaking through a microphone, she said she dreamed of speaking like them. Within two weeks, Asha spoke into the microphone, sang a song and danced, and spoke about her illness. That was the first time she had ever spoken through a microphone and shared her suffering and pain in front of a mass of interested people. She said no one in her family or neighbourhood was interested in listening to her, but in *Sachchai* she found people who would listen to her. As her story reveals, women's immediate

cause for according value to speaking comes from being unheard by anyone in their own families and neighbourhood. Their feeling of neglect, ostracization, and lack of opportunity to say what they feel like is the immediate cause of their yearning to speak.

The second reason for embracing *Sachchai* was caste and patriarchy which had brutally suppressed their sound and voice, and the new faith gave them a chance to speak. I now present a story of another Dalit woman which illustrates the larger structures of caste and patriarchy that provide the contexts to the *Sachchai* women's desire to speak. Into her fifth year in the movement, Pushpa had now become an eloquent orator. A woman in her late twenties, Pushpa had finished her undergraduate degree, unlike other girls in her community, and was working as a housekeeper in a hotel in the town. It was a job that was unrelated to her degree, and paid poorly. Pushpa belonged to a traditional caste of singers—the lowest among low castes—whose males eked their living by wandering around villages singing songs and playing the fiddle in return for food and money. In addition to entertaining people by singing they would also serve as newsmongers spreading local news, messages, stories, myths, and events about recent incidents through their songs (See, Weisethaunet, 1998). For these tasks, they would need a good voice as well as awareness about news and incidents to survive. But their women stayed home; they would not travel.

I met and interviewed Pushpa one summer evening. She initially went to *Sachchai* not for herself, but for her father's illness. Upon hearing *Sachchai* women's exciting speeches there, she decided to embrace the movement. From her childhood, she had always wanted to speak, but had lots of inhibitions. She would hide when someone came to her home and never spoke a word in her school. She described herself before joining *Sachchai* in the following words:

> I would be shy to just sit among a few people. If I attended a wedding ceremony, I always wanted to avoid sitting with people. I used to be too shy to dance. People needed to pull me by my arms to force me to dance, and sometimes I felt like my arms were going to detach from my body. Now, I don't feel shy at all. I can put up with any kind and any number of people. Now, I dance spontaneously. Nobody needs to request me or force me. Now when I listen to a song, my legs start shaking reflexively. Why should we fear? A week after I joined *Sachchai*, I sang a devotional song. In the following week I narrated my testimonial and a few weeks later, I was able to teach the Bible. I don't know how I got that courage.

Why did Dalit *Sachchai* women, like Asha and Pushpa, desire so much to speak? What do they achieve from their speaking? As the cases of these two women show, Dalit *Sachchai* women realize self-worth, self-respect, and a sense of empowerment. Within *Sachchai*, they get appreciation and respect from fellow women, get recognition and status as a leader, and get invitations to speak from other branches. Outside of *Sachchai*, their husbands, husbands' families, and neighbours begin showing some level of respect to them. To reiterate, it is only the high-status and powerful people who speak in Nepal.

Dalit *Sachchai* women's desire to speak becomes more understandable within the larger contexts of Nepal. Speaking was an important marker for women and men in Nepal especially after the 1990s. The decades after 1990 in Nepal has seen a surge in

citizens' desire to speak in the public sphere, as being able to do so represents freedom, modernity and political claims. The fall of autocratic monarchical rule and introduction of limited democracy in 1990, the subsequent growth of public media such as radios and newspapers, empowerment programmes run by the state and other development agencies, and the rise in overall literacy rates—all these factors emboldened and contributed to actualizing that desire. Public voice acquired enormous significance in post-1990s Nepal, as political voice was supposed to be required to fight for and sustain democracy and to achieve the country's development and modernization (Kunreuther, 2014). These decades also saw a significant rise in women's as well as other marginalized groups' voices for their rights, equality, and justice. Dalit *Sachchai* women's desire to speak may have been shaped by these discourses around freedom, modernity, and selfhood.

Conclusion

The ethnographic examples presented in the previous sections have, I hope, shown why just being able to speak through a microphone and standing before an audience—irrespective of what they said—mattered so much for the Dalit women I studied. Their speaking through a microphone mattered to them so much so that it signified their condition of being healed from illnesses, pain, and suffering. Why did these women give so much value to such 'ordinary' acts such as uttering some words, holding a microphone, or standing and speaking before an audience? It is because, as I showed in this article, these women had been brutally silenced, both in their families and society. Many women said that once upon a time they had even hesitated to just utter their names, or to introduce themselves to others, or hold conversations with strangers or high-status officials. Besides enduring silencing norms of patriarchy and castes, these women became mute because of their immediate condition of ostracization, disrespect, and abandonment by their husbands, husbands' families, and neighbours. Under such circumstances, they neither had confidence to say what they wanted to say nor found someone who would hear what they had to say. *Sachchai* gave them a platform to speak; the women thus realized some degree of worth, self-respect, and power through their interactions and exposure in the movement.

I have shown that the speaking of Dalit *Sachchai* women did not just serve as a means of conveying a religious message—a communicative function, as scholars of religion have argued. Dalit *Sachchai* women's speaking is an end in itself that produces a kind of embodied empowerment and fulfils their desire to speak. Similarly, I have shown how paying attention to speaking itself—irrespective of its content—can enhance our understanding of voice. This aspect of voice, the speaking, has been ignored by scholars who have studied voice, including those from feminist, subaltern, and Dalit studies. As I discussed in the introduction of this article, voice is generally taken for granted and is mostly understood as an index to agency and empowerment.

While focusing on the act of speaking, this article, however, does not minimize Dalit *Sachchai* women's agency and empowerment, or the emancipatory potential that the act of speaking signifies. These women's utterances certainly contain much political potential and their speaking has surely brought many micro-level changes in terms of

gender relations in their lives. Speaking in *Sachchai satsangs* is, to a certain extent, an act of resistance to the patriarchal and caste structures that silenced their voice. Although my examples clearly suggest the agentive potential, I have not explored this in the article. For this reason, what I have presented here is just a half story. I did not focus on the other half of the story which is the agentive element of the women's speaking, because other scholars have paid ample attention to it. For example, Saba Mahmood (2005) has famously revealed agency among women who participated in Islamic piety movements in Egypt that aimed to cultivate Muslim ethics. Closer to home, Nathaniel Roberts (2017) has eloquently shown how Dalit Pentecostal women in Chennai, South India, used their suffering 'as a tool of social suasion'. He terms such an agency as 'agentive suffering.' What I have focused in my article is the women who I studied, and what they most often commented upon.

This article intended to expose the condition of a section of women, specifically Dalit women, for whom just uttering their name in the public was a great feat. While other sections of women in Nepal are much more outspoken and empowered, and have even become radical and revolutionary agents of transformation (For example, See Lohani-Chase, 2008; Manchanda, 2004; Pettigrew & Shneiderman, 2014; Yadav, 2016). My article has shown a contrasting picture to the celebratory portrayal of Nepali women seen in these studies. For the women I studied, raising a voice for political rights is very far from reality. Instead, just being able to speak—to say their own name in public, to utter some words loudly, to talk to a stranger—is what mattered most to these women.

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Endnotes

1 All names are pseudonyms.

2 Patriarchy in South Asia is dictated mostly by caste, and patriarchy can be termed more precisely as Brahminical patriarchy (see Arya, 2020).

3 Guru and Sarukkai (2019, pp. 60-66) state that in the past in India, the mere sound of a Dalit would pollute an upper caste, hence Dalits were not allowed even to produce sound in certain situations.

4 For an account of new religious movements in Nepal, see Toffin (2016).

5 For the origin of *Sachchai*, I interviewed *Sachchai* founders—an American man (living in the USA) and the other a Japanese man (settled and living in India)—when they had visited Pokhara to attend a *Sachchai satsang*. According to their accounts, they were part of an Indian mission of a Biblical group called The Way International founded in the USA in the early 1940s. After being dissatisfied with the evangelical group, they founded *Sachchai* in the late 1970s, as unorganized, family-based congregations so that a believer did not necessarily need to go to or become a member of a Church and also that a believer could study the Bible irrespective or his/her religious and cultural backgrounds.

6 This is not uncommon in the global context of charismatic Christianity, such as Pentecostalism, which is overwhelmingly participated by women (Robbins, 2004, p. 132). In Nepal, women outnumbered Pentecostal churches in Bhaktapur (Gibson, 2017).

7 Leading a religious group by an inter-caste couple in a deeply rooted caste society is itself significant in many ways. She sometimes used her Brahmin surname that clearly proclaimed her Brahmin status, and sometimes used her Brahmin surname together with the Dalit surname inherited from her husband that sounded like a Brahmin surname. Many believers knew their real castes, while some presumed both the couple to be Brahmins. But believers I interacted with were not concerned about the couple's caste identity, as they said, 'caste does not matter in the kingdom of God.'

8 This phenomenon in which Jesus Christ is followed while continuing to practice religions that were practiced before their introduction to Jesus Christ is evident in other parts of South Asia. For example, the *Khrist Bhakta* of Chennai, South India consider Jesus as an incarnation of the Hindu god Brahman (For example, see, San Chirico, 2014), and the

Jesus *Imandar* of Dhaka, Bangladesh, follow Jesus Christ but continue to celebrate Muslim festivals(For example, see, Jørgensen, 2008).

9 Uma Shrestha (2000, p. 41) observed the 'abundance of kin terms … used as personal names' among a low caste group in Kathmandu. She also observed younger generations' embarrassment for their first names that were derived from their caste.

10 The women researched and cited by Shah, no doubt, were upper-caste women. Dalit women had little access to development programs and, hence, they had little chance to learn how to speak, as compared to upper-caste women.

11 For example, Nathaniel Roberts mentions that in South Indian Dalit slum Pentecostalism, where 85 to 90 percent of believers were women, Pentecostal women were ineligible to be ordained as pastor and hence were 'confined to non-speaking and supportive roles' (Roberts, 2016, p. 207).

12 Hertzog (2011, pp. 182-184) provides an account based on her observation of a women's literacy training program. She finds that even for women's empowerment projects, all the speakers (except her) were (upper-caste) male while all the listeners were women.

13 Proselytizing is illegal in Nepal. One who proselytizes or assists in proselytizing is punishable by up to five years of imprisonment and up to fifty thousand Nepali rupees (roughly equivalent to USD500) fine. This law is murky, so that even the performance of baptism could be considered as converting or proselytizing.

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Intersecting Dalit and Cultural Studies: De-brahmanizing the Disciplinary Space[1]

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Abstract

The paper begins with the context in which Dalit culture and resistance emerges and the way brahmanical social order tries to maintain their *status quo* through established cultural inequalities with the dominance of power and knowledge. By invoking different claims of dominant epistemologies re-articulated by Dalit intellectuals and locating the cultural past of Dalit humiliation, this paper examines the anti-caste discourse and the Dalit cultural resistance from the colonial and postcolonial time. With an attempt to bring in the intersections of Dalit and cultural studies, the paper argues that by challenging brahmanical cultural knowledge production, Dalits can reclaim power and knowledge in relation with the 'politics of difference'. The Dalit aesthetic decenters the cultural production and circulation of the hitherto grand narratives. Further, it attempts to de-brahmanize the established disciplinary space by bringing the discourse of Dalit experience of caste and humiliation into mainstream academia. Lastly, drawing from the interdisciplinary context, the paper has elaborated the possibility of the making of a field of Dalit Cultural Studies as a step forward- a newer way for the cultural resistance of the oppressed.

Keywords

Dalit culture, de-brahmanization, anti-caste, interdisciplinary, Dalit studies, resistance

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> The most important strategy of the Dalit movement is a coupling of the cultural theory of despair with the politics of hope…Ambedkar himself provided the ideological basis for this cultural theory of despair…the intellectual biography of Ambedkar and the ideological topography of the Dalit movement merge together to produce a rage-filled reading of Indian history and culture.
>
> (Nagaraj, 2010, pp.105-106).

> There are historical reasons that gave a structural advantage to the top of the twice-born (TTB), which is the section of the upper layer of the social hierarchy in India, in consolidating its privileged position in doing theory. Historically accumulated cultural inequalities seem to have reinforced Dalit epistemological closure. This in effect left the realm of reflectivity entirely free for the TTB. Such closure has its sanction in Manu's thinking.
>
> (Guru, 2012, p.16).

> [...]if experience and knowledge are inextricably interlinked in social sciences, then the location of the knowledge producer, the researcher, in social structure is crucial from the perspective of production of knowledge. That is, the perspective from below is necessitated due to the politics of location. The process of production of knowledge and the advantages emanating out of one's location in social structure are invariably linked.
>
> (as cited in Kumar, 2014, p. 25).

> [...] in search of the debris of history. I am wiping the dust off past conversations to remember some of what was shared in the old days...To bear the burden of memory one must willingly journey to places long uninhabited, searching the debris of history for traces of the unforgettable, all knowledge of which has been suppressed.
>
> (Hooks, 1992 /2015, pp. 166-172).

Introduction

When it comes to intellect and power in India, one is bound to see the production of knowledge coming from renowned, mainstream public intellectuals as legitimate. This can be attributed to many factors such as early English-language initiation, upper-caste elite networks in academia and in think tanks, higher qualifications in specialized disciplines, access to foreign education, etc. This set context inhibits us from considering local knowledge systems of marginalized people, who have a rich cultural history passed on from one generation to the next. In a Brahmanical society, cultural reproduction is a reality of the Dalit lived experience(s), and until the recent Dalit literary movement, had not come out in the mainstream literary and political circles. The social handicaps of caste and discrimination made it easily possible for upper castes to keep the lower castes subjugated. The historical difference in treatment made it possible to define culture in a singular manner (that is spirituality and Brahmanical religiosity) while disregarding the Dalit culture entirely.[2]

The four epigraphs given at the beginning of this paper set the context in which Dalit 'cultural theory of despair' (Nagaraj, 2010) emerges and the way the 'top of the twice born' (Guru, 2012) have looked at the historical and cultural inequalities through privileged knowledge production and the way they try to maintain their *status quo.* It

is a ‘politics of location’ (as cited in Kumar, 2014) which has given the privilege to the cultural elites in the game of knowledge making processes. Therefore, one must go for the journey of ‘searching the debris of history’ (Hooks, 1992/2015) in order to understand the strategies by which knowledge and culture of the marginalized communities is erased and suppressed.

Phule-Ambedkar Ideology and Indian Academia

The crusaders of anti-caste movement in Maharashtra, Jotirao Phule through his path-breaking text *Gulamgiri* (*Slavery;* 1873), and B.R. Ambedkar in his phenomenal text *Revolution and Counter Revolution* (1987) have tried to deconstruct the dominant brahmanical culture and knowledge production. Both of these anti-caste thinkers present the cultural critique of ‘graded inequality’ i.e. caste order through which the twice born have exploited the masses. Phule and Ambedkar’s writings contextualize the cultural hierarchies through which *savarnas* have kept themselves in the privileged position while *shudra-atishudra*[3] and women – in other words *avarnas,* have remained at the lower level of social status. Phule’s power and knowledge discourse attempts to deconstruct the *shetji-bhatji* (bania-brahmin) nexus. Following Phule, Dr B.R. Ambedkar through his writing and resistance explains the organized and controlled system of brahmanical power. Considering the brahmanical social order as a subject of scrutiny, Ambedkar created the possible domain to debunk the ‘cultural hegemony’ of the twice born castes.

Inspired by the anti-caste thoughts, the Dalit literary and political movement is a radical response to the brahmanical knowledge production. The Dalit movement emerged in the context of everyday caste discrimination, humiliation, and stigma that the outcastes have to carry throughout their life. Rising against the stigma and Dalit atrocities, the Dalit Panther[4] movement in Maharashtra emerged in 1972. Although short-lived, it indeed generated a radical consciousness among the Dalits and the other oppressed groups. In the context of Maharashtra it was the Dalit literary movement which supported the Dalit Panther whereas in other parts of India the case was opposite. The Dalit movement is not just political or social but a cultural movement which attempts to dismantle the brahmanical hegemonic order.

At present, it seems that the Indian society is transitioning between caste and democracy. Because of the constitutional safeguards, Dalits and the other oppressed sections of the society are able to rise up against caste exploitation. The Phule-Ambedkar approach is an ideological basis for the ‘politics of hope’ for the Dalits as Nagaraj states in the epigraph provided at the beginning of this paper. Dalit experiences of humiliation are rooted in the Indian social structure. Crossing all kinds of hurdles the discourse of the Dalits has Reached in Indian academia only recently, specifically after the 1990s; and perhaps because of prolonged *closure* the Dalit cross-disciplinary theoretical domain has remained underdeveloped, in other words, did not reach in the mainstream academic discussion. Therefore, one can claim that the available mainstream approaches in humanities and social sciences in India could not grasp the intensity of Dalit pain and anguish; and it has only presented the mainstream sympathetic view. Scholars from the dominant academia have reduced the meaning of

the term 'Dalit' as broken, crushed, and so on. Even after the radical political activism of Dalit Panther, the meaning of the category of Dalit did not change. It is perhaps only Gopal Guru and D. R. Nagaraj who have seen 'Dalit' as a category that radicalizes the consciousness of oppressed communities (Guru, 2001, p. 102; Nagaraj, 2010, p. 94). However, the cultural and administrative institutions have reduced the meaning of Dalit to pity and emotion. Gopal Guru (2012) presents this disparity in the context of Indian academia that 'social sciences are divided into empirically inferiorized and the critically privileged domain of knowledge' (p.9). The oppressed masses remain marginalized whereas *savarnas* dominate over knowledge building institutions.

Therefore, there is a need to debrahmanize the disciplinary space. In this process intersecting Dalit and cultural studies could help so that Dalit culture and the fight against injustice could be radically visible. The Dalit literary and political movement, along with the Phule-Ambedkar anti-caste ideologies, is also inspired from the Black consciousness of USA. If one looks at the Black knowledge production domain one can see how Black studies curriculum or their resistance movement has gained a certain kind of global recognition. In contrast, the internationalization of Dalit studies is still an ongoing exercise. A more recent phenomenon has been international conferences organized in Black-American academic circles with themes revolving around caste, class, race, and gender in relation with the Ambedkarite ideology.[5] Another account would be Isabel Wilkerson's recent contribution to caste studies in global perspective. Wilkerson (2020) in her piece in *The New York Times Magazine* mentions caste is about power, resources, respect, authority, and competence, and about which groups have it and which do not. With a few exceptions, the effort of raising Dalit issues at the global level seems to have been taken up only by the few anti-caste Ambedkarite scholars who are studying abroad. But, Black intellectuals do not seem keen on taking Ambedkar in their everyday matters of fight against race. Rather they seem to heavily rely on the Marxian notion of class and capitalist nexus and its relationship with race. Sharmila Rege (2013, p.19) points out that:

> research and curricular frameworks in social sciences and literature departments included studies on Dalits or Dalit writings while completely evading the epistemological challenges posed by the Dalit Panthers. However, since the late 1990s, Dalit studies has emerged, shaped by the "secular upsurge of caste" at national level and the emergence of the caste question in international forums like the United Nations World Conference against Racism.

By invoking the different claims of dominant epistemologies re-articulated by the Dalit intellectuals (Guru& Geetha, 2000) and locating the cultural past of Dalit humiliation, this paper examines the anti-caste discourse and Dalit cultural resistance from the colonial and postcolonial time. With an attempt to bring in the intersections of Dalit and cultural studies the paper argues that by challenging brahmanical cultural knowledge production, Dalits can reclaim the power and knowledge in relation with the 'politics of difference'. The Dalit aesthetic decentres the cultural production and circulation of the hitherto grand narratives. Further, it attempts in de-brahmanizing the established disciplinary space by bringing the discourse of Dalit experience of caste and humiliation into mainstream academia. Dalit literary and political movement has

not only challenged the brahmanical order of caste but it has also developed various forms to express their rage and angst against caste and everyday brahmanical politics. Dalit literature has been an important aspect of the Dalit culture in India as it is mostly available in regional and vernacular languages and therefore, it needs to be brought into mainstream academic discourse through the process of translation and rigorous research work. Dalit literature is studied in various way but largely highlighted in socio-political context. Popular Dalit folk songs, dramas, and humour are yet to find a respectable place in mainstream Indian academia. Moreover its cultural context has also remained unexplored. Therefore, Dalit studies need to go beyond the confined disciplinary fields as its vast canon of literature remains outside these boundaries. Metaphorically and realistically, it is similar to the way the dominant social order and its gatekeepers kept the Dalits outside the village society. On the same line Dalits' knowledge production, by which they resist, has been kept outside the dominant academic discourse.

Indian Cultural Studies and the *Absent* Anti-Caste Movement

Drawing from Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay (2006) it is possible to retrieve the historicity of Cultural Studies abroad and in India. Cultural Studies as a field of interdisciplinary studies started in the British and American academia somewhere between the 1960s and 1980s and was influenced by Marxist philosophy. In the process of socio-political and economic development, it has brought a range of studies together and evolved at the global level. In the context of India, the launch of *Journal of Arts and Ideas* marked the arrival of Cultural Studies in the country during the 1980s. Unlike British academia, the arrival of Cultural Studies in India was influenced not only by the Marxist movement but also the 'political spirituality' of Gandhi, and Nehru's socialist vision of democratic institutions. The dominant aspect of theorizing the culture in India is of (upper caste) society and the behaviours, beliefs and attitudes of its members alone. Culturally, much of its focus has remained limited to the theatre movement and the Hindi cinematic evolution from India's independence to the arrival of the free market economy. Only recently, it has started to explore marginal identities such as gender, class, and patriarchy. Yet, Phule-Ambedkar and the anti-caste resistance movement seems absent in the mainstream articulation of Cultural Studies in India.

Nonetheless some efforts have been made by scholars who are influenced by the world of the anti-castes. In this relation Sharmila Rege (2000) has made an important contribution by mapping the trajectories of the two terms 'popular culture' and 'mass culture.' In analyzing popular cultural forms such as *Satyashodhak Jalsa*, *Chhatrapati Mela* and *Ganesha Mela*,[6] Rege underscores the way caste is mapped, re-mapped, and contested through the caste-based, gender-based cultural practices and material condition of the working caste/class communities (Ibid, pp. 194-198). In addition, there are few scholars like Gary Michael Tartakov (2013) and Y.S. Alone (2017) who have contributed in the field of Indian art history and its cultural context through which they try to deconstruct its brahmanical epistemology. Tartakov in his edited book *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery* looks at the ancient art of temple architecture and

its social connection through which he emphasizes on the Varna hierarchy based social stratification. In addition, Tartakov has looked at the images of Ambedkar painted in various magazines. Alone, an art historian, focuses on the visual manifestations with the conceptualization of 'protected ignorance' (2017, p. 141) drawing on the paintings of Dalit and non-Dalit painters' expressions. To elaborate 'protected ignorance' further it is an academic blindness of the savarnas the way they overlook the matters of caste. Deeptha Achar (2019) in her essay invokes the concept called 'Dalit Art', by critically looking at the striking absence of caste question in contemporary art discourse in India (p. 183). In addition, she mentions that Dalit art is a self-conscious practice; but at present Savi Sawarkar who practices in Delhi and G. Chandrashekhar who works in Chennai, are the only artists who display the caste question through their politically charged aesthetics (Ibid, p. 188). These are the few exceptional interventions that have been made in the discipline of Art History and Indian Cultural Studies at large. These scholarships have distinctly come from anti-caste researchers and have remained at the periphery of mainstream framework of Indian cultural studies. In such a situation one would go beyond and ask that what could have been the state of Dalit studies in mainstream Indian academia even after its substantial development.

Dalit Studies and Its Development

Savyasaachi (2004) in an essay elaborates about a national seminar held on *Dalit Studies and Higher Education: Exploring Content Material for a New Discipline* at Bodh Gaya, Bihar in the spring of 2004. It was proposed in the seminar to prepare the ground to understand the history of the suffering of the marginalizedso that there could be Dalit studies critiques of the dominant system (p.1660). T.M. Yesudasan (2013) in his essay critically attacking the dominant historical oppression shows how oppressed masses raise self-reflexive queries (p.149) such as

> Do we have a role to play in the ever-changing scenario in which history and the future are both fast evolving? Will social invisibility and political powerlessness continue to haunt our destiny, leaving us in perpetual wretchedness and humiliation? Dalit Studies originates on the premises of these disturbing questions and frustrations of the people.

One can observe that Dalit Studies evolved by radically asserting a critical past. Yet there are systemic hurdles and impossibilities in its growth. Ankit Kawade (2019), drawing on impossibility, argues that Dalit Studies is a production of assertion, but the pedagogical practices and institutional policies in higher education have ignored the thought process of the Dalits. He further mentions that Dalit studies becomes an undesirable site for research, because it is undervalued to retain the Brahmanical academic 'purity' for their institutional disciplines (Ibid, pp. 21-22). By raising critical questions against mainstream history and culture, Dalit Studies poses the challenge to the dominant brahmanical system. Hence, in mainstream hegemonic academic atmosphere it tends to become an undesirable site for research. How then could one make it a desirable site of research? In what manner can Dalit studies become a dynamic discipline? Can Black Cultural studies show a path in foregrounding the

discipline of Dalit Cultural Studies? Mae G. Henderson in his article (1996, p. 66) mentions that

> the arrival of Black Studies was central to the project of contemporary cultural studies. It has articulated the perspectives and counter-perspectives in various ways. It has challenged the dominant Eurocentric institutions and has generated the possibility to alter the mode of inquiry with an effect of change in texts, curricula and classrooms.

Similar to Black Studies that has challenged the domination of the white supremacist ideology, Dalit Studies also draws its articulation from the centuries-long oppression, anti-caste resistance, and the vast domain of egalitarian culture to challenge the dominant brahmanical institutional supremacy and narrate the unheard, unseen, and unimagined social pain of the Dalit community.

By reading the historical complexities and the socio-political philosophy expounded by Ambedkar and other anti-caste thinkers, one will be able to see that the academic discussion around Dalits and other marginalized groups of the society has become merely an object of discourse and needs to be interpreted and understood from the Dalit cultural point of view i.e. having a 'perspective from below' a process of de-brahmanizing the dominant theoretical disciplinary ideas. Scholars in general have asserted that Dalit writing is not just about 'writing experiences' of one individual or a community in general, but it is about raising the voice against dominant narratives and social suppression. It is an assertion and resistance against the brahmanical power, which is at the core of the distinction between Dalit versus *Lalit* perspective (Limbale, 2004). Lalit literature is that which tries to project otherworldly, fictional, and exaggerated realities of society. Dalit perspective stands against this notion by focusing on the experience, oppression, and resistance and, the world of the outcastes. Dalit expressions are negation against the brahmanical (upper-caste) social world.

Caste, Democracy and Dalit Resistance

Constitutionally, untouchability and discrimination based on caste have been abolished, but caste is still a visible and persistent problem, culturally ingrained in the social sphere. It reproduces inequality in social institutions in different ways. Caste is so prevalent that one cannot spend a single day without hearing about caste-atrocities or about the rapes on Dalits and *Adivasi* (indigenous) women. We see several cases of caste discrimination in the educational sphere too. Ambedkar had argued for an extension of India's political democratic model as the social democratic model. But because of the cultural binary between democracy and caste society, the multi hierarchical structure continues to exist. M. S. S. Pandian (2016, p. 26) by referring to K.M. Panikkar mentions that:

> Democracy and caste are totally opposed…one is based on equality, the other on inequality of birth. The one is actuated by the principle of social inclusion, the other by the principle of social exclusion. Democracy tries to break down the barriers of class; caste seeks to perpetuate them…In all matters that are of

> importance, caste and democracy are fundamentally opposed, they are at their very bases, incompatible.

Democracy not only opposes caste, but also provides a space to represent the experience of the excluded subjects. Therefore, to subvert the dominant 'politics of representation' the pan-Indian Dalit literary movement continues to have a contentious relationship with academia and outside as well. Sharmila Rege (2006) writes, '(S)ince the 1980s caste identity and caste consciousness have dominated the political scene, and theoretical and political issues concerned with the role of caste in social transformation are at the centre of political debates'(p. 64). Caste and consciousness have become the centre of political debate as Gopal Guru (1995) aptly points out that 'less powerful members of a society have a more encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants them certain epistemic positions over others' (p. 2549). Sara Beth Hunt (2014, p.10) writes,

> Dalit literature exposes what Dalit politics does not – the subtlety and widespread experience of caste discrimination among not only the Dalit poor, but the Dalit urban middle class. In other words, Dalit literature highlights the inescapability of caste identity and the emotionality of discrimination in a different way to Dalit politics.

Dalit politics and literature both are inter-relational as one cannot sustain without the other. For any movement to live long, it must have a literary backup.

The notion of caste is socially rooted across communities and it creates barriers for the oppressed Dalits. In contrast, the democratic process provides an access to Dalits at the socio-political and cultural level. Democratic politics of Dalits paved the way to liberate themselves from the prolonged experience of discriminatory social reality. Further, Hunt's (2014) study argues that 'Dalit politics portrays a very specific Dalit identity linked to social and economic oppression, historical disenfranchisement and a shared set of civil rights that must be regained, Dalit literature displays a much broader and more fluid set of the characteristics and experiences that constitute Dalit identity (Ibid, p.11). The question of representation is important to know from where the voice of/for Dalits is coming. In a brahmanical society like India a of framework representation works in various ways: one way is that of the progressive liberals who are actually from the oppressor class but to have an 'agency' in their hand they will appropriate the struggle of the oppressed and resist against oppression. According to Ravi Kumar 'while the spurt in translations ensures that Dalit voice does become accessible and casteism is exposed, it is important also to remember that there is a politics of selection at work in terms of what is translated and by whom'(as cited in Rege, 2006, p. 9). The selective ways of seeing, doing and allying Dalit politics needs a critical cultural approach about the way Dalit literature and politics is projected. Rege (Ibid) points out further that the articulation of castes has been reduced to purity-pollution and untouchability and reforms are articulated through the division of labour upholding the *varna* order 'as the division based on differential qualities and skills' (p.26). Ambedkar in his famous piece *Annihilation of Caste* points in a succinct manner that 'caste is not merely a division of labour, but the division of labourers' (1979, p.47). However, mainstream academicians have reduced the caste functionality to

division of labour. The savarna intellectuals mostly rely on the Marxist notion of class, and they generally look at the matter as through binary position of haves and have nots. Caste as a social order dominates the psyche of the Indian individuals through number of divisions. There are visible divisions and invisible divisions (varna-jati complex)[7] There are visible divisions and invisible divisions (varna-jati) complex, and most studies have focused on jati(s) or caste complexities. however its subdivisions have not been addressed widely in the Indian academic knowledge production. on *jati(s)*or caste complexities and its subdivisions have been addressed widely in the Indian academic knowledge production.

This discussion takes one towards the formulation of the categories called *brahmani* or savarna and *abrahmani or* avarna, or in other words non-Dalit and Dalit that has been debated across Maharashtrian politics. This helps us to open up a way to analyze the question of (self) representation. Rege writes,'in the conceptualisation of this binary, abrahmani referred to thoughts and practices that contested caste, class, and gender exploitation; in practice it was slippage on the issue of caste that became central in labelling practices as brahmani' (p.30).Similarly significant is Shailaja Paik's work (2014) that documented the neglected resources from Marathi to understand the efforts of Dalit radicals: Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar in reorganizing and refashioningthe Dalit women's lives. The Dalit radicals have challenged the double discriminatory practices of brahmanic order, caste and patriarchy in order to liberate the Dalit women through the means of education.Generating anti-caste consciousness among the backward communities and bringing them in non-brahmanic fold is a counter-cultural project. Its impact was seen during the protests on the issue of Mandal commission—an extension of reservation policy for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the state-run institutions of India. Thus, the issue of caste and discrimination has been brought in academic and political discussion along with the debate on caste based reservation. Braj Ranjan Mani (2005, p. 34) writes 'as an exploitative ideology and practice, Brahmanism has been kept hidden in modern India under cleverly designed "cultural" or "national" discourse which obfuscates (in a variety of ways) the historical reality of caste and its consequences'. Understanding the complex relationship of caste and the democracy, Dalit intellectuals try to explain that as long as caste remains, the brahmanical power knowledge discourse will continue to operate. Therefore, in order to annihilate caste they try to de-brahmanize disciplinary space. Gopal Guru and V. (2000) mention what Sanal Mohan argued during the DIC[8] meeting held in Pune in March 1997 that even when caste was/is unequivocally existing there was/is a singular absence of caste in Indian history writing. Mohan went on further to say that Indian social sciences is centred on '*bhadralok*' (elite) imagination. Historical writing around caste is about oppression and exploitation; therefore, the historical memory of the Dalits needs to be recovered (Ibid, p. 132). It is also about everyday resistance as much as it talks about oppression and exploitation. In this context D.R. Nagaraj (2010) mentions the 'cultural theory of despair' that is a mechanism of the anti-caste movement to repair the fragmented memory with the 'politics of hope'. Anti-caste intellectualism and the Dalit movement become helpful in exploring the historical and cultural context of caste. The academic debate of Dalit intellectual which has

started from 1990s onward needs to bring into the new framework what this paper calls *Dalit Cultural Studies*.[9] It can be used as an umbrella term and approach to re-conceptualize the available studies and framework that deals with the Dalit world and imagination. It will be '*anti-disciplinary*' in its making. Anti-disciplinary in the sense that it will work on anti-caste ideology which dismantles the casteist disciplinary power and knowledge domination. Following recent studies one can see that 1990 was a crucial year from the Dalit point of view in relation with the declaration and implementation of Mandal Commission recommendations and consequent violence that erupted in many parts of India. It generated caste solidarities among the oppressed castes and thereby re-energized the Dalit movement. It followed the galvanization and celebration of Ambedkar's birth centenary, which renewed the life of Dalit movement at the pan-India level (Tharu, 2008; Kumar, 2014; Rawat and Satyanarayana, 2016).

Towards De-brahmanizing the Disciplinary Space

In a casteist social order Dalits had no right to gain or preach knowledge. Shudra-atishudra (Bahujan and Dalits) were left in historical darkness where light of the day was completely invisible. Their lives were guided by the *Manusmriti*c social order and had no rights over their own minds and bodies. The culturally rooted historicity of Dalit suppression was revealed by anti-caste leaders. Braj Ranjan Mani (2005, p.35) writes:

> The Dalit-Bahujans, who have suffered humiliation and exclusion due to their caste, know the history of caste from their lived experience. Breaking the imposed 'culture of silence', they have started telling their stories in their own words. Their narratives refute their conventional representation in history and culture. The Dalit-Bahujan ideology—inspired by Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar, heroes of the social justice movement in modern India—rejects the brahmanic version of caste and culture.

Therefore, a project of de-brahmanizing the disciplinary space goes beyond merely bringing the literature of the oppressed into mainstream academic domain. The coupling of Dalit and cultural studies attempts to reconstruct the Dalit cultural past in an ontological manner so that objectification of the oppressed can be prevented. In this relation the Dalit epistemological perspectives are to be widened to include Dalit experiences of anguish, negation, and their resistance against the dominant culture to question the social hierarchies. To de-brahmanize the (Indian) cultural context, the vernacular intellectual deliberation of the Dalits must be brought into the mainstream academia in order to explore the larger context of Dalit and Cultural studies. For instance, in providing a context to the Dalit feminist understanding, Gopal Guru (1995, p. 2549) points out that Dalit women not only face exclusion in political sphere, but they are also being marginalized the cultural field. Caste patriarchy[10] which is brahmanicalin nature, works in all the institutional mechanisms. For example, Dalit men do not take 'serious' note of the literary output of Dalit women; instead they become dismissive of their contribution. Hence, Dalit women's resistance also remains invisible. In this context, we see that the field of cultural studies does not have its

own framework as such. It is an intra-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary and multidisciplinary project yet it is a framework in itself. Nelson; Treichler and Grossberg (1992, p.4) describes thus:

> A number of efforts to define and delineate the cultural studies project help map the diversity of positions and traditions that may legitimately lay claim to the name. Keeping those efforts in mind, one may begin by saying that cultural studies is an interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary and sometimes counter-disciplinary field that operates in the tension between its tendencies to embrace both a broad, anthropological and a more narrowly humanistic concept of culture.

There is a difficulty in mobilising a pan-Indian coalition of marginalized groups given their regional, linguistic, religious and other cultural differences. Thus, efforts to articulate a pan-Indian counter-hegemonic cultural politics will have to be undertaken at various levels. Dalit theoretical discourse is based on the notion of anguish, negation, revolt, and humanitarian values which focuses on the conditions of caste and the historicity of Dalit humiliation. Marathi Dalit writer Baburao Bagul (1981) writes 'human being primarily never is a Dalit, marginalized or untouchable. It is the social structure that brings him to this stage. Once you change the structure, a human being remains a human' (1981, pp.19-20; *roughly translated from Marathi*). Sharad Patil draws upon Marx, Phule and Ambedkar's ideologies together to evolve an 'absolute' answer to 'India's sorrow' pertaining to caste-class relationship. (1988, p.71; *roughly translated from Marathi*). Dalits and marginalized people in India are never treated as human. They are reduced to their caste-assigned status which is why Ambedkar's philosophical approach is important. It not only understands sorrow but also cures it and shows the way towards human liberation. Sharankumar Limbale (2004) borrows the notion of aesthetic from Sharad Patil's approach of non-Brahmin aesthetics, raising the question of 'why counter revolutionary literature possesses the weapon of aesthetics, but revolutionary literature does not' (p. 113). In addition he also emphasizes on the evolution of Dalit literature and the way it has developed through the different approaches such as Ambedkarism, Marxism, its relationship with African-American literature and so on. While critically looking at brahmanical literature and the way Dalits are projected by using the dominant strategy, Limbale mentions '[…] Dalits have been portrayed from a middle-class perspective, which expresses sympathy for Dalits from a reformist-liberal standpoint. Because the middle-class, upper caste writers' world of experience is limited, there is no realistic representation of Dalits in their writing' (Ibid, p.27). This is what Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (2012) refer to as a '...complex and distorted reflection between theory and experience' (p. 6). Alok Mukherjee (2004) elaborates, 'one facet of Dalit literature's rejection of the brahmanical literary tradition is that it does not adhere to classical Indian aesthetics, according to which the purpose of art, literature is to evoke different emotions and feelings, such as pity, love, fear and anger' (p. 14). But neither social sciences nor cultural studies in India have paid much attention to understand the relationship between Dalit culture and the way it evokes the feelings and emotions about the Dalit world

The Dalit movement of 1970s created a space for social activism but it is largely seen as a literary movement. There has been an academic and political 'invisibility' of 'other' forms of assertions, which remained 'subsumed' under the category of the literary. Sharmila Rege (1998) in her review of Gopal Guru's (1997) book *Dalit Cultural Movement and Dialectics of Dalit Politics in Maharashtra* points out that the state has colonized the Dalit movement which has caused the decline of Dalit politics, and further that the fall of the Dalit movement was observed due to the invasion of electronic media. Mainstream media and politics after 1990s works more powerfully to showcase the majoritarian political spiritualism, and in this process Dalit political and cultural activism has remained invisible from popular visual media circulation (pp.339-340). Dalit world, imagination, and their expression have never been a part of mainstream popular TV serials and their focus, at a singular level, remains limited to projecting the brahmanical spirituality and culture.

Even in the Rohith Vemula incident mainstream media's attempt was to 'wipe out and divert' the matter about how Rohith Vemula did not belong to the Dalit community and how caste discrimination had no role to play in his suicide, rather than broadcasting caste discrimination faced by Dalits on Indian campuses. Thanks to the active Dalits on ground, on social media and Dalit-Bahujan web portals who took the matter in their own hands to dismiss mainstream media's untrue claims about Rohith Vemula's caste and suffering. It is the Dalit youth who are socially and culturally active in academic spaces and also in the social sphere. Even most Dalit leaders are silent on the cultural matters remaining absent from media spaces. Guru (1997) aptly points out that, 'Political leaders after Ambedkar never recognized the importance of cultural activists who right from Ambedkar's time played very effective role in radicalising the Dalit masses' (p. 20). Taking a cue from Guru it can be said that most harm to the Dalit political movement has been done by the mainstream political parties through the process of 'political subordination,' and co-option of the Dalit cultural movement by the state has deflected the progress of the Dalit culture at a large scale. In the politics of difference, the relationship between representation and lived experiences of Dalits and understanding the production and reproduction of lived experiences becomes an important point of discussion. It reflects on the aesthetics through which one tries to draw meaning. S.P. Punalekar (2001) elaborates, stating that the agenda of Dalit cultural resistance was uplifted by the Mahars of Maharashtra, and it is now resurrected by other complex social and political groups. Along with the question of identity and humanism, the new narratives seek solidarity in order to resist Dalitism in a newer way with an 'unexplored social cultural content' (p. 239-240).

This is an alternative discourse to understand the reality of the life of the repressed. Outsiders try to understand their experience through sympathy. The main source of Dalit literature is Ambedkar's philosophy and the Constitution of India which provides certain rights to resist the imposed cultural stigma. Dalit studies has expanded at various levels but it is yet to be institutionalized. In order to de-brahmanize the established disciplinary space, cultural theorization from the anti-caste point of view is yet to take place. Therefore, an intersection of Dalit and Cultural studies becomes an

important intervention as anti-disciplinary challenge against the brahmanical 'cultural hegemony' of power and knowledge.

Conclusion

The paper sought to draw from the Phule-Ambedkar's radical resistance against Brahmanical power and knowledge domination. It advocates challenging the mainstream cultural knowledge production to lay down the way towards cultural theorization of non-brahmanic tradition. Further, it has highlighted, with the 'politics of difference', how Dalit aesthetics decenters the cultural production and circulation of the hitherto grand narratives.

Moreover, this paper has critically analyzed the framework of Indian cultural studies in relation with an anti-caste ideology. Reading through the anti-caste tradition and its influences on Dalit movement, the paper has provided a detailed overview of disciplinary political relations and contestations in and around Dalit studies. Further, it has also made an attempt to see the relationship of Dalit resistance with caste and democracy. Discussing the available Dalit intellectual scholarship, it has sought to elaborate how the discourse of anti-caste narratives reached Indian academia from 1990s onwards. Through interdisciplinary context the paper has argued how de-brahmanizing the disciplinary space can generate the possibility of Dalit cultural studies a step forward and a newer way of cultural resistance and academic activism of the oppressed.

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Endnotes

1 This is an extended version of the paper presented in the "5th International Conference on the Unfinished Legacy of Dr B.R. Ambedkar: Rethinking Gender and Religion at The New School, India-China Institute, New York, USA, Oct. 24-26, 2019.

2 As an example, Indian cuisine is very vast. Varying by geography, climate and community, there are certainly more varieties than what we are actually aware of. For the knowledge of culinary culture to spread, the practitioners have to transfer the knowledge from one generation to another. How much of the food habits and culture of the Dalits is known to the masses? The knowledge of culinary arts and food culture is limited to what has been.

3 Jotirao Phule conceptualized shudra-atishudra category for the people who are at the lower level in the social order of caste. Nowadays, it is also called Bahujan-Dalit/Dalit-Bahujan. Phule in his *Gulamgiri* elaborates the way Peasants (Shudras) and Untouchable (Atishudras) were exploited by shetji-bhatji (bania-brahmin) nexus.

4 J. V. Pawara, founder member of Dalit Panther, has given a detailed account of the Dalit Panther Movement in his book *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History*, published in 2017.

5 The first conference was organized in 2015 at Brandeis University with the theme 'The unfinished legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Following the same theme, the College of Education and the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies, University of Massachusetts hosted the fourth annual conference on 'Caste and Race: Reconfiguring Solidarities' in May 2018. See details in 'International Conference on Caste and Race Set for May 4-6.' 2018 (April 25). *News and Media Relations.* Retrieved from https://www.umass.edu/newsoffice/article/international-conference-caste -and-race

6 *Tamasha* or *Lavani*is a popular folk dance form of Maharashtra, it is an erotic performance performed by women. *Satyashodhak Jalsa* is an alternate popular form influenced by non-Brahmin anti-caste tradition thatis different from *Chhatrapati Tamasha*. *Mela* is also a non-brahmin popular form that emerged against *Ganesha Mela,* and talks about caste and gender. *Ganesha mela* is one of the practices by which brahmanical religious cultural ethos is maintained.

7 According to the ChaturvarnaVyavastha there are four classes viz.*Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya* and *Shudra* who have to do karmic duties assigned to them as per the Varna hierarchy. *Ati-shudras* are untouchable communities, or outcastes (avarnas) who do not fall under the Varna structure. *Jati(s)* are the divisions and subdivisions (castes and subcastes) of the four Varna. Although the outcastes remain outside of varna-jati complex, they have to do caste assigned menial jobs that are culturally imposed by the caste order. (For more details see Geetha, V., and S. V. Rajadurai, 1998, p.xiii).

8 Dalit Intellectual's Collective (DIC).

9 At the moment it is an ambitious project, but if this formation comes true, there might be challenges and confrontations over the naming of the discipline itself; whether it should be called Dalit cultural studies, Non-brahmin cultural studies, or Anti-caste cultural studies. Perhaps the debate will be similar to the way we see the contestation on naming Dalit literature, as Buddhist literature, Ambedkarite literature, and so on . In my understanding, the term Dalit provides a context for the making of a political category which has the historical baggage not only of humiliation but also of resistance. Moreover, bringing Dalit Studies into the fold of cultural studies will radicalize the anti-caste knowledge production, as one can see that in the larger context of India, the oppressed communities feel connected with the category of being Dalit, and culturally and ideologically there is a possibility of being united.

10 Sunaina Arya's (2020) paper, 'Dalit or Brahmanical Patriarchy? Rethinking Indian Feminism', explores the context of the working of patriarchy in Indian feministic discourse. Her paper looks at Gopal Guru's quest of Dalit patriarchy differently. (For details see in *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, *1*(1), 217–228.

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Ambedkarites in Making: The Process of Awakening and Conversion to Buddhism among Non-Mahar Communities in Maharashtra

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Abstract

Scholars have presented Buddhist discourse in Maharashtra- the western part of India, as an expression of protest and emancipation of the former untouchable caste Mahar. But in the recent past, people from different social backgrounds belonging to non-Mahar castes have embraced Buddhism. Now it has become the collective discourse of protest of different castes and tribes from marginalized communities. This paper, an outcome of my anthropological study, concerns with changing consciousness among non-Mahar castes regarding conversion to Buddhism as a tool of resistance to overcome caste inequalities. Brahmanical patriarchy is the basis on which the caste system thrives, thus it is the root of women's oppression. Women's assertion for a gender-equal society and its actual implementation on the ground constitutes a major part of the anti-caste movement. Therefore, this study also seeks the answer to the question of how Buddhism helps to rupture the caste patriarchy and its rigid structure. A significant indicator would be to see precisely how women are breaking those age-old boundaries of castes. Therefore, this paper also addresses the issue of women's emancipation through Buddhism and how it challenges the Brahmanical patriarchy and liberates its women followers from oppression.

Keywords

Caste, religion, conversion, Buddhism, Non-mahars, Matang, women emancipation

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Introduction

Caste has been studied as the central organizing principle that categorizes Indian society (Rao, 2013; Dirks, 2010). Caste system is often conceptualized as a hierarchical social system that is graded, fixed, and permanent without any possibilities of change or mobility of castes, with an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt (Ambedkar, 2013). Therefore, people belonging to the so-called lower castes face the highest scale of contempt at the hands of the so-called upper castes. People from these low castes were regarded as 'impure and polluting' and thus, considered 'untouchables'. It has been also observed that such people who are assigned a low social status in the caste hierarchy and treated unequally within the Hindu-fold are attracted to religions that advocate social equality at least theoretically (Bandyopadhyay, 2004; Jeurgensmeyer, 2009).

Religions such as Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism emerged in India countering the social inequalities and discrimination prevalent in Hindu society. Religions with foreign origins such as Christianity and Islam also attracted several low caste people to escape caste discrimination (Sanal Mohan, 2015; Roberts, 2016). Thus, by providing an alternative religious philosophy, they emphasized on social equality. Dr. Ambedkar appealed to his followers to renounce Hinduism and convert to the religion that would give them dignity and equality. Nearly about one million people followed his path and converted to Buddhism. Those who converted to Buddhism majorly belonged to the Mahar[1] caste (Beltz, 2004). But in the recent past, people belonging to non-Mahar castes have also converted to Buddhism.

Though Mahar is the predominant scheduled caste (SC)[2] that converted to Buddhism earlier, people from non-Mahar scheduled castes such as Matang[3] and some of the nomadic tribes[4] and Other Backward Castes (OBC)[5] in Maharashtra have also converted to Buddhism recently. Historically, the relationship between different castes has always been that of domination, subordination, and hostility. For many years, Buddhism in Maharashtra was equated with Mahars with terms like Mahar Buddhists being used for referring to new Buddhist converts; and Matang Buddhists to denote Buddhists converts from the Matang community. This exposes the feeling of 'us' and 'them' amongst Buddhist converts from different castes (Paik, 2011). Therefore, there is always a fear of non-assimilation of different castes into Buddhism in Maharashtra as merely casting off their Hindu religion does not give them the feeling of equality, especially when the graded inequality of caste system is deeply entrenched in the society. After all, it is not just the highest ideals but the actual living practice of a religion that is important. The highest values of equality, fraternity, and liberty should not remain merely teachings and belief systems of religion but it also should be practiced in the customs, usages, observances, rituals, and the common life of religious communities (Webster, 2002). Otherwise, it can further become an obstacle for the formation of a community of the new-Buddhists.

Existing scholarship on Buddhist conversion in Maharashtra revolves around Ambedkar's conversion movement and the subsequent conversion of people from Ambedkar's Mahar caste, the largest SC community in the state. However, not many studies have been undertaken to understand how the non-Mahar castes converted to Buddhism, and the processes involved in the constitution of their religious identity. Therefore, there is a pressing need to study the 'experience of conversion' among non-Mahar castes hailing from different social, and cultural backgrounds. This

paper seeks to address this important socio-religious movement of non-Mahar castes in Maharashtra and also explore the intersections of different caste identities and culture of an anti-caste movement that the Dalits claim to have adopted through their conversion to Buddhism.

This paper is an outcome of my Ph.D. research. The site of my inquiry is Beed district[6] of Maharashtra, where the Buddhist conversion movement has gripped non-Mahar communities. Cities are considered as hubs of the conversion movement and studies on Buddhist conversion movement in the state have treated them as sites of inquiry. Most of these studies have paid very little attention to activities happening in small pockets of rural communities. Therefore, this research looks in detail in the rural and semi-urban areas, and focuses particularly on Beed district in the most deprived Marathwada region. Using non-participative observations, semi-structured interviews, and case studies as data collection methods, I interacted with newly converted Buddhists coming from different castes, from the rural and semi-urban background.

Why Conversion and Why Buddhism?

Thorat (2002) argues that, the reasons for continuation of the practice of untouchability, discrimination, and atrocities as well as violent reaction by higher castes are to be found in the continuing belief and faith by higher castes in the sanctity of the institution of caste and untouchability. The traditional Hindu social order continues to govern the thought process and behaviour of the large majority of Hindus. The provisions in the constitutional laws are secular and equal, but the customary rules of the caste system and the institution of untouchability are based on the principle of inequality. This results in a conflict between the constitution and the traditional customary rules, norm, and values of the caste system, particularly untouchability.

People continued to follow tradition as it provides immense privilege and serves their social, political, and economic interests. When the Dalits try to seek equal access and 'assert' their rights, it often invites the anger of higher caste people in the form of atrocities and physical violence. As has been well-established that the practice of untouchability and discrimination has stemmed from religious precepts and also has religious sanction, therefore, the change in the social order from a discriminatory caste Hindu society to an equal society must also have a religious character (Ambedkar, 2004; Juergensmeyer, 2009).

According to Dr. Ambedkar, religion is an indefinite word with no fixed meaning because religion has passed through many stages. He says religion is a human projection onto the cosmos of social values concerning life and its preservation embodied in the usages, practices, observances, rites, and rituals which are to shape the behaviour of those who make up the society (Webster, 2002). Dr. Ambedkar believed that the purpose of religion is to emphasize, universalize, and spiritualize social values and bring them to the mind of the individual who is required to recognize them in all his/her acts so that he/she may function as an approved member of society. Therefore, it is necessary to check what kind of social values a particular religion promises. Does it recognize every single person worth as human being, stands for equality, offers the benefits of liberty, and promote fraternity? These questions need to be asked not merely of the teachings and belief systems of any religion but also the customs, usages, observances, rituals, and the common life of communities owing allegiance to it.

I quote a statement of Dr. Ambedkar which he made to the Indian Franchise Committee in 1932 (Zelliot 2005, p.5)

> …the system of caste and the system of untouchability form really the steel frame of Hindu society. This division cannot easily be wiped out for the simple reason that it is not based on rational, economic, or racial grounds….the chances are that untouchability will endure far longer into the future than the optimist reformer is likely to admit on account of the fact that it is based on religious dogma... The ordinary Hindu looks upon it as part of his religion and there is no doubt that in adopting towards untouchables what is deemed to be an inhuman way of behaviour, he does so more from the sense of observing his religion than from any motive of deliberate cruelty. Based on religion, the ordinary Hindu only relaxes the rules of untouchability where he cannot observe them. He never abandons them. For abandonment of untouchability to him involves a total abandonment of the basic religious tenets of Hinduism as understood by him and the mass of Hindus…

Dr. Ambedkar found Hinduism worth abandoning given its foundation rooted in discrimination. There is no sense of equality in Hinduism. Considering others as lower or higher based on one's birth into a particular caste has religious sanction in Hinduism. In many ways Dr. Ambedkar found the desired social values of equality, human dignity, and fraternity in Buddhism. To achieve equality, human dignity and fraternity one has to essentially change their religion from Hinduism to Buddhism. I will not go in details of whether to apply the concept of religion to Buddhism or not. But as Lakshmi Narasu (2004) says if the content of religion consists of God, fear of God, or the dread of unknown, or the hankering for the unseen and the unintelligible, or the feeling for the infinite, then Buddhism is not a religion. But if by religion we mean something which inspires enthusiasm and fervor, Buddhism is certainly a religion.

Therefore, religious conversion to Buddhism can be understood as a rejection of discriminatory practices inscribed and approved by the Hindu religion and inventing their practices[7], which are more inclusive and equal. Conversion to Buddhism thus, is a matter of transcended identity that is equal. Through conversion, one sees freedom from oppression as not only liberation from old social alignments but a release from old religious ideas as well. So, conversion to Buddhism is a definite move toward equality in a caste-ridden society.

Buddhism among Non-Mahar Communities in Maharashtra

Several scholars have presented the Buddhist discourse in Maharashtra as an expression of protest and emancipation of the former untouchable caste Mahars and regarded Buddhism as a religion with a universal message of brotherhood and equality (Beltz, 2005; Zelliot, 2004; Omvedt, 2003). For a long time, non-Mahar castes in Maharashtra kept at the distance from Buddhism, which predominantly remained the religion of one caste, Mahars. However, a complex phenomenon like caste can't be fought out and abolished by individual castes. It requires a larger community base. Beltz (2004) argues that caste is too complex a social phenomenon to be abolished by a small minority fighting against the majority will.

In the recent past, the Buddhist conversion movement in Maharashtra has not been restricted to only the Mahars. People belonging to other low castes and tribes have started converting to Buddhism and have demonstrated how Jotirao Phule's

Sarvajanik Satyadharma (Public Religion of Truth) can be put into practice to achieve this unity among non-Brahmin castes oppressed by upper castes. People and organizations such as late advocate Eknath Awad through *Manavi Hakka Abhiyan* (Campaign for Human Rights), late Atmaram Chandane through Democratic Party of India, and late G.S. Dada Kamble through the *Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangh* (SSM) worked tirelessly amongst the Matang and other marginalized communities to make them aware of their political rights, mobilize public opinion, and motivate them for conversion to Buddhism.

On October 14 2006, Awad along with thousands of his followers predominantly belonging to Matang community converted to Buddhism in a grand public conversion ceremony coinciding with the 50th anniversary of Dhammachakra Pravartan Din[8] at Deeksha Bhoomi,[9] Nagpur. Similarly, Dada Kamble, under the banner of Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangha, organized more than ten *Deeksha* (initiation) ceremonies at different locations wherein hundreds of Matang community people converted to Buddhism.

Other economically and socially backward and isolated groups in the state comprising nomadic and de-notified tribes are also reclaiming their histories, linking their ritualistic practices to Buddhist traditions. They too are claiming Buddhism as their past. There are community leaders like Laxman Mane who are working on the agenda of reaching out to these groups and awakening them to anti-caste ideology. Like Awad, Mane too, along with a few of his colleagues converted to Buddhism on October 14, 2006, and seven months later May 27, 2007 he organized a grand public event for his followers from de-notified tribes who converted to Buddhism in Mumbai.

The non-Aryan theory regarding Aryans as foreign invaders and the non-brahmin (lower castes) as original inhabitants as proposed by Phule was de-emphasized by Hindu nationalist forces. As a result, people belonging to middle (OBC) castes preferred to align themselves with Brahmin castes. The non-Aryan concept was restricted within untouchables and tribal communities. But in recent times OBCs in Maharashtra in general, and Beed district in particular, are trying to re-establish unity among non-Brahmin castes by claiming their ethnic and cultural past by highlighting differences of traditions been followed by Hindu upper-caste and low castes historically. The *Satyashodhak OBC Parishad*, a leading OBC movement founded by late Hanumant Upare and now led by his son Sandeep Upare, has played an important role in bringing OBCs into the fold of Buddhism. The organization re-emphasized the belief that OBCs are natives of this land and were Buddhist in the past. Therefore, conversion to Buddhism for them is reclamation of their past religion.

Hanumant Upare, however, passed on March 19, 2015 before his announced conversion date of October 14, 2016. Due to the death of Hanumant Upare, Satyashodhak OBC Parishad couldn't organize the conversion ceremony on the proposed date. Later, under the leadership of Sandeep Upare, the organization organized a Deeksha ceremony, in which Upare's entire family took to Buddhism along with their followers from the OBC community.

The Process of Politicization and Actual Conversion

After a visit to Burma (Now Myanmar) and Sri Lanka, the lack of social concerns among *Bhikkus* (monks) there made Dr. Ambedkar think about an active *Sangha* (community) which would work like an 'activist missionary' (Zelliot, 2004). Dr.

Ambedkar imagined the Buddhist monk as a social worker who works for the benefits of society unlike a priest in Hinduism. But contrary to what Dr. Ambedkar had envisioned the Buddhist monks did not go into the community to spread Buddhism. They have not reached to the places where majority Buddhists are residing. It is evident from the fact that many of the newly Buddhist converts in the villages have never seen any monks or *Bhikkus* reaching out to them to teach them the principles of Buddhism. Therefore, village level community leaders and social activists have taken the responsibility of 'activist missionary' and have involved themselves in the process of reaching out to householders/ lay Buddhists and preach Buddha's eightfold path.

The process of conversion to Buddhism is conscious. It is regarded as a *politicization process* through which people who stayed away from Buddhism for a long time are awakened. Activists employ different approaches to initiate interaction with *non-politicized* communities to introduce anti-caste ideology. It is an activity in which fellow community members are informed that caste is the root cause of their problems and since caste is an integral part of Hinduism, the solution to these problems lies in conversion from Hinduism. It is also believed that Buddhism will help in improving the social condition of its followers and emancipate them.

This process of politicization is complex in the way various tactics are used in pursuit of bringing people into the fold. As told by Dr. Ambedkar (2003, W&S Vol 17. Part I) in his speech delivered at the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference, 'to materialize the goal of conversion it is very important to judge the public opinion of all the communities.' Dr. Ambedkar believed that public opinion judged through the meetings of each caste separately is more representative and reliable than the opinion arrived at through a common meeting of all the castes together. Carrying forward this legacy of Dr. Ambedkar, continuous efforts have been made to mobilize public opinion of conversion among marginalized castes. It is done through propagating anti-caste ideologies of social reformers, primarily belonging to the same castes in which politicization is progressing. For example, among Matang community anti-caste ideas of Annabhau Sathe, Lahuji Salve, and Mukta Salve who hail from the same community have been propagated. Similarly, among Charmakars, it has been done by propagating the anti-caste ideas of Sant Ravidas. Among OBCs it has been done by invoking Jotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule,[10] and their anti-caste discourse of *Sarva janik Satyadharma* and *Satyashodhak Samaj* (the truth seekers society). Thereafter highlighting linkages with anti-caste ideologies of different social reformers and with Ambedkarism they try to establish a common platform for the introduction of Buddhism.

To become a Buddhist also means one must follow the Buddha's teaching. Following the eightfold path given by Gautam Buddha is the basic expectation from Buddhists. Omvedt (2003) summarized the eightfold path of Buddha and divided it into three major sections- (i) rules for living or righteous conduct, (ii) meditation, and (iii) intellectual insights. Although a householder or lay Buddhist is considered to be capable of observing all these precepts, the major emphasis is on righteous conduct. Therefore, social activists who work in the community to spread Buddhism also emphasize upon the righteous conduct of the eightfold path in their interactions.

Social platforms such as celebrating *Jayantis* (birth anniversaries) of eminent personalities such as Dr. Ambedkar, Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule, Anna Bhau

Sathe, Chatrapati Shahu Maharaj, among others who have inspired generations are used by social activists to spread awareness and enlighten people about the anti-caste ideology and the Buddha's teachings. It is also coupled with grand public celebrations of significant events of the anti-caste movement and Dalit resistance such as the *Mahad Satyagraha*[11], *Manusmriti Dahan Din,*[12] *Dhammachakra Pravartan Din,* etc. Through these events activists reach out to masses in a bid to educate them about the forgotten histories of their ancestors.

Even though the decision on religious conversion is a personal choice and the decision is taken in individual capacity, the actual conversion ritual is done in a grand public ceremony along with other individuals who wish to convert. Such a public display of religious conversion and assertion of their right to choose their religion is considered essential not only to counter the dominant Hindu culture but also encourage others to come forward and assert their religious views openly and convert.

Reinterpreting Sarvajanik Satya Dharma and Buddhist Conversion among Non-Mahars

It is imperative to mention Mahatma Phule's 'non-Aryan theory' here. According to this theory, all lower castes can be considered a community of the oppressed for they are exploited by upper castes in a caste society (Omvedt, 1971). Phule considered all non-Brahmin castes as oppressed communities. It is nothing but the class of oppressed castes against the class of oppressor castes. However, Dr. Ambedkar had cautioned that, it's very difficult to ally with the oppressed castes as there is graded inequality among them. That proved true as most of the middle castes aligned with upper castes and separated themselves from the then untouchable low castes. There was a pressing need for a well-organized and coordinated effort to bring these oppressed castes together and form an alliance to fight caste slavery. Buddhism seems to be playing an important role in this direction as it is offering an alternative platform for this mobilization.

The activist missionary put Phule's theory of exploitation into practice to mobilize non-Brahmin castes together. As per Phule (Cited in Omvedt, 1971), Brahmins were the exploiters whose dominant position in the caste system and religiously justified monopoly over resources and knowledge enabled them to generate enormous power. Brahmins were seen as descendants of Aryan invaders, therefore an outsider, who had divided the indigenous population through the caste system. Though Phule focused on cultural and ethnic factors and not on economic and political factors as a reason for exploitation, the activist missionary (Buddhist activists) linked cultural and ethnic factors to the economic and political problems of non-Brahmin communities. Some highlighted the exclusion of oppressed communities from the development activities of the state, while some others dwelt on the persistent caste-based violence and atrocities they face; and for some of them it is about their experience of being denied citizenship rights and other basic human rights. The conscious efforts of these activist missionaries in mobilization and politicization of communities led them to take a common path that is Buddhism. Therefore, Buddhism has now become the collective discourse of protest against caste oppression for the people coming from different

social backgrounds. It offers a collective religious identity and has the potential to challenge caste from its roots.

The real challenge for newly converted Buddhists, however, comes after crossing the hurdle of the conversion ritual. Merely converting to Buddhism does not give them equal status, especially when caste is a system of graded inequality. Dr. Ambedkar has given certain guidelines to overcome this problem and those who convert to Buddhism are expected to follow the guidelines. One of the basic and essential expectations from the new converts is to reject Hinduism and its traditions. The second expectation is to follow Buddhist principles and lead life adhering to Buddhist values. Buddhists believe that they do not have caste. It is expected to assert their identity as Buddhists without any sense of hierarchy. Newly converted Buddhists believe in equality and humanity as their social ideas. Rationalism and atheism become the basis for Buddhist lifestyle and morality holds the place of God in Buddhism (Zelliot, 2004). But these teachings and belief systems of Buddhism also need to be tested on the customs, usages, observances, rituals, and the common life of religious communities in their everyday life. After all, it is not just the highest ideals but the actual living practice of religion that is important (Webster, 2002).

Women Assertion: Confronting Caste to Reconstruct Society

The liberation of women from all kinds of oppression was the focal point of anti-caste movement led by Mahatma Phule and Savitribai Phule. They believed that gender-equal society and liberation of women from oppressive caste patriarchy is the founding stage of the annihilation of the caste system. Therefore, the best way to understand whether Buddhism is helping communities to overcome caste or not is to observe how the newly converted communities deal with their women, as they are always used as a tool to control boundaries of caste in Hinduism. Women are degraded, exploited, and treated inhumanly in a caste-ridden society. Brahmanical patriarchy is rooted in the caste system and hence the root cause of women's oppression. They face discrimination in the name of rituals, customs, traditions, etc. Women are subjected to patriarchy at various levels. They face many restrictions and control over their choices even in everyday activities resulting in exclusion of women from various walks of daily life. Dalit women are doubly oppressed, first as women they are considered as the second gender in a male-dominated society and secondly, as women from oppressed castes (Paik, 2011).

With the revival of Buddhism in Maharashtra women from the converted families have found themselves caught between two conflicting ideologies: on one side the Buddhist philosophy offers liberation to all its members from all sorts of oppression and inequalities and on the other is the deep-rooted tradition of patriarchal practices of casteist Hindu society. Therefore, it is important to see how Buddhist women are challenging those boundaries of castes because it's women's assertion and its actual implementation on the ground which poses a major threat to the caste society. It also constitutes a major part of the anti-caste Buddhist ideology.

I present here the life stories of two common women who fought their way out of caste patriarchy and adopted Buddhism and set a role model for others to follow. With their resilient fight, they showed that Buddhism offers freedom and liberation to every individual.

Madhu (name changed) who hailed from the Matang caste before her conversion had to rebel against her parents, who still believe in Hinduism. According to tradition, she was denied higher education and forced her into marriage at an early age. Against her parents' wishes, she completed her Bachelor's degree in Nursing and started working in one of the Government Medical Colleges in Maharashtra. Notwithstanding an envious government job, Madhu's life after marriage was no different from what it was at her parents'. She was routinely subjected to domestic violence for not bearing a child. Her husband, in-laws, and parents were forcing her to permit the second marriage of her husband without divorcing him. She proposed the adoption of a child as a solution. But they neither agreed to adoption nor to divorce as she had a government job which means stable income. Thus, their decision came from interest in her earnings and not from their affection for her as an individual. Finally, Madhu obtained a divorce from her husband through the legal procedure and has adopted a daughter as a single mother.

Madhu gives credit to Dr. Ambedkar for whatever she has achieved in life. She holds caste patriarchy responsible for the torture she had undergone and does not accept it as her 'fate' as expected of Hindu women. She believes it is Dr. Ambedkar and his constitution that gave her the right to live with dignity. But caste patriarchy keeps governing the thought processes of individuals and justifies such discriminatory behaviour. It is this system of caste patriarchy that made her parents treat their children of different genders unequally. Therefore, she decided to convert to Buddhism as she believes that Buddha's Dhamma has everything she requires to lead a dignified life.

Life after conversion hasn't been easy for Madhu. Her parents were already unhappy with her over her divorce decision. In addition to this, Madhu converted to Buddhism and adopted a daughter further aggravating the situation as her parents ostracized her and severed all familial relationships with her. One needs to understand the hardship Madhu has undergone at the hands of her family and her decision to convert to Buddhism from the historical context. There was a sense of internalization and acceptance among ex-untouchable castes of their 'outcaste' status in the caste hierarchy (Fitzgerald, 1997). As mentioned earlier, most of the Buddhists in Maharashtra, though not all, belong to one single caste that is Mahar. For long, the Matangs remained distant from the conversion movement. Conversion to Buddhism was considered an act of defiance of the caste norms by the Matang community, which ostracized members who embraced Buddhism. Although Mahars faced the brunt of upper castes for breaking the caste norms and daring to convert to Buddhism, they never faced any internal opposition from their caste and blood relatives as it was a collective act of conversion of the majority of their fellow caste people. The same is not the case with Matangs as about the community is pretty much divided over the issue of conversion.

Defying all these oppressive structures Madhu, a divorcee with no child of her own (considered taboo), has adopted a girl child post-divorce, and converted to Buddhism. She is leading her life as an empowered individual having broken all the oppressive caste and patriarchal boundaries. *Satyashodhak Samaj Mahasangh,* the social movement started by Dada Kamble, has played a crucial role in Madhu's journey from being an oppressed Hindu woman to a self-reliant Buddhist activist. SSM works amongst the marginalized communities politicizing them about the anti-caste discourse, awakening them to the legacy of their Buddhist past and its philosophy, and finally, motivating them to convert into Buddhism. Madhu is volunteering as the District Coordinator of SSM Women Wing of one of the districts. As Dr. Ambedkar responded to questions raised against conversion and possible isolation of untouchable castes after conversion, he said the only way to end social isolation is to establish kinship with, and get themselves incorporated into another community which is free from the spirit of caste (Ambedkar, 2016). Madhu found new friends and family in SSM as she has continued to spend time in the organization and work towards spreading Buddhism among the marginalized communities.

Durkheim's (1995) definition of religion emphasizes more on the importance of religious beliefs and practices, which are *sacred*. This sacred gets its meaning in connection with forbidden. Sacredness is maintained by protecting and prohibited from something which is not considered as sacred. Similarly, women's body is used by Hinduism to maintain sacredness by imposing many restrictions on women. Women were made to carry the burden of maintaining the purity of religious rituals in Hinduism. The natural capacities of menstruation and reproduction were always considered impure. Menstruating women were kept away from the day to day life and treated as untouchable by their family members. They were restricted from taking part in auspicious religious rituals. Even in the present times though it is a rule of the constitution which is governing every individual in independent India, women continue to be oppressed in the name of religious traditions and culture.

Childless women, widows, and divorcees are seldom treated with grace by orthodox believers of the religion. Women have always been treated as second class citizens irrespective of their caste locations when it comes to religious rituals. The castes and persons involved in ritualistic affairs and priesthood are regarded as the highest and purest in the caste hierarchical society that is dominated by men. Women have not been allowed to conduct any rituals in Hinduism but although their bodies are used as tools to maintain the sacredness of rituals. Therefore, disassociating the self from the gender roles prescribed by Hindu scriptures is the first step towards liberation from a caste-patriarchal society. Madhu is the quintessence of liberation in this regard. She not only defied the gender roles but also challenged the caste boundaries with her assertion of human dignity through religious conversion.

At one point in time in the early stage of Buddhist revival in Maharashtra, all rituals in Buddhism were dominated by males- Bhante[13]. Bhante are also known as Baudh Bhikku or Baudhacharya in Maharashtra. But during my fieldwork in Beed district, I have witnessed Buddhist weddings in which the ceremonial part was conducted by a female *Baudhacharya*, Ms. Manisha, the second protagonist of my

paper. She is a social activist from Beed, and has performed many Buddhists as well as *Satyashodhak* weddings. Fondly called *Tai* (elder sister), Ms Manisha hails from an OBC community. Her husband is also a Buddhist, who had converted to Buddhism along with their leader Eknath Avad in the mass conversion event organized by Manvi Hakka Abhiyan at Dikshabhoomi, Nagpur in 2006.

Manisha Tai represents the kind of activist missionary as envisioned by Dr. Ambedkar: She is a fulltime social activist having dedicated her life for the cause of women's emancipation. By performing such religious rituals, Tai has challenged the gender roles in the religious domain. She and her husband Mr. Ashok- also a full-time social activist, are instrumental in encouraging, arranging, and performing many inter-caste/religious marriages. They not only encourage and help in solemnizing inter-caste marriages but also work to ensure the safety of the newly married couples after marriages as many a time the families do not accept such alliances, especially when one of the spouses is from a lower caste.

Manisha Tai considers herself as a lay woman, who is not highly educated but her self-study about Buddha's teachings and her experience of working as a social activist at grassroots level has strengthened her belief that both men and women are equal and are equally capable of changing their life-world and that gives her the strength to stand for what is right. Manisha Tai says, '*conversion to Buddhism means you consider everyone equal. But it's not true for everyone. Even among Ambedkarite Buddhists, their women are not treated equally. Many of the men even after conversion were not aware of their subtle patriarchy in their day to day life. We have to make them aware of it.*' This shows the reflexive nature of anti-caste ideology that Buddhism has imparted amongst its followers.

Manisha Tai didn't stop at highlighting her key learnings from Buddhist philosophy; she implemented those learnings in her anti-caste activism through her association with social movements. She was the President of *Savitribai Phule Mahila Mandal* (SPMM). SPMM is one of the initiatives of Manavi Hakka Abhiyan. Creating awareness about gender equality among men and women is one of the most important activities undertaken by SPMM. It has organized multiple workshops for men and women on gender equality and developing leadership qualities among women. 'Unless we achieve gender equality in all spheres of life, we can't say that we have become Buddhists in a true sense', she says.

Dr. Ambedkar (2016, W&S Vol.5) believed that 'the purpose of religion is not to explain the origin of the world…. An ideal religion is one that transforms society into a moral, ideal, and democratic order, such as Buddhism.' This methodology of Dr. Ambedkar clubbing Buddhist values with political activism to bring social change reflects in the kind of work these women social activists are presently engaged in. As social activists, they are using Buddhist values in their day to day activities in challenging Brahmanical patriarchal structure by rejecting gender roles and showing compassion in their approach while addressing women's issues irrespective of caste and class.

Conclusion

Through this paper, I have tried to demonstrate that Buddhism now is not restricted to one particular Dalit caste but has become a collective form of protest for people belonging to various marginalized identities in Maharashtra. People from different social backgrounds are taking to the Buddhist way of life to assert their disapproval of the discriminatory practices of the Hindu religion. In the process, women have taken the lead and they are rejecting the dominant perception and popular notion that women are second class citizens and are always supposed to be subordinate to men. The converted Buddhist women have rejected the gender roles prescribed by the Brahmanical patriarchal caste structure and stand against any form of oppression. By converting from Hinduism, they are not washing their hands of their responsibilities, rather they draw power from the Buddhist philosophy to change their life-world. Buddhist women are at the forefront in reshaping and reconstructing their social, political, cultural, and biological conditions. As it is rightly pointed out by Omvedt (1971), what Phule seems to have sensed accurately that as long as there was inequality in the family, there could be no true equality in the society. Suppression of women, in traditional Hindu culture, went hand in hand with the suppression of low castes and untouchables. Against this backdrop, Buddhism plays an important role as it provides an alternative world view different from the oppressive caste society of Hinduism which leads to the self-transformation of Buddhist women resulting in the transformation of the society, they live in.

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Endnotes

1 The *Mahar* caste is numerically the largest ex-untouchable caste in Maharashtra. They comprise almost six percent of the total state population and almost sixty percent of the total scheduled caste (SC) population of the state. Apart from Maharashtra, they have scattered presence in neighbouring states of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, and Telangana.

2 The scheduled caste (SC) is the constituional category assigned to castes considered 'untouchable' in Hindu scriptures and practices. These castes are officially regarded as socially disadvantaged for implementation of an affirmative action programme called reservation in India.

3 Matang, also known as Mang is the second-largest scheduled caste in Maharashtra. They constitute thirty percent of the total SC population in the state.

4 The Nomadic Tribes and De-notified Tribes are the people without fixed habitation and consist of about sixty million people in India, out of which about five million live in Maharashtra. There are 315 Nomadic Tribes and 198 De-notified Tribes in India. Because of their nomadic lifestyle and derogatory group attributes these tribes are stigmatized and socially isolated, and remain educationally and economically backward. They are among the most marginalized communities in India.

5 The Other Backward Class is the constitutional category of castes that are educationally and economically disadvantaged given their social status in the caste hierarchy. Primarily these are castes of artisans and peasants, who are also referred to as middle-castes.

6 Beed district is located in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra. Around eighty percent of its population resides in rural areas. Out of the total population of Beed district, 13.58 percent are SC and 11.81 percent are ST.

7 After conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism, newly converted Buddhist are not supposed to follow Hindu traditions, rituals, religious practices and also not supposed to worship god and goddess.

8 Dhammachakra Pravartan Din is the day when Dr. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in Nagpur on October 14, 1956 along with an estimated one million followers. This day is also called Ashok Vijaydashmi as it was on this day that Emperor Ashoka embraced Buddhism.

9 Place in Nagpur, where Dr Ambedkar converted to Buddhism. Deeksha is Sanskrit for initiation.

10 Social reformer Jotirao Phule is also called Mahatma (great soul). Along with his wife Savitribai, Phule made significant contributions toward the upliftment of downtrodden communities in Maharashtra. They were pioneers in Dalit and Women's movements which laid the foundation of the anti-caste movement in India by giving an alternative ideology to the non-Brahmin subaltern castes of the nation.

11 Mahad Satyagraha also called Chavdar Tale Satyagraha was a social movement intended to resist the inhuman practices of Hindu upper castes to prevent untouchable castes from using water of a public tank. It was a non-violent civil resistance led by Dr. Ambedkar on March 20, 1927 to allow all untouchable castes to use water from a public tank in Mahad town of Raigad district. The high point of the event was the act of drinking water from the public tank by Ambedkar and his Dalit followers. The day is also observed as Social Empowerment day in India.

12 On December 25, 1927, Dr. Ambedkar along with his followers burned the Manusmriti as a symbol of the rejection of the discriminatory Hindu scripture which is the basis of untouchability against low castes in India. Manusmriti is the ancient Hindu law code that divides the Hindu society into castes with 'graded inequality.' It regulated the day to day activities and prescribed punishments for violators of the caste code.

13 Bhante is respectable title used to address Buddhist monks which confers recognition of greatness and respect in Theravada Buddhist tradition.

Article

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Sex as a Weapon to Settle Scores against Dalits: A Quotidian Phenomenon

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Abstract

In the Indian context, caste controls the gender norms as women are producers of the notion of 'caste purity'. Historically, the violation of caste codes including those related to women have been subjected to punishment through the instrument of social ostracism. Dalit men and women have been encountering culturally sanctioned violence, from higher caste people in the name of 'violating social norms' such as temple entry, untouchability, inter-caste marriages, and so on. As a result, Dalits, especially women become easy targets for the 'guardians of social authority'. Sadly, larger majority of Hindus remain immune to the occurrence of violence against Dalits. This article aims to address sexual violence, specifically rapes of Dalit women due to their intersectional position in the society. It explores the responses of state machinery on two case studies: Bhagana (2014) and Alwar (2019), wherein Dalit women's rapes expose the power wielded by dominant caste communities. The paper shows the use of rape as an apparatus to humiliate a community and family in cases of land disputes involving Dalit farmers.

Keywords

Rape, Dalit women, caste, sexuality, power, sexual violence

Introduction

Dalits, with their total number estimated to be 16.6 percent of the Indian population (Census of India, 2011) experience a disproportionate share of its socio-economic burdens. Arguably, it is only Dalits (constitutionally known as scheduled caste), who continue to suffer the traumatic legacy of the most humiliating social degradation inflicted on them through the centuries-old tradition of untouchability

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through casteism. Despite all the constitutional safeguards as well as the enactment of several laws to support women's honour and dignity, the strong impact of caste even on the judicial system has been seen across the country on several occasions. Inequality of resources, opportunity, and discriminatory treatment towards Dalit women is the prime cause of their vulnerability and social exclusion in society. Since exclusion is both the cause and consequence of the deeply divided Indian society, it is important to understand how religion, caste, gender, class, ethnicity, and region based identities and status could become a possible source of instigation of violence. Thus, identity plays a significant role while interrogating the violence perpetuated against Dalit (ex-untouchable) men and women due to their caste position in society. In India, caste has been defined in several means and modes, one of which is that "caste system is marked not merely by inequality but is affected by the system of graded inequality" The Caste system involve division of Hindus with graded inequality in economic, social and cultural rights.As we go down in caste hierarchy from Brahmin to the unouchbales the rights get reduced, and the untouchables who are located at the bottom of caste hierarchy practically have no rights except to serve the castes above them.The women irrespective of caste particularly suffered the most from denial of rights..In this sequence of graded inequality the untouchables women suffered the most. (Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches 2014 p. 167) Ambedkar further observed that 'caste originated and developed through reproduction in an organized manner, control and excessive violence over women's sexuality, and legitimate control over such practices through ideology in an intra-group process' (Rege, 2013, p. 61). John Gultang (1990) has emphasized on the role of ideology in instigating violence. In all this dynamic changes, although caste has undergone changes, its core feature of greaded inequality, particularly related to women and their sexutally through Hindu religious practices. has remained without much change.

The issue of violence against women needs to be scrutinized with utmost priority so as to develop an adequate strategy and initiatives to curb such incidents. Violence should be understood through its structural causes such as 'Brahminical patriarchy' (Chakravarti, 1993). Such construction is needed to look for strategic solutions on violence against women as deeper examination reveals that acts of sexual violence comprise both caste ideology and misogynistic attitude. They are more likely to happen when the focus of violence is upon toxic masculinity wherein men generally perpetrate violence on women. However, it does not mean that women are incapable of indulging in violent activities or restraining themselves from instigating violence. The social construction of masculinity and femininity gives ground to justify male violence due to the patriarchal structure. Ironically, due to such justifications and notions, many feminist groups in India consider patriarchy as the sole reason for violence heaped on women. It is primarily due to such narrowed conclusions of violence on women that the literature of Indian feminist framework has not been able to capture a better picture of violence on Dalit women (Darapuri, 2017, p. 441-42).

In comparison to the mainstream literature on sexual crimes against women, there are fewer studies that capture the plight of Dalit women. The few examples include ethnographical and autobiographical works based on socio-anthropological research (Paik, 2018, p.2). However, considering the way Dalit women have been overburdened by 'intersecting technologies' of caste, class, gender, sexuality, and community, it clearly makes their condition different from their non-Dalit counterparts (*Ibid*). Therefore, the caste and community oppression are an immediate addressable

followed by their socio-economic position in society. Further, Dalit women are involved in different occupations because of their structural location in the Indian social order. They have been forced into hazardous occupations such as excreta cleaning, cleaning of dead animals, piggery, butchery, and cleaning of soiled clothes, etc. (Kumar, 2020, p. 144-45). In addition to these persisting factors, Dalit women are easily accessible, affordable, and available to such occupations to the dominant caste. Also, the dependency of Dalit women on the perpetrator's dominant castes leads to an unwelcome culture of violence and silence (Aloysius, Mangubhai, & Lee, 2011, p. 3). Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish the 'homogenous' category of 'Indian woman' and the nature of violence against her from the poles apart experiences and position of the Dalit woman.

Women encounter violence across caste and class in the urban context. In the rural context, Dalit women face collective, physical, and sexual atrocities publicly on a regular basis. These function as a means to 'punish' Dalit women and men for asserting their rights against the caste hierarchy. Most of such acts (murder, gang rape, and naked parade, etc.) have a telling effect on the psyche of Dalits as a whole, and women in particular. This structure of violence makes them 'easy prey' to the lust and wrath of upper-caste men (Arya & Rathore, 2019, p. 8-9). Such incidents are supposed to be reflective of collective weakness, sense of insecurity and vulnerability of the marginalized community, and is particularly targeted against their men, who are considered 'incapable' of protecting their women from men of dominant castes. The obvious question that is raised by many scholars is why do such incidents frequently occur against Dalit women in rural areas? The larger civil society, media, and social activists seldom focus on their plight.

As the aforementioned arguments and questions communicate that caste difference, experiences and location become a subject of inquiry for violence on Dalit women. The location of the victim and the background of the offender convey the intensity of violence and the overall impact, it makes as an event, as a process, or an everyday experience of someone's life. In the Indian context, violence on women is regulated through their social position as well as the civil society's reaction to it. One cannot assume that rape is just a matter of sexual desire; it is an affirmation that women are objects of pleasure; on many occasions the ground for revenge. In a collective sense, rape has explicitly been used as a political act with collective aggression, and become a spectacular ritual-- that of victory against the enemy community (Agrawal, 2012, p. 259). The semiotic expression of the sexuality of upper caste and lower caste women needs to be explored in the context of sexual violence on Dalit women. Likewise, non-Dalit women rape cases such as the Nirbhaya case in Delhi (2012) and Priyanka Reddy case in Telangana (2019) divulge the selective justice process from the state machinery and speedy procedure in comparison to other cases. Such cases have led to many protests against the Indian state. Because media, movies, and documentaries were made to reach these cases to the masses, it led to the perception of sympathy towards 'India's daughters'. In contrast, more horrendous incidents have occurred with Dalit women in Karamchedu (a village in Prakasam District) massacre in Andhra Pradesh (1985), Bhanwari Devi in Rajasthan (1992), Shivapati (1994), Anita Kumari in Uttar Pradesh (2003), Khairlanji (a village in Bhandara District) in Maharashtra (2006), Mirchpur (a town in Hisar District) in Haryana (2010), Budaun in Uttar Pradesh (2014) and Satyabhama in Maharashtra (2015). According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, on an average four Dalit women are raped daily (Dutta, 2019).

Ironically, NCRB data has huge gaps while enumerating rape cases; the 'principal offence' criteria mentions that a rape leading to death will be recorded as murder, not rape (All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch [AIDMAM] & National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights [NCDHR], 2018, p. 27). Such a criterion invisiblizes the heinous crime of rape. According to the National Family Health Survey data (NFHS 2015-16), 33.2 percent of SC women experience physical and sexual violence between the ages of 15-49 years in rural India Ibid, P-23. Surprisingly these cases have faded away from the sight of the state, and the media's efforts to reflect on causes of such incidents have instead proved counter productive for Dalit women.

Therefore, this paper aims to address the violence against Dalit women with reference to Bhagana Rape Case (2014) in Haryana, in which land became a contentious issue and rape was used as an apparatus to humiliate a community and family. This paper also examines another case in Rajasthan's Alwar district (2019) wherein a married Dalit woman was gang-raped in front of her husband. In this incident, the downtrodden status of Dalits allowed the dominant caste status of the perpetrator to commit violence. This was reflected in a statement of one of the offenders who said, 'What can a Dalit do to us?' (Dayal, 2019). This statement indicates the structure of supremacy and caste privileges enjoyed by offenders; they were obviously aware of the social hierarchy and apathy of the state machinery towards the marginalized sections.

Social Prerogatives on the Un(touched) Dalit Women Body

The continued violence against Dalits is arguably both an undeniable social fact and source of embarrassment for the state at the same time (Rao, 2011, p. 613). The Indian constitution abolished untouchability through Article 17, but upon witnessing the persistence of such practices, a set of affirmative action policies and laws were put in place to tackle the issues of continued atrocities on ex-untouchables. Such a system of 'compensatory discrimination' is undoubtedly a unique form of civil rights law and enables the understanding of caste and its structures of deprivation and impoverishment. Dalit women's personhood and integrity have been denied at multiple levels due to social hierarchies. As argued by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, 'the origin of the caste system is associated with the mechanism of endogamy' (Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches 2014 p. 4). Endogamy strictly controls the sexuality of women which is followed in Hindu culture. It shows how the caste system uses women to safeguard the caste hierarchy within the notion of purity and impurity and makes a woman regulate her sexuality in the name of honour and virtue. Furthermore, *Manusmriti* supports these arguments by snatching away all kinds of freedom from women in the process of making them dependent on their male partners in the household (Ambedkar, 2014, p. 429-30). Similar roles for women can be seen in *Kautilya,* which considered women as property (Aloysius, Mangubhai, & Lee, 2011, p. 26). The very notion of seeing women as property, as keepers of family and caste honour, make them vulnerable victims of caste, communal, and ethnic violence.[1] In addition, on an average, the most read and celebrated epics stories of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* portrayed Dalit women as *Asura,* or those who attempted to break religious norms and faced retribution. Vizia Bharati (2019) cites the characters of *Matanga Kanyas*, *Tadaka*, *Shurpankha*, and *Ayaomukhi*, who expressed their interests towards *Kshatriy a varna* rulers and were punished with chopping off of their noses, or ears and even killed.

Similar atrocious punishments persist in modern India against lower caste women. For instance, the religiously sanctioned practice of *Devadasi* (servant of God) system for Dalit women, still exists in some parts of rural India. Savi Sawarkar (2019) argues that it is a heinous 'psychotic perversion'. In the Devadasi system, a Dalit woman is made to 'give' herself to the service of God. However, local priests who proclaimed themselves as agents of God, sexually exploit Dalit girls on a regular basis and turn them into objects of their desires, while perpetrating the notion that these girls do not have any kind of rights on their own bodies. Such a practice creates a double sense of disgust as 'untouchable' and 'women' among the victims. Sawarkar (2019) observes that many priests have made it a daily routine of physically abusing these women with a notion that it is their 'right to have pleasure' over the 'untouchable body of women' (Bharati, Arya & Rathore, 2019, p. 122-24). In other words, it is religiously sanctioned sexual slavery, which stigmatizes a Dalit woman till the end of her life.

The context of sexual domination paradigms: the control over women's sexuality in Brahminical patriarchy and the concurrent discourse of 'honour' and 'shame' with the specific power, force, and authority allowed dominant caste males to exercise control over Dalit women's bodies. Ironically, the perception of Dalit women bodies as 'polluted' and 'untouchable' become 'touchable' during sexual violence (Aloysius, Mangubhai, & Lee, 2011, p.177-78). However, the worst aspect of repression in rape is due to its social meaning i.e. *izzat lutna* (robbing honour) in Indian society. After rape, a woman's body becomes an unmarriageable body that is ostracized from the social relations process. Therefore, it is considered as one of the most heinous punishments for a woman.

According to Ruth Manorama, 'certain forms of violence are traditionally reserved for Dalit women: extreme filthy verbal abuse and sexual epithets, naked parading, dismemberment, pulling off teeth and nails, and violence including murder after proclaiming witchcraft, and many more' (Manorama, Channa &Mencher, 2013, p. 263). Laura Brueck (2012) argues that upper caste men's usage of Dalit women's bodies is a way of controlling and humiliating Dalit men. 'The prime reason behind this consideration is that any attack on a Dalit woman is an attack on the Dalit community and their men's masculinity' (the ability of a man to protect his wife and other women in the family who are dependent on him). On a regular basis, a collective effort of violence by the higher castes to threaten Dalit women is obvious (Brueck,2012, p. 226). The importance of masculinity and its related considerations are better explained by Jean-Paul Sartre as 'a man feels himself more of a man when he is imposing himself and making others the instrument of his will. 'It gives him 'incomparable pleasure' (Roul, 2016, p. 111). In cases of caste violence and rape, the perpetrators get similar pleasure, when they instigate violence. The supremacy of dominant caste men on Dalit women's sexuality also exposes the caste-obsessed nature of the state and society. For instance, retribution for violation of caste norms includes caste violence which includes rape, as part of feudal punishment. Thus, crimes such as rape often amount to attaining power, dominance, and control rather than mere sexual fulfilments. Certainly, the sexual violence on Dalit women is the penalty of their assertion against the hegemony of the dominant caste (WSS, 2015, p. 48).

Demystifying Rape

It is believed that rape is committed against women irrespective of their social identities. 'Rape is rape' (Raphael, 2013) be it outside or inside the room, attempted by an individual or a group, occurs intentionally or unintentionally, but it is a crime against a woman due to her sexuality (Diwakar, 2019, p. 63-64). A committee set up in 1979 on the elimination of discrimination against women primarily drew attention towards all kinds of gender-based violence. It observed that women faced violence not merely for their female sexual characteristics but also due to deprivation of equal status, violation of their dignity and human rights, which impacted on their overall growth. Therefore, one has to distinguish between rape as violence on female sexuality, or as a political tool to humiliate the enemy group or community. Apart from sexual violation of the human body, there are other definitions of rape which acknowledge patriarchal and intersectional structures of society that contribute to such incidents. For example, within feminism, the radical feminists have come up with two major categorizations of rape:'violence is sex' and 'violence is not sex' (Price, 2009, 12-14). According to Kathleen Barry (1984) the definition of crimes against women consider those acts of violence which are directed towards women due to their female sexual characteristics; in which men treat women as an object of their sexual desire. Barry's definition contrasts with the idea of power, dominance, and control. However, Sanday (1981) has observed that the sexual act of rape is not merely about sexual gratification of male, but the deployment of the penis as symbolic masculine social power and dominance (*Ibid*). Another understanding suggests women as the property of males in the family. The argument that rape is not about a woman's consent or will, instead a property crime against men…has been emphasized by Susan Brownmiller (1975, p.17-18). She explains that in the nineteenth century, married women were considered by law to be the property of their husbands. And if a woman is not married, she is a property of her father (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 63-65).

Clark and Lewis (1977) mention that rape is snatching someone's sexual property with whom the rapist does not have any relationship. It also is seen as a crime against the honour of the family, community in order to humiliate, degrade, and stigmatize the community in public domain. In both the theorization, the role of power dynamic is crucial to understand how a woman's sexuality is used as a tool to avert the demands and assertions made by the community at large. Along with that, feminists mostly discuss rape in the form of gender-based violence due to the oppressive structure of patriarchy. Still, there is a need to widen this understanding through intersectional structures, with special considerations about the particular identities of caste, religion, and ethnicity as reasons for rape in India. However, sexual violence incidents against Dalit women need an intersectional and inter-disciplinary framework. When a Dalit woman is raped, it is not a sexual act that is committed on one individual but an act of violation of the human rights of the social group that she belongs to. What is being asserted here is not merely male superiority, but caste, and community superiority as well. The upper caste men or their communities as a whole violate all norms of 'pollution' (impurity) when they touch the body of a Dalit woman. Ironically, the people who shun even the shadow of the Dalit feel no violation of their purity when they rape a Dalit woman. It is not a matter of purity and pollution; it is a matter of exploitation and extraction of labour and services at the cheapest possible terms from the Dalits. It is therefore crucial to see the act as political rather than sexual; it is a direct violation of human rights and dignity (Channa, 2013, p. 267).

Situating the Perpetrator and the Victim/Survivor

To identify the causal factors of sexual violence on Dalit women, one needs to look at the context of the social status of the perpetrator and the victim. In most cases, Dalit women have mentioned that the perpetrators were either landlords or having functional economic and political clout in the society or state institutions.[2] On the other hand, the victim Dalit women were mostly engaged as agricultural laborers, midwives, or domestic workers in upper-caste Hindu houses. Because of Dalit women's economic dependence on perpetrators, they get a lot of chances to harass them. According to an AIDMAM report, 'the non-Dalit first occupies the land of Dalit and then seeks sexual benefits from the mother, daughter, or daughter-in-law. Sometimes the non-Dalits get the Dalit men drunk and so they don't know what's happening with the women in the house (2018, 12). Along with that, the role of state and non-state actors such as police, local political ruling parties, panchayats, political leaders, medical officers, goons, and blatant and subtle forms of support from other dominant caste people becomes prominent in the perpetuation of violence (Aloysius, Mangubhai, & Lee, 2011).

In some cases, a family member also helps the perpetrator. The two case studies discussed in this paper highlight the role of state and non-state actors directly and indirectly moderating such instigations. In the Bhagana rape case, the perpetrators (belonginig to the dominant *Jat* community) were politically influential and represented in the state and administrative mechanisms. They had hundreds of acres of land and were economically powerful too. They also influenced the Panchayat and police machinery. In comparison, the *Chamar* and *Dhanuks* victims were from the scheduled caste community. They were landless labourers and worked in the fields of Jats. Similarly, in the second case in Alwar, Gujjars were the dominant caste who influenced the state political and local administration machinery in Rajasthan.

Land as Contested Space: Bhagana Rape Case

The incidents of rape on Dalit women by dominant caste groups have been on the rise in Haryana. According to NCRB data, the numbers of rape cases against Dalit girls or women rose from 1,346 in 2009 to 2,536 in 2016 an increase of 88.4 percent nationally, while in Haryana they rose by a whopping 167 percent (Teltumbde, 2018, p. 167). According to the AIDMAM and National Tribunal reports the maximum number of sexual violence cases came from Haryana, followed by Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh (AIDMAM & NCHDR, 2018, p. 27). The state is also notorious for feudal practices such as involvement of *khap panchayats (community courts)* in social affairs as a 'moral cornerstone' of communities' justice delivery mechanism. Most of the crimes involve suppression of Dalits by the dominant castes and the use of caste and misogynistic language, followed by dehumanization and objectification of Dalit women's bodies. In addition to glamorization of violence and masculinity, the justification of caste, class, and gender hierarchies, have not been able to help in the preservation of law and order and overall stability in the state. The failure of land reforms in the state has worked to the advantage of the Jat community enabling their economic and social dominance as also overwhelming hold over political power.

With eighty percent of all land in the state being owned by Jats, they are the only caste in Haryana to corner state benefits at large while marginalized and backward classes remain deprived. They have been able to exercise undoubted control over

the state machinery as well with their presence in majority of formal and informal institutions. As a result they have been seen exercising their caste power over other castes and social groups with impunity. Not surprisingly, the sexual exploitation of Dalit women and girls is considered by Jats a privilege which they can easily access. Apart from several forms of dominance such as major ownership of productive lands, the Jats also control several common village assets such as grazing lands, wastelands used for defecation and burial of dead animals, and lands such as playgrounds and *chaupals* (used for community meetings) which are developed with public funds. Due to the lack of free access to such spaces, Dalits have been dependent on Jat landowners for economic support. Therefore, it is quite common for Jats to 'enforce' social and economic boycotts against Dalits when they try to assert their rights to public assets such as common land. Against this backdrop of caste conflicts and simmering differences, rape incidents of Dalit women are embedded in the nature of violence so as to gain social control over them. These incidents cannot be seen in isolation but are a continuum of pre-existing social tensions among various castes.

A case in point is the Bhagana rape case of 2014. Bhagana is a small village in Hisar district. The Jat community dominates the village while *Chamars* and *Dhanuks,* representing the lower castes, are Dalits. Unlike Jats, Dalits are mostly landless wage labourers employed in fields owned by the dominant caste. On the night of 23rd March 2014, four minor Dalit girls went out of their houses to answer nature's call. Five men of the Jat community, who had been stalking them for a long time, abducted the girls by dragging them into a car. They sedated and gang-raped the girls and then dumped about 170 kms away near Bhatinda railway station in the neighbouring state of Punjab. Upon their daughters' sudden disappearance, the parents of the girls approached the village *sarpanch* (village head), who was also a Jat. Instead of taking the incident seriously and helping the parents file a police complaint, the sarpanch tried to pass off the incident as a case of elopement. On the persistence of parents, he took the missing girls' parents and relatives to Bhatinda railway where the girls were found. On their way back, the sarpanch accompanied the girls in a car while their relatives were asked to take the bus. This was allegedly done to intimidate the girls throughout the journey asking them to forget the incident and warning them of dire consequences for their families in case they went ahead with police complaint. All the while, the sarpanch, upper caste people, and police insisted that the incident was a case of elopement alleging that one of the victims had an affair with one of the accused persons and that the girls were raking up the issue to get compensation from government.

Nonetheless, the girls and their families filed a police complaint following which the girls under went a medical examination confirming rape and physical assault. Although the police were initially reluctant to file a case and proceed further, they could not resist any further due to pressure from families and Dalit activists.

A sting operation by a leading news magazine *Tehelka* later found that the entire episode had been carefully planned as a means to settle scores with parents of one of the victims whose father had taken on the sarpanch by lodging a police complaint against him. The father worked as a daily wage labourer in the house of the sarpanch. Once, he was beatenup on the issue of wages. He lodged a First Information Report (FIR) against the sarpanch, but the police did not take any action against them. The sarpanch and his relatives threatened to 'teach a lesson' to the daily wager for having gone to the police station against them. After a month, the gangrape incident happened. Here, sexual violence needs to be seen in the background of simmering tensions

between the Dalit and Jat communities. The incident of rape was the consequence of a prior conflict. Another among the several simmering issues between Dalits and Jats in the village pertained to the fundamental right to use and access the shamilat-deh (common land) in Bhagana. The authority for distribution of common land is vested in the Panchayat. The Amendment Act of Punjab Village Common Land (Regulation), October 2009 states:

A Panchayat may, gift, sell, exchange or lease the land in Shamilat-deh vested in it under this Act to such persons including members of scheduled caste and backward classes on such terms and conditions, as may be prescribed' (Association for Democratic Rights [AFDR], People's Union Democratic Rights [PUDR], &Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression [WSS], 2014, p.4.).

In 2012, 280 acres of common land was under the authority of the village Panchayat. Out of the total, sixty acres was distributed among villagers through auction. The Jats dominated the Panchayat and got access to more land. They deliberately planted trees on the common land to stop Dalit accessibility to the area. They also allegedly collected Rs 1000 rupees per family for plot allotment. While the sarpanch stated that they had already allotted 123 plots to Dalit families, the Dalits resisted the allotment as the plots given to them were earlier used as burial grounds by upper caste people. Since Dalits are mostly landless labourers and they have livestock that grazed on the common land, they had no grazing land left after it was allotted to others following the auction. This affected their livelihood. The PUDR report mentions that the Dalits were raising their voice to seek redistribution of common land. When the Dalits started raising their voice against injustice, the Jats began to prohibit them from accessing public spheres. Subsequently, Dalits started protesting against it. On 21st March 2014, the Dalits filed a case against the Jats' encroachment on common land. However, the judiciary bypassed the issue saying that 'the case comes under the Panchayat's authority; and the judiciary has no role to play' (PUDR, 2014, p. 6-7).

The Dalits in the village had also been demanding a change in the name of a village square from *'chamar chowk'* to 'Ambedkar Chowk' and wanted to install a statue of Dr. Ambedkar there. Yet another demand was related to a playground. After the rape incident, 137 families of the chamar community went to Delhi for holding a demonstration in their quest for justice. They organized under the banner of *Bhagana Kaand Sangharsh Samiti* (Bhagana episode struggle committee) and demanded justice for the rape victims and socially boycotted villagers. However, the state government and the central regime took no action.

In this case, the dominant caste used rape as an instrument of caste shame and humiliation. According to Prem Chowdhary (2010), because of persisting caste boundaries and notions of purity, the upper-caste ensures control over women's sexuality. However, in the case of Dalit women, their bodies are seen as a 'site of dishonour, revenge, and subordination'. Attempting rape on Dalit women becomes a symbolic mechanism of perpetuating subjugation. Rape, thus, is relational violence because it is connected to family and community honour.[3]

Interestingly, the culprits do not consider rape as violence until they face any resistance, and are in a position to proclaim that it (raping) is their right. On the other hand, the victims and even their families and community as a whole are subjected to all sorts of humiliation as a collective punishment (Baxi, 2014, p. 28).

Alwar Gang Rape Case

When rape is used as an instrument to impose power, or reflect the powerful position of influential people in society, it is considered 'power rape'. According to Geetha Mukherjee(1983), 'when a woman is raped under economic domination, or influence, or control, or authority, it includes all kinds of legal and illegal domination by the perpetrator who is holding power in a state or non-state mechanism through which he shall deem to commit rape' (Baxi, 2014, p. 34-35). Baxi (2014) argues that in the case of Bhanwari Devi (1992), men of the dominant Gujjar community raped her as she had ventured to stop a child marriage in their family. This action was considered by Gujjars as humiliating as a lower caste woman had dared to question their customs. During the long-drawn legal battle for justice, a sessions judge reportedly said 'it's impossible for upper-caste men to rape a lower caste woman' (Shukla, 2006). The judgment mentioned Bhanwari Devi as 'un-rape-able' based on her social location *vis*-à-*vis* the age and caste location of perpetrators. Nonetheless, the incident led to the introduction of a law on sexual harassment even though incidents of power rape have not stopped since.

A more recent instance of 'power rape' is the gang rape of a married Dalit woman on 26th April 2019 in Rajasthan's Alwar district. A Dalit couple was riding a motorcycle at around 3 pm, when they were stopped by six men on two motorcycles. As the men turned aggressive and violent, the couple pleaded with them that they were married and even tried to prove their credentials by giving their village name and contacting relatives but to no avail. Once it became clear that they were Dalits, the attackers seized their vehicle and forced them to an isolated spot and took turns raping the woman. The victim recalled that the attackers first asked their names, fathers' name, marital status, and their caste too. When they disclosed that they were 'Dalits and a married couple,' one of the attackers said, 'what can a Dalit do to us' (Dayal, 2019). They even video-recorded the gruesome act. Once they were done, the accused forced the couple into a sexual act and filmed that too. The couple was let off after two hours. They also took Rs 2000 from the husand and warned the couple against reporting or filing a complaint about the incident or they would circulate the video on social media.

However, two days later the perpetrators began black mailing the couple asking Rs 10000, which they were unable to pay and sought the help of relatives. With the support of relatives the couple reported the incident to the police but no action was taken. Meanwhile, the perpetrators went ahead and circulated the videos on social media. It was after the relatives showed the video recording of the incident to the police on May 4, 2019, that all the six accused were arrested (Scroll, 2019). The woman meanwhile said that she had received immense support from her husband and in-laws in resuming normal life thereafter. In hindsight, she wondered if her caste identity was the sole reason behind the rape as the perpetrators were confident that no harm could come to them due to their superior and dominant caste status in the area.

The incident also exposes the unwillingness on the part of state machinery to take up issues of Dalits, particularly Dalit women. It also draws attention to vote bank politics as the caste considerations of the accused and their dominant status was hampering justice for the Dalit woman. For the police, the woman's issues had become secondary and it was only after the videos of sexual violence got viral on social media that they were forced to take action against the upper caste accused. (Dayal, 2019).

The incident reflects how rape is not merely sexual assault but a form of 'sexual terrorism', used by patriarchal and caste-obsessed people to subjugate the Dalit women in particular and community in general. Cheris Kramarae (1986) defines sexual terrorism as part of a broader political project which hinges on the total appropriation of women's bodies. Such trauma and suffering have become 'routine' in Dalit women's lives. The persistence of violence against Dalit women, the escalation of its scale, method, and intensity remain unnoticed and unaddressed. The similarity that can be drawn between Bhagana and Alwar cases is that both were results of intentional and targeted caste violence. The issues of distribution of common land, resource usage, and caste dominance had created ground for caste-based sexual violence. In both cases, Dalit women were the major victims of atrocities and bore the brunt of casteism.

Conclusion

Violence against women is one of the major challenges towards achieving an equal and just society. Any form of violence against women is unacceptable. Among the several acts of violence, rape is the most heinious act against a woman. It is not merely a non-consensual sexual act forced on a woman's body but is loaded with several social, cultural, and political considerations associated with women's bodies. This paper discusses how forced sex is a used as a significant tool to suppress the rights and dignity of not just Dalit women, but the community as a whole. It also highlights the patriarchal, and hierarchical caste and class structures which legitimize sexual crime against lower caste women. The rape of a Dalit woman revolves around the issues of both patriarchal and Brahminical norms. It is therefore pivotal to note that caste is the dominant factor in case of incidents of sex crimes against Dalit women.

In most cases rape becomes the consequence or the resultant end of several causal factors such as land disputes, factional rivalry, and above all caste dominance due to deeply embedded discriminatory behaviour sanctioned by religion. Both the Alwar and Bhagana cases throw light on the apathy of the state authorities in ensuring justice to victims and survivors. Rather than looking into the enormity of the violence against an individual, these Reveled how state institutions characterize women by their caste identity.

The notion of individuality disappears in the cases of Dalit women. Caste-biased rape is not only a mere non-consensual physical act of violence but is also a festering wound on the individual's psyche as also that of her community. As memories of such events and trauma haunt Dalit women they live in perpetual fear, which adversely affects their future aspirations. Hence, rapes of Dalit women need to be tackled with the human rights approach so that their concerns are addressed more inclusively and substantially. Also, in order to prevent violence on Dalit women there is a need for 'substantive' justice rather than a 'punitive' one. It can only be possible when the state, civil society, academia, and mainstream media collectively start to address their issues without prejudiced minds and institutional support is provided in a holistic manner.

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Endnotes

1 According to Adama Dieng, representative of UN on sexual violence in conflicts, sexual violence became a 'tool of dehumanization and shame' and 'a weapon of punishment and persecution'. See: Edith M. Lederer, 'Sexual Violence being used as Terror Tactics,' *The Times of India* (Delhi), May 16, 2017**.** Susan Brownmiller also stated the meaning of rape as the violent act against another person and the property in the context of war. See: Susan Brownmiller, *Against our will: Men, women and rape* (New York: Fawcett Columbia., 1975), 186.

2 If we look the previous caste atrocities cases, we see that perpetrators have invariably been from higher castes. In the Karamchedu massacre (1985) in Andhra Pradesh, the perpetrators belongedtotheKammaslandlord community, who had a hold in politics and administrative posts and a dominant position among other castes. In theBhanwari Devi case in Rajasthan (1992), Gujjars were the dominant community in Bhaterivillage.They gang rapedBhanwaridevi in front of herhusband. IntheShivapati case (1994) and Anita Kumari case in Uttar Pradesh a Dalit woman wadraped by adominant caste community male. In the case of Khairlanjicasein Maharashtra (2006) the offenders were from Kunabi and Kalar caste group. They were also the dominant castes in Khairlanji village. In the case of Mirchapur (2010) and Bhagana (2014) in Haryana the perpetrators werefromJat community.

3 The ideology of honour is highlighted in the gendered notion of inequality and hierarchy. Men and women both embody honour, but the woman is the repository and men are the regulator of honour. Thus, a woman's honour is associate with family and community honour. So, if a woman is 'dishonoured' by any mechanism, then her family or community can never regain that honour. See: PremChowdhary, *Redeeming honour through violence:Unraveling the concept and its applications*(New Delhi: CEQUIN, 2010), http://cequinindia.org/images/ResourcesItem/Pdf/Honour%20killings%20by%20Prem%20Choudhury.pdf.

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Dalit Counterpublic and Social Space on Indian Campuses

Kristina Garalytė[1]

Abstract

This article discusses three different university campuses in India (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Osmania University, and the English and Foreign Languages University) and their political and social environments with a particular focus on Dalit student activism from March to June, 2013, and from January to March, 2014 when this ethnographic research was conducted. It questions what place Dalit student activism, constituting the 'counterpublic' (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002), occupied in these campuses; how Dalit student activists interacted with other student political groups; what characteristic features the Dalit student activism had on each campus. This article discusses the changing power relations in Indian universities and the role of 'social space' (Bourdieu, 2018) in negotiating social statuses. Dalit student activists actively engaged in appropriating social space by installing Dalit symbolic icons on the university campuses, bringing up caste issues to public attention and thus temporarily turning certain campuses into 'political strongholds' (Jaoul, 2012) of the Dalit movement. Contributing to the recent scholarship on student politics in South Asia this article argues for the understanding of interactive relation between campus space and student politics, showing how Dalit students changed the campus space through symbolic appropriation and, conversely, how historically constituted campus spaces affected the nature of Dalit student activism in each of the discussed localities.

Keywords

Dalits, student activism, counterpublic, social space, social statuses

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Introduction: Dalit Student Activism as a Counterpublic[1]

Until the post-colonial modernity, public space in India was largely the privilege of upper castes. Gorringe argued that 'few areas in India constitute public space in any meaningful sense since space has usually been hierarchically patterned' (2005, p. 178). Untouchables through centuries were 'isolated, excluded, and ostracized' and 'constituted "non-people" who were not accepted as being members of the "Hindu public," but were perceived as "outcastes" on the fringes of civilized society' (Ibid, p. 176). However, colonial and post-colonial reforms and the foundation of modern institutions began opening up accessibility of the public space to formerly marginalized groups. Some Dalits and other lower caste members, through the means of reservation policy, nowadays secure admission to universities--the sites of social privilege-- and become active participants in campus public life, leading to increased contestation over public space among different student groups.[2]

Indian universities are generally perceived in terms of the Harbermasian ideal of the public sphere (Habermas, 1991) marked by social consensus and rational debates. There is a noticeable opinion that Indian universities should serve a double purpose: create the critical public sphere and enable the 'bracketing' (Fraser, 1990) of social inequalities (Béteille, 2007; Deshpande, 2016). This suggests an ideal that by educating young individuals universities should enable them to become active participants in the public life of the nation. Nevertheless, as Deshpande claims, Indian universities face one of the biggest challenges of accommodating, educating and empowering new social groups−the lower-castes (2016). This challenge stems not only from the difficulties in creating and applying efficient education policy and teaching methods, but also in accommodating these new groups as equal participants in universities' and nation's public life. In other contexts, for youth entering and studying in a university is an exciting journey, but for Dalits and other lower caste members the university years sometimes turn into a bitter experience, in not so infrequent cases leading to suicides (Ovichegan, 2015; Sukumar 2016).

Despite difficulties that university infrastructure and social norms impose on the subaltern youth, some Dalits and other lower caste members after going through educational empowerment become active participants in campus public sphere. However, instead of accepting the dominant construction of public concerns, some of these groups and individuals, drawing on their own subjective experiences of social marginality, create alternative 'counterpublics' (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002) that reframe the dominant understanding of social relations. Fraser defined subaltern counterpublics as 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (1990, p. 67). Meanwhile in Warner's understanding, counterpublic is a self-organized discursive space that it is marked by the subordinate status with regard to the dominant public (2002).

Conceptualizing Dalit student activism as a counterpublic, this article situates it in the broader social and political environments of the Indian university campuses. Instead of viewing university campuses as representing a homogenous public sphere marked by social consensus, and following the critique of the notion of public sphere (Calhoun, 1992; Fraser, 1990; Susen, 2011; Warner, 2002), I look to university campuses in terms of 'agonistic pluralism' (Mouffe, 1999) as spheres comprised of

different publics, and clashing interests and concerns. Particular focus is placed on how Dalit student activism, representing the alternative counterpublic, re-appropriates the public space and what concerns, values, and interests it brings to the fore. However, it must be noted that Dalit counterpublic should not be understood as a homogenous entity but it should be seen as 'heterogeneous and varied and full of various kinds of tensions that are present within the Dalits as a group' (Narayan, 2011, p. xxiv). The existence of multiple Dalit student organizations within the same campus aptly proves the multiplicity of identities and interests within the Dalit student community and the overall complexity of the Dalit category.

While discussing how Dalit students appropriate the campus public space, I draw on Bourdieu's understanding of 'social space' and 'the spatial distribution of powers.' He claims that 'there is no space that does not express social hierarchies and distances' (2018, p. 106), therefore there cannot be unappropriated social space, as it is always a playground of power relations. The case of Dalits in Indian society is exemplary of the complex interaction of space, power, and social status, and shows how changes in social status affect spatial organization.

A number of authors have delved into the ways Dalits use public space to renegotiate socio-political relations and their social status in different regional contexts in India (Beth, 2005; Gorringe, 2016; Jaoul, 2006, 2012; Narayan, 2011, 2012). Jaoul has shown how in Uttar Pradesh Dalits negotiated their relationship with the state by re-signifying space with their own community icons and symbols (2006), and how political competition between Hindu nationalists and Dalits unfolded through symbolic appropriation of space resulting in the creation of 'political strongholds' (2012). Gorringe (2016) argued that by contesting the norms and practices regulating accessibility to social space in Tamil Nadu, Dalits were contributing to the creation of public space inclusive of representatives from different castes. Of particular relevance to the discussion presented in this article is Beth's work (2005), which shows how Dalit public gatherings took different forms depending on the public spaces where they were happening. In this article it will be shown how Dalit student activism in each discussed campus gained specific character depending on the historically constituted campus political culture and broader socio-political context, resulting in various campus-specific trajectories of Dalit student activism.

While there is a rich literature on Dalits' relation to public space, comparatively little is known on Dalit political activism in university campuses. Existing research on Dalit student activism mainly explores beef and *Asura* counter-culture festivals, which were specific forms of campus protests. These festivals were analyzed in terms of 'democratization of the public sphere' (Gundimeda, 2009), 'counter-hegemonic assertion' (Pathania, 2016), 'dialectics of counter-culture' (Garalytė, 2016) and 'culturalization of caste' (Natrajan, 2018). Though providing interesting accounts of subversive or 'counter-culture' politics, these studies lack a more in-depth and detailed engagement with the ways Dalits make use of the campus public space and how the particular campus spaces affect Dalit student activism. Contributing to the recent scholarship on student politics in South Asia (Martelli and Garalytė, 2019), this article argues for the understanding of interactive relation between campus space and student politics, showing how Dalit students changed the campus space through symbolic appropriation and, conversely, how historically constituted campus spaces affected the nature of Dalit student activism. Through borrowing certain political strategies of symbolic appropriation of public space already employed by various Dalit movements

in regional contexts, Dalit activists in university campuses had more freedom for political experimentation and establishing broader socio-political alliances resulting into novel forms of cultural politics. If Warner argues that '[p]ublics do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them' (2002, p. 416), this article claims that publics do not function apart from the social space that structures them. It is an attempt to elaborate on the complex relationship between the Dalit counterpublic and campus social space.

The research presented in this article is based on a multi-sited ethnography in three university campuses—Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Osmania University (OU) and The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) conducted from March to June, 2013, and from January to March, 2014. JNU and EFLU are categorized by the Indian government as central universities, while, OU is a state university.[3] These specific institutions were chosen for research because in 2012, at the time of planning of research design, they were most often reported in Indian news media with regard to Dalit student political activism. These universities were even more attractive for research as they were related to each other through the student activists' network. Research methods included participant observation of everyday campus life, and semi-structured interviews with student activists and faculty.

In the following sections, I discuss the context in which Dalit counterpublic emerged on Indian university campuses in the 1990s. Then, I separately focus on the chosen three university campuses highlighting the specificity of the Dalit student activism in each of them and how it was shaped by the specific campus political culture. The article ends with a reflection on the recent socio-political developments in these campuses, which proves the temporary and context dependent nature of the Dalit student activism.

The Emergence of Dalit Students' Political Subjectivity

When I joined Hyderabad University [*University of Hyderabad*] *way back in 1991, it was a height of Mandal agitations—the pro-and anti reservation movements. We entered the Hyderabad University as young students to pursue our Masters* [*post-graduation*]. *Coincidentally that was also the year* [*of*] *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's centenary celebrations. Thus, as students we were shaped by these two events: at one level we were constantly warned by some progressive teachers, 'look, there are anti-reservation forces fighting against Mandal interventions and you* [*Dalit*] *people have to unite and float the organization.' The other level was to understand how important Ambedkar's centenary was for students from Dalit backgrounds…It shaped an entire generation. I can say that I'm the seed of that particular generation and* [*I'm still*] *growing as a tree. I was a seed at that particular point of time. So we sprouted with the Mandal agitations along with Ambedkar's birth centenary celebrations.*[4]

These are the words of a Dalit scholar, Sudir[5], who as a student witnessed and participated in the political mobilization of Dalit students in the 1990s. Similar to other Dalit scholars' narratives, especially those who entered central universities as students at the turn of the decade, 1990s for them meant a turning point. Dalits associate this decade with particular events that provided impetus for the emergence of Dalit students' political subjectivity– Ambedkar's[6] centenary celebrations, the Mandal reform[7] and subsequent agitations.

The Indian government announced 1991 as the year of Ambedkar's centenary celebration, which according to some commentators was yet another attempt by it to appease lower-caste groups in the wake of their growing political consciousness and power. Many programmes were organized for the commemoration of Ambedkar throughout the country and abroad. Following the centenary celebrations in 1992, the Government of India established Ambedkar Foundation with an objective to spread Ambedkar's ideology and to enact long-term schemes that would improve the living conditions of Dalits. Ambedkar had laid a strong emphasis on education as a major means of social mobility for Dalits. Therefore, most of the initiatives that the Foundation took up included installation of libraries and universities under Ambedkar's name, the publication and translation of his works, initiation of various awards and scholarships for Dalit students, as well as projects for organizing events related to Ambedkar and his ideology. Since 1993, in some of the universities, Ambedkar academic chair positions have been established with an objective to encourage academic engagement with Ambedkar's writings and the study of social inequality and exclusion.

Ambedkar's centenary celebrations, the establishment of the foundation in his name and the institutional initiatives, enabled Dalit students to identify with the leader of the Dalit movement and his anti-caste ideology. Various institutional provisions opened a space in the Indian universities for Ambedkar's ideas to proliferate. Today at Indian universities the followers of Ambedkar's ideology call themselves Ambedkarites. For them, Ambedkar stands as the greatest role model in different spheres of life – education, politics, state, and religion. They have adopted, and further proliferate Ambedkar's ideas – his criticism of caste and Hindu religion, the belief in modernity, and principles of constitutional democracy – which today resonate not only among Dalits but also diverse underprivileged, and political opposition groups. These initiatives, as Rodrigues put it, were instrumental in moving Ambedkar 'from being the villain of Indian nationalism, to its center-stage in the socio-political contestation in India' (2014, p. 37).

Sudir refers to another important event, the Mandal agitations. In 1991, the implementation of the Mandal reform triggered major opposition between upper-caste students who protested against the extended reservations against lower-caste students, including Dalits, who supported the new reforms, turning Indian universities into battlefields of the Mandal and the anti-Mandal groups. From the universities, the anti-Mandal protests spilled on the streets. Rajiv Goswami, a student from Delhi University, immolated himself in protest against the new reforms, becoming a symbol of the anti-Mandal protests (Kumar, 2012). Guha notes that there were nearly 200 suicide attempts across the country: 'These self-immolators were upper-caste Indians whose hopes for obtaining a government job were now being undermined' (2012, p. 609). Although Dalits were not directly affected by the Mandal reforms, the violent attacks on the policies made them unite with OBCs and form various organizations to defend the reservation policies (Jaffrelot, 2011, p. 343-348). Many of the first Dalit and other lower-caste organizations in central universities were set up against the backdrop of these events. For example, in 1991 the United Dalit Students Forum (UDSF) was founded at JNU (Raman, 2013). In 1993, Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) was founded at the University of Hyderabad (Johari, 2016; Janyala, 2016).

The rise of the Dalit political consciousness in the 1990s was not a completely new phenomenon. As demonstrated by numerous works on the Dalit socio-political movement and Dalit politics in various regional contexts in India, Dalit political

subjectivity grew and every so often emerged through various socio-political anti-caste movements since late colonial days and post-independence. What was new with the upsurge of the 1990s was that it touched the sphere of India's public life that was previously not much affected by the Dalit movement. In the earlier accounts of the Indian student movement and campus politics (Shah, 2004), there was no mention of Dalits as political actors in Indian universities, neither caste figured prominently in student politics. This was not because they were absent there but because the earlier studies focused almost exclusively on central elitist universities that did not have significant Dalit representation. If we had switched our gaze to the regional state universities, we could have found that, for example, in 1978 in Maharashtra, Dalit students mobilized into *Namantar andolan* to rename the Marathwada University after Ambedkar, which led to terrible violence against Dalits (Guru, 1994; Jaoul, 2008; Omvedt, 1979; Gupta, 1979).

The 1990s signified a new era of Dalit student activism as it entered central university campuses gaining more public visibility than before. Sushil, a Dalit scholar from Hyderabad, whose political shaping occurred during the Mandal period, reconfirms this saying that 'before the 1990s, so before the Mandal [commission], there were no Dalit student organizations, there were organizations mostly of the Left kind.' Referring to the Mandal agitations, he highlights the shift that happened in Indian universities during that time:

So it [*caste*] *became a public issue both in Parliament, in press, as well as in the university. That really empowered and enabled Dalit students to talk about it* [*caste*]*, because there was some kind of a ban to talk about it before.* [*To*] *talk about casteism* [*was*] *like you're talking about primordial identities. In fact, the general kind of language used* [*for caste*] *was if* [*it was*] *'the ugly face of tradition' and* [*as if*] *'caste is the monster or evil' or something like that. So there was a discussion about what is caste, is it evil? Or is it social reality? Is it system for discrimination? And is it also* [*an*] *identity? Does it also give you* [*a*] *social status? Is it a marker of social status? What is it?... What is caste? So, there were a lot of counter discourses that came up. And how does one think of Indian society, Indian reality without thinking of caste, without some kind of conception of caste and discrimination? So that really kind of allowed these new organizations to come, and articulate, and elaborate these questions.*[8]

Sushil remembers the confrontational Mandal agitations as an 'empowering' and 'enabling' moment, which allowed Dalit students to share publicly their experiences of caste. He reveals that for Dalits caste has contradictory meanings. In a negative sense, caste is an instant reminder of the humiliating experience of caste discrimination and untouchability. Yet in a positive sense, it signifies one's social identity. Today Dalit student activism continues to navigate through these contradicting notions of caste, perceiving caste identity both as a social stigma, as well as the '"social, economic and cultural capital" of the community' (Satyanarayana, 2014, p. 52).

The coincidence of these two events laid the foundations for the Dalit counterpublic to emerge in India's university campuses. Ambedkar's centenary celebrations exposed the SC students to Ambedkar's anti-caste ideology and foregrounded their ideological transformation from the SC to Dalit. The Mandal agitations served as a political opportunity structure for Dalit student activism to emerge, which highlighted major caste confrontations (with upper-castes) and enabled caste alliances (with OBCs and other subalterns). With Ambedkar's ideological foundation and the SC and

OBC participant base, Dalit student activism began entering central, elite university campuses as the new political player, reconstructing the university public space and public debates through the lens of caste. I now explore how Dalit student activism, more than two decades after the 1990s events, manifests in present day Indian university campuses.

Jawaharlal Nehru University–Searching for Space in the Left Dominated Campus

Popularly known as the 'Kremlin on Yamuna,' JNU throughout its history has been the symbol and centre-stage of the oppositional Left wing politics in India (Martelli and Parkar, 2018; Martelli and Raman, 2016). The most iconic image of the campus has been its walls. Every year before the JNU students union elections in September, the University's walls were covered with new building-size drawings by different student groups, which were later covered with an additional layer of various smaller posters and pamphlets (*parcha*), thus rendering JNU walls a constantly changing, multi-layered venue of political communication. The issues depicted covered both international and national issues, and quite often both of the discourses overlapped – Marx and Lenin stood together with Indian independence fighters, regional movements advocated together with the international struggles etc. Right and Left wing groups on the walls seemed to be in a constant blame game. The radial Left supported the Naxalite movement, and criticized the Congress of neo-imperialism and Hindutva of fascism. Hindu Right groups denounced leftists' violence and anti-nationalism. A recurring icon and point of agreement and disagreement throughout the visuals of various organizations was B.R. Ambedkar – historical leader of the Dalits and their social justice movement.

Dalit socio-political mobilization at JNU began in 1991, when the United Dalit Students Forum (UDSF) was founded. This was the year when India was shaken by the neo-liberal turn and the Mandal reservation reforms that expanded quotas to the OBCs, leading Dalits to get into the crossfire between pro-Mandal and anti-Mandal groups (Raman, 2013). The UDSF emerged as a cultural organization, a forum that did not have the status of a political group and did not contest in the JNU Students Union elections. Contrary to other organizations, UDSF recognized natural membership, which meant that every SC/ST student on the JNU campus was by default a UDSF member, while possibly belonging to any other student political body on the campus. The organization functioned more as an awareness group raising students' knowledge about diverse caste issues, as well as the experiences, thoughts and ideologies of subaltern communities.

There were other Dalit organizations on the campus. *Mulnivasi Sangh*, for instance, was a student branch of the Backward and Minority Communities Employees' Federation (BAMCEF) with just a few members at that time. Mulnivasi Sangh was different from the UDSF mainly in some ideological aspects, in a sense that it drew the Dalit question into autochthon discourse, claiming that Dalits were real *mulnivasis* (aboriginals) of India and had a natural birth right to control the land and the country. There were also two other subaltern organizations that once had been active in the campus but during my fieldwork were not much visible−the BSF (Bahujan Student Front) and the AIBSF (All India Backward Student Forum). Soon after I returned from my fieldwork, through social networking sites on the Internet I discovered that Dalit

students started posting posters with new banners of the NSOSYF (National ST, SC, OBC Students and Youths Front), and the BAPSA (Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students Association). The names of the two organizations indicated that they attempted to unite all the Bahujans[9] (STs, SCs, OBCs and other minorities). The ideology stemming from these groups was defined by their social experience of caste discrimination and anti-caste, anti-Hindu sentiments. They both carried on the legacy of the historical icons that fought for social equality and justice – B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Periyar etc.[10]

None of the lower-caste groups at JNU, probably the only exception being the short-lived NSOSYF backed by the controversial Dalit politician Udit Raj, were supported by any national political party. When asked about party support, students kept repeating that the Bahujan Samaj Party, a national level Dalit party, and which could have been the logical initiator of a student branch, held a general assumption that Dalits should first concentrate on studies and not waste energy in politics, which was seen as a risky matter. Since Dalit groups at JNU at the time of my fieldwork were not contesting elections and functioned more as cultural or awareness groups, I could not observe any rivalry among them. A Dalit student could be simultaneously a member of a few cultural groups and at the same time belong to any of the students' groups that contested elections. Visible charismatic leaders were absent in these Dalit organizations and groups organized as described by Hardtmann (2011, p. 238):

> The organizational structure of the Dalit movement is flexible and constantly changing, which makes the movement difficult to suppress. It is a movement guided by innumerable leaders, where none could claim to be the one and sole leader. Fissions and fusions in the networks are constantly taking place and activists cross back and forth between networks, often taking part in more than one group or organization.

While leftist groups voiced protests against neo-liberalism, globalization, and communalism, and Hindu Right groups bemoaned threats to national integration and security, Dalits framed their ideological line based on caste critique, as Dipak, a Dalit activist from JNU, explained:

Either Left, Right, [*or*] *Centre–we have criticism. The Congress, BJP*[11] *and Left, we have criticisms for all of them because they…didn't consider caste as a major contradiction of Indian society… Casteism* [*is a*] *major* [*issue*] *for Dalits. Casteism is a major problem of* [*the*] *Indian society. But Marxists never consider that. That is our major criticism and that is the criticism* [*against*] *BJP and Congress as well. How they* [*are*] *doing their caste politics?...Congress Party is ruling for 65 years in this country after the independence…but reservation is not fulfilled in 65 years.*[12]

Open conflicts between Dalits and other student groups, which was characteristic of Dalit student activism in the universities of Hyderabad, were absent in JNU, where Dalit politics reflected the general climate of the university. JNU student politics up until recently[13] was known for its democratic tradition, debates rather than fights, which were common in other Indian universities (Mehta, 2015; Singh, 2016; Singh, 2015). Dalit student activism at JNU also developed in a rather mild tone of assertion. Dipak further elaborated:

More organization, more democratization. More voices, more democratization. This is the process of democratization. So we are not afraid of that. We [*are*] *all friends, even other parties not even Dalit we have friends.* [*We have*] *very good friendship with other organizations.*[14]

Despite a non-confrontational position, politically active Dalits on the campus were spreading the idea of their moral superiority, that only Dalits could understand and solve the problems of Indian society. This idea had been initially set in motion by some Dalit scholars, who argued that only those having experience of untouchability could authentically and morally engage with it (Guru, 2013).

Since 2013, the time of my fieldwork, Dalit student political subjectivity in the JNU campus underwent growth. Formed in 2014, Birsa Ambedkar Phule Student Association (BAPSA), carrying forward 'Justice for Rohith' agitation,[15] contested 2016 JNU students union elections. Its major slogan was unity among oppressed or otherwise Bahujans – Dalits, Adivasis (STs) and minorities. Ideologically it tried to 'expose casteism practiced by the Indian Left.' Rahul Punaram Sonpimple, BAPSA's presidential candidate, addressing his main adversaries, claimed, 'For a change, you must listen to the underprivileged speak in their own tongue and style' (Talukdar, 2016).

Addressing Dalit Concerns: Different Student Groups in JNU Invoking Ambedkar (Photographs by the Author)

Despite being apart from the main political competition, Dalit student activism in the JNU campus seemed to have significant influence and visibility. Apparently, the strength of the Dalit activists in the campus was their power to veer common political debates towards the issues of caste, social justice, and Dalit representation. It has

been observed that the campus politics in recent years witnessed an upsurge in lower-caste political participation. A JNU student activist, Abhay Kumar, in a commentary noted that in the 2012-2014 JNUSU election all Students Union presidents were from socially marginalized backgrounds. In the 2014 JNUSU election, members of lower-caste groups also took four main positions of AISA (All India Students' Association).[16] Significantly, the key candidates of other student groups were coming from socially 'backward' backgrounds, including the schedule castes. Kumar notes that this tendency has been gaining prevalence since 2006, that is Mandal II reforms, when 'the social demography began to shift in favour of Dalit bahujan' (Kumar, 2014). The mainstreaming of the Dalit and social justice issues could also be seen in the emergence of new organizations that fused leftist and Dalit movement ideologies. In 2013, the campus had a small group of lower-caste students called *The New Materialists* (TNM) and the socially diverse *The Concerned Students* (CS), both groups fusing Marxism with Ambedkarism and venturing into counter-culture initiatives such as beef and Asura festivals (Garalytė, 2016). Ambedkar was an icon not only of the Dalit groups, but was increasingly appropriated by different student groups across the political spectrum, all of them trying to attract SC students under their ideological influence.

Osmania University–Challenging and Combating Hindu Right Wing

Osmania University (OU) was the hotbed of the radical students' movement since the 1969 Jai Telangana agitation setting the demand for a separate Telangana state that was materialized during my fieldwork in Hyderabad in 2014. Being the symbolic epicentre of the Telangana movement, the campus student politics had a strong Left leaning (Pathania 2018). With student activists capturing more and more power in their hands and student activism taking a violent turn, students union elections in the university was banned in the mid-1980s. Nevertheless, student organizations were present in the campus and continue to raise their demands for re-introduction of students' union polls till this day.

In 2014, OU had a strong presence of Dalit organizations–Bahujan Students' Front (BSF), Dalit Bahujan Cultural Association (DBCA), Madiga Students' Federation (MSF), All Mala Students' Association (AMSA), the latter two representing Dalit sub-caste identities, and highlighting the inherent inequalities and divisions within the SC community. Despite underlying sub-caste identity differences, they propagated the 'autonomous' Dalit political discourse and ideologically disassociated from both Right and Left politics. This shift reflected the broader changes in the SC members' political orientation in the area since the mid-1980s. After the Karamchedu and Tsundur Dalit massacres, in which Dalit families suffered from the dominant castes, the SCs began disassociating from the Communist and Naxalite movements, asserting an 'autonomous' Dalit political identity, instead of class taking caste as a main point of ideological positioning (Berg, 2014; Gudavarthy, 2005, 2013; Kota, 2019; Satyanarayana, 2014; Srinivasulu, 2002). At the time of the fieldwork, the 'autonomous' Dalit political movement discourse which had questioned Dalit involvement in Left politics, was already present in the Osmania campus and the existence of the aforementioned Dalit organizations proves this point.

The Arts College Building of Osmania University with Dalit Political Posters (Photograph by the Author)

Besides these two blocks, Dalits and leftists, there was a group of Telangana organizations that were largely pre-occupied with the Telangana movement, and in a way had mixed political identities, ranging from Left to Dalit leaning. Dalit students were especially articulate in the Telangana agitation, creating an impression that the Telangana movement was majorly led by Dalit and other subaltern students. During the fieldwork, the Telangana cause was one of the most significant resources upon which the Dalit student activists built up their repertoire of contention. In 2014, the campus public space seemed to be in the grip of Dalit student activism. The Arts College building every now and then would display huge building-size posters with pictures of Dalits and other lower-castes' historical icons and political leaders–Buddha, Ambedkar, Phule, Kanshi Ram and others.

Despite their differing ideological positioning, the SC students, both from Dalit and Left leaning came together to participate in common Telangana agitations and their collaboration was especially evident when it came to confronting 'communal forces,' that is Hindu Right wing student group – ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad). Conflicts among different groups were seen as essential to campus politics, as they were a major way to expand political influence and public visibility. The Dalit student activists of OU in interviews often recalled their conflicts with ABVP. Many of them alleged that 'until recently OU was in the clutches of the ABVP goons' who used to frequently beat up Dalit students and force them to participate in Hindu celebrations. As the Dalit student numerical and political strength grew they gradually curbed ABVP dominance by force and numerical strength. Territorial contestation was the most prevalent form of political strife. I kept hearing Dalit students saying that Osmania was 'their territory' with 'their people,' while others would look on with suspicion to this 'dangerous' area. However, the 'stronghold' had to be maintained as tensions between Dalits and ABVP 'goons' were persistent and kept emerging at critical moments. Lenin, a renowned communist Dalit activist from OU recalled:

Ek night ko ABVP goons mere bhai ko mare, bahut mare [*One night ABVP goons beat my brother*]. *Stick se bahut mare* [*Beat him a lot with a stick*]. *When we reached* [*in the*] *morning we gathered all student organizations.*

What followed was an agitation in front of the Arts College building in which agitated Dalit students burned the portrait of Hedgewar[17] and of other Hindu nationalist leaders and brought down a *Saraswati* (goddess of learning) statue inside the campus.

These reactions emerged in response to a particular incident in the campus, but they immediately translate into a symbolic political message. Dalit politics in OU was based on outward confrontational strategies and the bigger the confrontation, notwithstanding some sacrifices, the more intense was Dalit political mobilization. Arun (2007) observes how Paraiyars in Tamil Nadu purposely instigated confrontation with upper-castes since 'they came to realise that they could assert themselves in the village only by creating conflicts' (p. 93). Similarly, beef and Asura counter-culture festivals were employed by Dalit students in this polarized and combative university setting because of their communicative explosive symbolic potential.

While in JNU Dalits as a counterpublic were participating in student politics largely on an ideological level, in OU the counter positioning took the form of physical conflicts and open confrontations in the quest to capture campus social space. What could explain this tendency? State universities in India are more prone in general to physical violence than central universities. Secondly, the historical legacy and proximity of the Telangana movement might have influenced the overall nature of student politics and Dalit student activism in the Osmania campus. The context of the Telangana movement played a structuring role in a double sense. It infused students with the spirit of resistance and taught the strategies of counter mobilization. On a more practical level, it enabled local SC, ST, and OBC students to mobilize across different campuses establishing an empowering political network.

The English and Foreign Languages University–Outreaching for the Subaltern Alliance

Like JNU, The Central Institute of English (the initial name of EFLU) was the 'brainchild' of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru which was established with a mission to prepare highly qualified English language teachers for the developing nation. Being a central university and the centre of foreign language learning, EFLU had a multicultural character with students coming from different Indian states. In general, EFLU was not known for its student politics until it got into national media attention because of beef and Asura festival celebrations in 2011 and 2013.

During my fieldwork, the campus was dominated by DABMSA (Dalit Adivasi Bahujan Minority Student Association). Although established around 2000, the organization was not active until 2004 yet through the years it has managed to become the most visible and influential student organization in the campus. It united not only Dalits but also other subaltern groups – *Adivasis* (STs), OBCs, Muslims, and Christians among others thus forming a wider subaltern alliance of the minority communities. Befitting to its social orientation, the group has been actively involved in the fight for the implementation of the reservation policy. At that time, besides DABMSA, there was a small but vocal LGBTQ group that was politicizing sexuality issues in the campus, as well as feminist groups. They did not have a formal name but were active in shaping public opinion within the campus.

Back in 2005 and later on, DABMSA was preoccupied with cultural debates. Samata Biswas, an upper caste Bengali student (2005), recalls poster wars between

university administration and DABMSA members over what musical instrument – *Veena* (a classical Indian string instrument associated with upper-caste culture), or *Dappu* (a drum of Madigas, the local SC group) – should sound in the campus. Biswas observes that 'we tend to forget that "culture" is…not non-coercive' and that 'the relationship between the Veena and the Dappu is one of domination' (Biswas, 2005). In 2013, DABMSA members organized 'Asura pride week' celebrating the so-called antagonists of the Hindu mythology as a symbolic declaration of appreciation of cultural differences (Mathew, 2013). They also staged an alternative Onam celebration in 2013 that brought to the public the silenced experiences of subaltern communities in Kerala (Garalytė, 2016). These initiatives were intended to fight against the 'forced homogenization of our lifestyles.'[18] Through the claims of multiculturalism, cultural liberalism and tolerance, DABMSA managed to attract 'progressive' students from different social backgrounds including some upper-caste students who had become 'Daliticized' or 'subalternisized' during their study years through involvement in student politics and certain study courses.

However, the organization was not without its contradictions. DABMSA started contesting elections since 2006 and this created many problems and divisions within organization. The initial name of the organization was DBMSA and did not involve Adivasis (STs) who were added later on. *Banjaras* – the dominant ST group in the area, which gained increasing visibility on EFLU and OU campuses, began questioning the logic behind the organization's name. Rakesh, a DABMSA's member, recalled:

Some people were asking why Dalits in the front, why not Adivasis first and then Dalits, some small issues, some problems. They were able to resolve that problem, but yeah some issues like that [*were there*] *in the beginning.*[19]

Another contestation of DABMSA's influence in the campus came from Telangana Student Association (TSA), an organization that largely stood for the Telangana cause, but more broadly was also involved in Dalit student activism. During the 2009 agitation[20] there was heavy repression of OU students: the police *lathi-charged* (beat with batons) students while SRPF (State Reserve Police Force) entered hostel rooms in a crackdown on student activists. Osmania students quite often found refuge in the nearby EFLU campus. As students recall, people used to come to EFLU to sleep and discuss the Telangana movement issues overnight and that is how TSA was formed.

Apart from being the natural spillover from the Osmania campus in the context of the Telangana agitation, the formation of TSA also had another impetus – it sought to challenge the caste composition of DABMSA. The members of TSA articulated a 'discrimination within discrimination' discourse on a regional basis, as Suresh, one of the leading members of TSA, explained:

DABMSA was largely dominated by Andhra [*people*]*, that is why TSA* [*Telangana Student Association*] *had to emerge. And those people, our people: Telangana Dalits, OBCs, STs and everybody, used to work for DABMSA. But when this Telangana movement started, we even started looking at DABMSA, the functioning of DABMSA in a critical* [*way*]. *Saying who are all presidents? Who all are given posts? Why Telangana people are only treated as their work force? The greatest development in DABMSA is* [*that*] *they have given the president post to the Telangana Lambada, the ST…To survive in this Telangana movement, regional movement they have given it to him. DABMSA is not representing our concerns and they are using our work force.*

The Telangana movement and its 'victimization' discourse allowed local Telangana groups, be it SCs, STs or OBCs, to gain an upper hand in the campus politics and revealed that within the Dalit and subaltern organizations there was an inner competition over dominance. It also showed that there was a constant reshaping

of what constitutes 'we,' which proved difficulties among Dalits or subalterns in forming common political platform. Despite organizational disagreements, in terms of ideology most of the organizations in the campus, except ABVP and DSF (Democratic Students' Front) – a leftist student organization, aligned with the Dalit/subaltern discourse, adding to the major cause of social justice supplementary ideological hues.

The strength of Dalit student activism in the campus was not only due to the work of student organizations but also of former Dalit activists who after entering the university in faculty positions started teaching courses that addressed caste, Dalit and subaltern issues. EFLU's Department of Cultural Studies offered most such courses and was seen as the most radical and politically challenging department in the university. It brought alongside trendy courses on film, culture, gender, feminist studies, and a course on 'Dalit Studies,' which was introduced by a former student activist and faculty member. The course has become popular in the campus, exposing the wider student community to Dalit and caste issues. Many of the Dalit and pro-subaltern students, even some from the upper-castes whom I spoke with, narrated the transformation of their political attitudes and social vision, once they got exposed to the Dalit/subaltern discourse.

Another reason behind the strength of Dalit student activism was the emergence of the 'Dalit Camera' – a YouTube channel that was mainly dedicated to video coverage of various issues related to Dalits, 'through the un-touchable eyes,' as it claims. It has become one of the most authoritative and visible Dalit media platforms nation-wide. It was founded in 2012 by a Dalit PhD student from EFLU, originally hailing from Tamil Nadu a state where Dalit politics is particularly strong. The 'Dalit Camera' was mainly run by EFLU students, belonging to different social backgrounds, even upper-castes, who were associated with DABMSA and who have gone through 'caste sensitization' in the campus. The presence of the 'Dalit Camera' was a sign of empowerment for Dalits, who have been voicing their complaints of not having their own media or sources of representation. The 'Dalit Camera' had a significant influence on shaping public discourse not only in the campus but also nationally. By bringing silenced Dalit experiences from different parts of India onto one easily accessible platform, the 'Dalit Camera' contributed to the formation of the imagined pan-Indian Dalit community. It also attracted upper-caste members, who participated in the video material production, probably not only because they were sympathetic to the social cause, but also because it was a 'modern' and 'cool' way of engaging student politics. As I came to know, the presence of the upper-caste volunteers in 'Dalit Camera' became a contested issue on the campus, as some students began questioning why instead of employing Dalits, who would be real representatives of their own cause, the 'Dalit Camera' chose upper-caste members in its team.

The EFLU campus politics is interesting in a sense that it started forming in the post-Mandal (I and II) period, marked with an active Dalit and other subaltern political assertion throughout the country. At the EFLU campus, Dalit and other subaltern groups had an social space, not dominated by other student groups, to assert their identity and turn the public debates towards Dalit and subaltern issues. The dominance of Dalit concerns was clearly seen by visual political representations in the campus public space during my fieldwork. Ambedkar's images and his quotations were displayed on the administration building as well as in the Sagar square – central meeting point of the campus – unchallenged by the presence of any other political icons; the row of subaltern icons (Jyotirao Phule, Ambedkar, Savitribai Phule, Komaram Bheem, and Periyar, near the image of Gandhi, which was framed differently and installed on another occasion) were placed at the doorway to the administration corridors or in the

women's canteen overlooking the tables where food was usually served. Whether one related to these ideological icons or not, their presence consciously or unconsciously shaped people's sense of place and belonging and formed the sensation that one was in the stronghold of the Dalit/subaltern movement.

While the strength of Dalit student activism on the Osmania campus might be attributed to successful mobilization of local Telugu students formerly exposed to radical left politics, in the EFLU campus Dalit activism managed to successfully outreach other non-Dalit student groups, simultaneously evolving into the broader counter-culture movement that, during the time of my fieldwork, was the most visible form of student politics in the campus.

Poster with the image of Ambedkar at the entrance to EFLU's administration building (photograph by the author)

Poster with Ambedkar's image at Sagar square at EFLU (photograph by the author)

Dalit-Bahujan icons and Gandhi inside EFLU's administration building (photograph by the author)

Dalit-Bahujan icons in women's canteen at EFLU (photograph by the author)

From Social Justice to Counter-culture

The examples from three university campuses illustrate the process of how contentious politics is related to the appropriation of social space and reconfirms Gorringe's claim that '[t]he notion of space, thus, is a central social idiom of the Dalit struggle' (2005, p. 171). Dalit student activism with its greatest resource of caste identity, Ambedkar's anti-caste ideology, and expanding lower-caste participant base, brought to public attention debates about caste and social inequality; the grievances that were previously

invisible in the public sphere of university campuses. They essentially attempted to reframe the public sphere through the subjective and ideological worldview of the Dalits, which was essentially constructed though the lens of caste and experience of untouchability.

A number of authors have showed how the Dalit socio-political movements at the grass-root level and the Dalit political parties acted to re-signify public space while marking it with their own symbols (Gorringe, 2005; Jaoul, 2006; Narayan, 2011, 2012). These accounts show that the symbolic re-signification of public space was related not only to the formation of identities/subjectivities, but also to political competition and power relations (Gorringe, 2005; Jaoul, 2012). Similar to the above mentioned works, campus social space was a battleground of different publics (student groups), their concerns, and worldviews, while Dalit students became major players in university campus politics. Dalit student activists positioned themselves as a counterpublic with regard to other student organizations in a triple sense: they sought to challenge the ideology and praxis of the dominant student groups, to change the present social system, and also to reverse the power balance in campuses. They sought social inclusion but in some of the campuses, became temporarily dominant.

Despite shared similarities (caste worldview, the icon of Ambedkar, anti-Hindu ideology, etc.), Dalit student activism in each of the studied campuses had its own specificity, which was affected by the broader socio-political context and the political culture of the campus. One could see a clear difference between the Dalit student activism in New Delhi's JNU and Hyderabad where the other universities are located, both in terms of strength and visibility of the movement and the nature of the movement's ideology. At JNU, Dalit student activism existed in the shadow of Leftist student groups that tried to appropriate the Dalit cause for their own political agendas. In JNU Dalit student activism was non-confrontational and was led largely in ideological debate form and was asserted mostly in terms of social justice with minor undertones of a more radical rhetoric asserting Dalits' natural right to lead the social justice movement in India.

Meanwhile, in Hyderabad, which had a living history of the Telangana movement, Dalits were at the forefront of student activism at large and actively engaged in appropriating other movements and their discourses. At both of the university campuses – OU and EFLU, despite their differing status (i.e. state and central), Dalit student activism was confrontational and dominant. The Dalit student activism elaborated its frame from social justice to the counter-culture movement, which enabled it to attain broader resonance and gain dominance and power to shape the social space and public debates. As a result, Dalit grievances, caste question, and Dalit-Bahujan culture temporarily took centrestage in everyday campus life, making even others speak in Dalit terms. Counterculture frame and counter positioning allowed various groups to accept Dalit discourse as a legitimate political narrative and strategy to challenge Hindu Right politics before the 2014 Parliamentary elections.

Postscript

Warner pointed out that '[a] public can only act in the temporality of the circulation that gives it existence' (2002, p. 421). I got back to these campuses in January 2019 that is five years after my PhD fieldwork. The first term of the BJP government was coming to an end and its second victory was impending in a few months. The atmosphere in the campuses has changed to a significant extent.

In JNU students were not allowed anymore to express themselves on the walls with political drawings, which was once the hallmark of liberal character of JNU. The University administration has tightened surveillance and hired a security firm which besides ensuring security also monitors student activity on campus. Vivekananda's statue,[21] robed in a saffron sheet and protected by security staff, was waiting to be unveiled. Some professors and students complained about the administration's attempts to replace the teaching staff with the loyalists of the governing regime and about increasing fees.

In EFLU, the situation was similar. Once a Dalit political stronghold, now EFLU was devoid of student political activities and seemed to be undergoing infrastructure improvements and campus beautification. Posters with Ambedkar's images and protest writings on the walls were absent. Security guards, who had doubled in numbers since 2012, in a demonstrative military-like fashion marched through the campus during the shift exchange periods twice a day. A former student activist in EFLU, now having a position in another university in Hyderabad, told me that every time he had got back to ELFU, he felt being looked upon with suspicion because of his former student activist identity. One professor shared his bitter experience about his apartment being raided by the police in search for the 'fabricated evidence' of him having Maoist links, a worrying scenario that had occurred before and will repeat itself with other intellectuals representing and advocating Dalit and other subaltern communities.

Meanwhile, Osmania University appeared to be much calmer compared to the peak days of the Telangana movement in 2014. On university campuses, Dalits and other counterpublics withholding their breath were waiting for the upcoming Indian general elections.

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2 For the discussion on how untouchables became Dalits, see Guru (1998), Muthukkaruppan (2014) and Zelliot (2010).

3 There are 42 central universities in India that are controlled by the Federal government and are known for high teaching and research quality, and fierce competition for admission. There are 310 state universities controlled by the state governments. In popular opinion, central universities are considered to be of higher prestige and research quality than the state universities.

4 Author's interview with Sudir at the University of Delhi, on May 3, 2013.

5 The names of all informants are coded.

6 B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) was the first and the most influential leader of the Dalit movement (Jaffrelot, 2012).

7 As part of affirmative action against the marginalized sections, the constitution of India guaranteed a reservation policy for the SC (Scheduled Caste), that is Dalits or former untouchables, and the ST (Scheduled Tribe) or indigenous groups in 1950 allotting 15 percent and 7.5 percent seats in legislatures, jobs and state-run higher education institutions. In 1991, the Government of India announced implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations extending reservations to Other Backward Classes (OBCs)–intermediary caste groups that were supposed to be characterized by educational and political marginalization–and assigned them 27 percent of seats in government services and Public sector Undertakings (PSUs). These reforms were met with fierce opposition from the high caste groups leading to nation-wide anti-Mandal agitations. Meanwhile, the reservations for OBCs in education sphere were passed only in 2006 by the so-called Mandal II reform (Hany Babu, 2010).

8 Author's interview with Sushil at EFLU, February 7, 2014.

9 Term Bahujan (majority) was popularized by the BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) – Dalit party that was founded by Kanshi Ram in Uttar Pradesh state in 1984. The term has been used to represent Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and religious minorities.

10 For a discussion on the ideas and work of various historical anti-caste leaders, see Omvedt (2013).

11 Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is a Hindu Right party currently in the central government for its second term.

12 Author's interview with Dipak at JNU, June 2nd, 2013.

13 January 2020 was marked by unprecedented violence in JNU when a group of unidentified outsiders entered the campus and attacked student activists.

14 Author's interview with Dipak at JNU, June 2nd, 2013.

15 In January 2016, Rohith Vemula, a Dalit student activist from the University of Hyderabad, after being expelled from the university, committed suicide. His suicide ignited outraged protest throughout India, social media and even among the Indian diaspora. Protestors interpreted his suicide in terms of "institutional murder" committed by the discriminatory university system and the Hindu Right government, especially hostile to minorities and political opposition (Sukumar, 2016).

16 It's a radical left wing student organization affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation.

17 Dr K.B. Hegdewar was Hindu Nationalist leader who founded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 in Nagpur.

18 DABMSA Facebook page (on August 27, 2020).

19 Author's interview with Rakesh at EFLU, February 25, 2014.

20 This was a year of the intensification of the Telangana movement. In 2009 Kalvakuntla Chandrashekhar Rao, the leader of the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, declared an indefinite hunger strike, which is supposed to have influenced Indian Parliament to approve the formation of the Telangana state.

21 Swami Vivekananda (1863 – 1902) was a Hindu monk who contributed to the revival of Hindu spiritualism. He has been appropriated as an ideological icon by the Hindu Right groups.

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A Cultural Psychological Reading of Dalit Literature: A Case Study of *Joothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki

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Abstract

Dalit literature has been a major cultural artefact in struggles against caste-based oppression and discrimination. It not only negotiates a collective identity for Dalits but also introduces variability in negotiations for the same. This paper focuses on the nuances of one such negotiation- the making of a Hindi Dalit writer. At the theoretical backdrop of cultural psychology, utilizing the conceptual machinery of Zittoun, the paper analyzes the autobiographical narrative of Om Prakash Valmiki. It identifies the ruptures and the transitional processes in Valmiki's life. These processes of transitions include identity redefinition, knowledge and skills; and meaning making. These processes were facilitated by varied resources: social, cognitive and symbolic. Valmiki's relocation to a city led to the change in his frame of activity. Thereafter, at each stage of his life, his social circle widened, his cognitive skills got enhanced and symbolic resources were used at progressively higher level of reflexivity. The major social resources were found to be the people with whom he came in contact after relocating to the city. The cognitive resources were found to be Hindi mainstream literature, Marathi Dalit literature, and theatrical devices. The symbolic resources were the works of Phule, Ambedkar and Marx. Accessibility and utilization of all these resources eased the reconfiguration of the semiotic prism reifying his identity as a Hindi Dalit writer enabling him transform the caste-based experiences on the plane of fiction challenging the power hierarchy embedded in social reality.

Keywords

Dalit literature, Valmiki, *Joothan*, dalit expression, caste

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Introduction

The word Dalit captures the collective struggle against the caste based hierarchy and oppression associated with it. It encapsulates the collective emotion of anguish resulting from being downtrodden for centuries in the name of rituals and traditions associated with religion. Drawing vitality from the teachings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit literature is the expression of the dissatisfaction that Dalit writers have had with the so-called upper caste writers who never took discriminatory practices into account as 'rarely did a writer take up an untouchable character and treat him realistically, like an ordinary human being full of vitality, hope as well as despair' (Kumar, 2010, p.129). Their experiences of marginalization in almost every sphere of life made Dalit writers assert their opinions which found creative expression in the form of almost every genre of literature—poems, stories, folklore, dramas and non-fiction.

The present paper focuses on one of those excruciatingly painful account of experiences penned down by renowned Hindi Dalit writer, Om Prakash Valmiki. His autobiographical account *Joothan* (Leftover) analyzed here is laden with the anguish as well as anger resulting from rampant caste based discrimination and exclusion. Sadly, this literature of resistance has been subjected to the same exclusion and undermined using several parameters. It has been accused of being propagandist, univocal and resentful in nature, and is disregarded on the universal standards of artistic finesse, neutrality and objectivity (Limbale, 2004). Critics posing these questions to Dalit literature, as discussed by Valmiki (2001) fall into three categories. The first group includes those who negate the overall existence of Dalit literature. The second group objects the authorship and ownership of Dalits over literature and holds the view that non-Dalits can also write Dalit literature. The third group comprises those Dalit critics who consider it inappropriate to bring out the experiential life of Dalits as part of public discourse.

As a fitting rejoinder to these critics, Dalit writers have set their standards for the aesthetics of Dalit literature. They have focused on the notion of *art for life sake* instead of *art for art sake* and define it 'as literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits' (Limbale, 2004, p.30). Since the word Dalit encompasses the suffering of all those who have been subjected to humiliation and injustice pertaining to caste, class, and gender, so the literary standards to evaluate this literature should be based on the theory capable of capturing social justice as its essence rather than the yardstick of entertainment and beauty.

Dalit literature voices experiences of the constant search of the self-respect while attacking the traditions set against this search. It questions the established criteria of neutrality and objectivity. It rejects the maxim of *Satyam, Shivam Sundaram (Truth, Godliness and Beauty)*[3] and seeks to see life in its untruth, unholy and unbeauty of reality from the vantage points of a Dalit (Ibid).

Writing in the same vein, Valmiki (2001) underlines Premchand's incapability to capture the lived realities of Dalits as he constantly portrays them as hapless victims drawing extensively on the metaphors, phrases, and language representing the upper caste mind-set. He also puts to scrutiny the Sanskrit and western literary conventions which are considered the very origins of aesthetic tradition in Hindi literature, and further stresses the inability of these forced conventions in portraying the essence

and specificities of Dalit lives and doing justice with the linguistic, metaphorical, and emotional foundations of Dalit literature (Ibid).

Pointing out the time and context bound nature of literature, Limbale (2004) writes, 'The act of imagination called art is impermanent and ever changing. Literature changes with changing culture. Unless the yardsticks change, the relationship between literature and criticism will be fractured' (p.107). And Valmiki (2001) restores this relationship between Dalit literature and its criticism by combining the tenets of Ambedkarism and Marxism representing caste and class consciousness respectively. He also lays down the key elements of Dalit *chetna* (consciousness) based on the vision of Ambedkar, rejecting Ram Chandra Shukla's definition of a great poetry.

In an effort to extend an interdisciplinary understanding into Dalit literature, the present paper is an attempt to analyze the text through the prism of psychology. It has two sections: the first includes reflexivity statement, a discussion on the theoretical framework and method of analysis. The second section presents the analysis of *Joothan* into different frames of activity. The paper argues that a Dalit autobiography analyzed from the semiotic prism of cultural psychology unfolds a much nuanced account of the making of a Dalit writer embedded in specific socio-cultural and historical milieu.

Reflexivity Statement

Born and brought up in a relatively socially-privileged household, I was introduced to Dalit literature as a student of Educational studies. My first reading in Dalit literature was an English translation of *Akkarmashi*(The Outcaste) by Sharan Kumar Limbale which led me to sleepless nights and restless days. For the first time I could understand the idea of caste beyond its constitutionally recognized categories. As a student of psychology in graduation and post-graduation, I reviewed studies on caste but majority of those treated caste merely as a variable and not as an experiential reality of the Indian society. Such reduction of caste into a variable which can be easily manipulated, balanced, and controlled, if the researcher is 'not interested' in observing its impact, is informed by and based on 'the two world problem: Out there vs. In here'. These two worlds are 'psychological world of the self (which perceives, deliberates and decides), and at the same time a material world (that which exists outside our thoughts)' (Gergen,1999, p. 8).

Deletion of such narratives from the academic field and the disturbing silence of psychology, specifically when it comes to the theorization of caste, regarding these issues are even more disquieting.

Against the theoretical backdrop of cultural psychology, the present paper is my reading of *Joothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki. The purpose of presenting the reading as a case study is to chart out a way how a Dalit life-narrative can be analyzed psychologically, bringing forth the transformation of a boy who was subjected to caste-based atrocities into a notable Dalit writer who wrote resistance. People may read the autobiography from varied lenses and the reading presented here is one of the innumerable possibilities that narratives of resistance have to offer. I have attempted to read this narrative against the backdrop of my disciplinary capabilities.

Theoretical Framework and Method

Cultural psychology lays emphasis on the mutual constitution of mind and culture, the process of meaning making, and the mediational nature of cognitive processes. It does not reduce culture into an entity or,

> 'a "thing" that one "has", or "gets" (by assimilation or socialization), but the active process of mediating human lives through signs, both intra- and inter-psychologically. The central issue for cultural psychology is to locate culture in the life activities of agentive persons. These persons are meaning makers, and the meaning made frame their relations with the environment.' (Valsiner, 2014, p.47-48)

Under the broader theoretical framework of cultural psychology, the paper utilizes the conceptual machinery of Zittoun (2007a, 2007b, 2008). The unit of analysis is rupture- transition. Ruptures here refer to the events and situations of life that pose a challenge for the taken for granted reality of an individual. They are considered psychologically significant only when the individual concerned perceives them as such. These are analyzed after the levels of explanation of the world given by Doise (as cited in Zittoun, 2007a) as related to 'intra-psychic, interpersonal relationships, one's relationship to a social group or to a societal state' (Ibid, p.351). They are followed by the processes of transition – 'through which the person engages in restoring some sense of personal integrity, regularity, and continuity, and reduces uncertainty' (Ibid, p.348). The processes of transition include three interdependent processes- identity redefinition, knowledge and skills, and meaning making. Each of this process of transition is facilitated by specific resources. An individual mobilizes social resources (mobilization of the social networks and social knowledge) in order to aid the process of identity redefinition. In the same way, cognitive resources assist the process of learning. The third kind of resources is symbolic resources which facilitate the process of meaning making. Symbolic resources refer to how people make use of cultural artefacts or elements as developmental resources in the face of situations loaded with uncertainty (Zittoun, 2007b). Three important conditions that she delineates for any cultural element to be considered a symbolic resource are the following.

1. Intentional use of the cultural element at least partially deviant from its *'aboutness'*.
2. Use of the cultural element should be 'beyond the immediate cultural value and meaning of that cultural element' (Zittoun, 2007a, p.344).
3. Inclusion of cultural elements 'that require an "imaginary" experience-the creation of a sphere of experience beyond here and now of the socially shared reality' (Ibid).

Symbolic resources mediate in the three basic psychological processes: intentionality, inscription in time, and distancing. About intentionality, Zittoun writes, 'Symbolic resources are cultural elements which, when used by the person, become about something else with some intention' (Ibid, p.346). The use of symbolic resources is located in time and 'the knitting of past and future into the present' is required for their use. Besides, each successive level of distancing represents the experience in a distant manner- from an embodied state, to contained and fixed emotional patterns; from those, to a labeled situation; from the latter, to categories grouping various experiences of self and the world; and from categories to orienting values. 'Symbolic resources offer such distancing possibility, because they create an imaginary sphere where personal, unique experiences meet culturally elaborated versions of other people's comparable

experiences (Ibid,p.348).They are generative in nature when used 'across a wide range of modality of uses'. They enhance or transform the understanding of the individual about self, about other and about the world as well.

The use of these resources is reflexive in nature. Here the dimension of usage ranges from degree zero use to the reflective use. Degree zero use is related with the simple appreciation of a cultural element. In quasi use, the individual possesses a vague sense that using that cultural element actually affects him/her. During intuitive use, the individual may not be clearly conscious about it still they acknowledge the effects of having specific cultural experience. Deliberate and reflective usage entails the active search for a cultural element to use it as a resource,reflection about the potential uses of the cultural element and the changes resulting from the utilization of the element (Ibid, p.354).

The process of transitions is represented through the semiotic prism having the four corners representing the subject, the other, the symbolic object, and the subject's sense of symbolic object. The model addresses both the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics. The former ones are represented by the vector between the person and the person's-sense-of-the-object and the latter ones are represented by the person-to-other and person-to-object-vectors (Zittoun, 2008). The semiotic prisms (Figure1 and 2) depicted in the present paper are based and adapted from this framework. (Ibid, p.168).

The semiotic prism is located within the specific setting called a frame of activity for the individual. The concept of frame stands for the larger societal context where social interactions take place. Therefore:

> Change can be seen as linked to the reconfiguration of the elements constitutive of the semiotic prism, and of their respective relationships- a change of the relationship of the person towards the other, the transformation of the sense of situation for the person, and consequently, of the object for him/her. Through such reconfigurations, something radically new can also emerge. (Zittoun, 2008, p. 16)

The paper intends to work with the said conceptual machinery to thematically analyze the autobiography of Om Prakash Valmiki. For the purpose of analysis, Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* has been divided in two parts: before relocation and after relocation. Relocations here signify the changing pattern of the dialectical relationship between Valmiki and his environment. The phase preceding relocation marks the predominance of environment over the agency, but in the life after relocation the agency occupies centre stage.

In brief, the analysis of Vlamiki's autobiography focuses on these questions – Was there a rupture in the experiential life of Valmiki? If yes, what was it and did it lead to transitions? What were the processes of transitions and what were the resources at hand that were utilized to facilitate these transitions?

Before Relocation: Village as the Frame of Activity

Being the youngest and the most pampered child of his family, Valmiki was always encouraged to study by his parents and family members. His father, especially, had been very supportive in this regard because he believed that education was the only means by which caste can be 'improved'. Valmiki received his primary education from Sewak Ram Masihi who used to teach children of *Chuhra*'s (sweeper) community in his neighbourhood. As Valmiki recalls, 'I learnt my alphabet in Master Sewak Ram

Masihi's open air school, a school without mats or rooms' (Valmiki, 2003, p.2). In this school 'without mats and rooms', he didn't mention a single sign of discrimination.

An argument between his father and the teacher, Masihi (of whom Valmiki does not give any account), made his father get Valmiki enrolled to the Basic Primary School by requesting Master Harphool Singh, 'Masterji, I'll be forever in your debt if you teach this child of mine a letter or two' (Ibid, p.3). In the new school, however, Valmiki faced caste-based discrimination that he describes in detail. He was made to sweep the whole school which was an unusual work for him: 'I swept the whole day. I had never done so much work being (the) pampered one among my brothers' (Ibid, p.5). What left a deep impression on his mind was the retaliation of his father to this maltreatment at the school and restored his confidence to some extent. Another incident that he mentions 'as life changing' was his mother's retaliation against insult inflicted on her by a *Tyagi*(an upper caste person). Both these incidents worked as an illuminating force in Valmiki's life which was darkened by caste oppression from an early age. Due to the weak financial condition of his family, he could not get admission to school after fifth standard. 'There was no question of taking admission given the circumstances the family found itself in. How could one think of studies when one didn't even have food' (Ibid, p.14). At this juncture, his *bhabhi*(sister-in-law) came to his rescue and offered her only ornament to sell and pay for his studies.

He did make progress in his studies. 'I had stood first in my section in the half-yearly exam. My results bolstered my self-confidence. I was made the class monitor after the examination and my seat was moved from the back of the class to the front' (Ibid, p.17). Despite his great academic performance, he was constantly discriminated in school which was not only limited to preventing him from participating in extra-curricular activities. Rather,

> All the teachers were Tyagis, and among the students too Tyagis were in majority. No one could afford to say anything against them. During the examination we could not drink water from a glass when thirsty. To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from way high up, lest our hands touch the glass. (Ibid, p.19)

Caste based discrimination affected his adjustment outside school as well. Literature was the means to get solace amidst all this. He borrowed books from the school library and read them to his mother. He was greatly influenced by the character of Saratchandra. Gradually, reading became his passion, and books his best friends. He turned into a quiet and introvert child.

> The basti people used to call me the quiet one, perhaps because I did not speak as much as they did. They minded my reticence. I did not participate in their day-to day activities either. I was absorbed in my books. It was during these days that I read Premchand, Sarat Chandra, and Rabnidra Nath Tagore borrowed from the school library. I was gradually developing a taste for literature and had also begun to try my hand in verse. (Ibid, p.68)

At this stage, literature as a cultural element was used by Valmiki intuitively on the dimension of reflexivity. He was able to appreciate literature that he was reading

(degree zero uses); also had a sense that literature had an effect on him (quasi use); and was also capable of acknowledging the effects provided by literature (intuitive use).

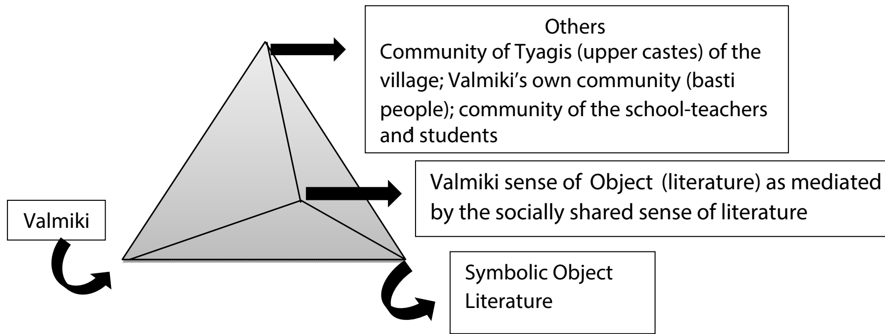

Fig. 1: Semiotic Prism before Relocation

In the semiotic prism depicted in Figure 1, Valmiki has been placed at the left vertex of the prism, the 'others' are placed at the top vertex while the symbolic object, literature, has been placed at the right vertex of the prism. Valmiki's sense of literature has been denoted by the fourth vertex of the prism. Interpersonal dynamics are represented by the Valmiki-others and Valmiki-object vectors, while intrapersonal dynamics are captured by the vector which connects Valmiki with his sense of the object i.e. literature. The socially shared meaning of literature has been represented by the Valmiki-other vector and acknowledgement that he receives from others has been represented by the 'other's sense' of literature. Most importantly, the three dimensions of the transition process have been represented by; Identity by the Valmiki-other vector, knowledge by Valmiki-object vector, and meaning-making by the vector that connects Valmiki to his sense of literature.

His understanding of the cultural element can be interpreted through the semiotic prism. Based on the details provided in the autobiographical narrative, 'Other' is further divided into three categories: (i) Valmiki's own community including his family and basti people; (ii) so-called upper caste Tyagi community; and (iii) the school community including teachers and children. Such positioning of elements conveys that the socially shared meaning of literature mediated Valmiki's own understanding in it while the school setting and community had a larger role in mediating his interest in literature. Then, what is more is the contribution of Valmiki's father who despite regarding education as merely the means to 'improve' caste, was always aware of its significance. Since the village community of Valmiki was largely illiterate and Tyagis' children had greater access to schools which, in turn, subscribed to the dominant view of literature. There is no surprise that the school did not have a single reading on Ambedkar and his thoughts; and the available literature shaped the consciousness of Valmiki. Immersed in his readings, although, he cried with the characters of Saratchandra, his inner voice could not sync with experiences portrayed there. An upper caste man who was amazed at his capability to read the *Ramayana* (epic) and his father who was proud at his ability to read *Bhagwad Gita* (holy book of Hindus) could not give him any solace as no one was aware of the turmoil rooted in the conflict generated by reality which was contradictory to what was portrayed in literature. At that juncture, literature, a cultural element that he used to seek refuge in turned out to be the cause of a major intrapersonal rupture in his experiential life. He witnessed the

abysmal apathy of people when police was mercilessly beating ten Dalit men and how literature belied the dark reality of the caste-ridden village.

> Their screams had made the birds in the trees take off, but paralysis had struck the villagers, who could not express their empathy. My mind was filled with a deep revulsion. I was then an adolescent, and a scratch appeared on my mind like a line scratched on glass. It remains there still. The poem by Sumitranandan Pant that we had been taught at school, 'Ah, how wonderful is this village life'….each word of the poem had proved to be artificial and a lie. What happened that day had caused a storm inside me. (Ibid, p.45)

The rupture incurred by this discrepancy between the reality and its portrayal led him to another transitional phase when he contested against the epic Mahabharata and to question the relevance of the custom of *Salam (Salute).* Besides acquiring the knowledge and skills of Hindi literature, his identity was getting redefined as an educated adolescent who was observing social hierarchies and inequalities.

This intrapersonal rupture was followed by another setback. His failure in the 12th (senior secondary) board examination disrupted the remaining continuity of life and he left the village to take admission in DAV college, Dehradun, thus, changing the frame of his activity from village to city.

After Relocation: City as the Frame of Activity

Relocation to the city forced him to make new adjustments in the midst of new challenges. He was poked fun at because of his country looks. He dealt with the mockery just by remaining quiet. Remembering those days he writes,

> Since I was new in college and unfamiliar with its ways, I kept quiet. Even otherwise I was quite used to taunts and neglect. I feel amazed when I look upon those days and the things I learnt to tolerate. How much my ability to tolerate hurts flung at me had taken out of me! (Ibid, p.80)

Soon Valmiki adjusted himself to the new environment as he socialized with Surjan's friends as well as his own classmates. With the change in space of interactions, he came to know his extended family members closely and also made many friends like Bhukhanlal, Gopi, and Hemlal who were all interested in social work. The most crucial turn took place when he was given a book on Ambedkar's life in the Indresh Nagar library by his friend Hemlal. Thus, he was introduced to Ambedkar's life and struggles. He expressed what had shocked him most:

> Despite my twelve years of studying in Tyagi Inter College, Barla, this name had not come to my knowledge in any way or shape. The college library also did not have a single book on Ambedkar. I had never heard this name from a teacher's or a scholar's mouth. There would be speeches on republic day when the narratives of devotion to the country were repeatedly told, but they never included the name of the maker of the constitution. All the media of communication had been unable to inform people like me about this name.(Ibid, p.83)

The life struggle of Ambedkar shook him completely and he described that impact thus:

> There was nothing special in the opening pages. But the further I went into the book, I felt as though a new chapter about life was being unfurled before me a chapter about which I had known nothing. Dr. Ambedkar('s) life long struggle

> had shaken me up. I spent many days and nights in great turmoil. The restlessness inside me had increased. My stone-like silence began to melt. I proceeded to read all of Ambedkar's books that I found in the library. (Ibid, p.83)

That soul-stirring effect led to his active participation in the social and political life of the college. Literature on Ambedkar was used by Valmiki at the 'deliberate' level of reflexivity as he actively searched for other works of Ambedkar and started using them as a resource. In this process, Valmiki's identity got its unique dimension: 'A new word, Dalit entered my vocabulary; a word that is not the substitute for 'Harijan', but an expression of rage of millions of untouchables. A new direction was opening for me...The deeper I was getting in(to) this literature the more articulate my rage became' (Ibid, p.84). Valmiki started debating with his friends on contemporary issues and became politically active. He witnessed the life of Dalits closely while canvassing for his friend in Roorkee. Now reality unfolded itself in its multitude of dimensions as he acquired the lens of Ambedkarism. He writes,

> The canvassing provided me with the opportunity to see the lives of people at close range. I heard the stories of deprivation. Most of the people did not understand the true meaning of democracy or the value of one's vote. They couldn't grasp the importance of stuffing a piece of paper in the ballot box. How innocent were these people. But then, had independence truly reached them? The pimps of the rulers were exploiting them for their own ends. (Ibid, p.86)

As part of these transitional processes, he could see the power structure operating under the veil of caste system. He relocated to different places after Dehradun, and after each relocation he ended up in a different frame of activity but the transitions continued. Each frame of activity brought forth a more sharply redefined identity, more knowledge and skills, and new ways to understand the world with the intellectual prism of Ambedkar.

He joined the ordnance factory Dehradun as an apprentice and for that he had to give up higher education. Books, again, proved to be his best friends that boosted his morale at this stage. After the one year training at Ordnance Factory Dehradun, he got an opportunity of further training in Jabalpur. Those were the days, according to him, when his selfhood was getting built. 'The new surroundings and the new environment gave him new experiences' (Ibid, p.97). His social circle widened as he came in touch with people from diverse backgrounds in Jabalpur, especially, when he shared his room with boys who hailed from completely different backgrounds. These roommates were from Dehradun, Muradnagar, Kanpur, and Pune.

Ambedkar's writings already had an influence on him and here in Jabalpur after coming in the contact of students having interest in Marxist literature, he accessed Marxist readings as well. He developed an interest in theatre and, finally, started writing poetry.

> There were some students who had Marxist leanings, and I started to read Marxist literature after coming into contact with them. Gorky's Mother, especially, shook me up. I had also become acquainted with Chekhov's short stories. I joined these Marxists in forming a theatre group. We rehearsed in the hostel. We staged many plays in the Institute's auditorium. (Ibid, p.98)

Valmiki's personality, speech patterns, and manners underwent major changes. The transformation of identity was facilitated by the social network he formed there. His social network consisted of people who were primarily interested in contemporary issues. The cognitive resources were provided by the seminars and cultural functions

he attended. And most importantly, symbolic resources, here especially the work of anti-caste intellectuals, enabled the distancing process and he started developing his own views on literature. He was 'more attracted to social realism than to aesthetic and formalist type of writings' (Ibid, p.99). By now he had started using symbolic resources at the highest level of reflexivity'- reflective usage.

The most important relocation occurred when he moved to Bombay (now Mumbai) for further training of two and a half years. This was the place and time which led to the most significant transitions in Valmiki's life. At Ambernath Hill where he received his training, he read Pasternak, Hemmingway, Victor Hugo, Pierre Louis, Tolstoy, Pearl Buck, Tugenev, Dostoevsky, Stevenson, Oscar Wilde, Romain Rolland, and Emile Zola. He also read the entire works of Rabindranath Tagore and Kalidasa here. He met people from different backgrounds and states and got more interested in theatre which, subsequently, became a regular weekend activity for him. He also started a drama group in the hostel. He wrote his first essay on the problems of Dalits which became a point of controversy. Most importantly, he started reading Marathi Dalit literature which actually broadened his consciousness, already made critical by the works of Ambedkar and Phule.

> It was during these days that I was introduced to Marathi Dalit literature. Dalit writings were changing the face of Marathi literature. The words of Daya Pawar, Namdev Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Gangadhar Pantavane, Baburao Bagul, Keshav Meshram, Narayan Surve, Vaman Nimbalkar and Yashwant Manohar were igniting sparks in my veins. Their voices exhilarated me, filled me with new energy. My reading of Dalit literature was beginning to change my notions about what is literature.(Ibid, p.105)

The process of transition acquired a new direction when he started participating in the Dalit movement after getting appointed at the Ordnance Factory, Chandrapur. It was the time he started writing and also started a theatre group named *Meghdoot Natya Sanstha (*Meghdoot drama institute). His poems were published in magazines such as *Navbharat, Yugharm and NaiDuniya.* He also started writing a column in *Janapratinidhi*, a Chandrapur Weekly. Moreover, Dalit movement and Buddha's philosophy continued to influence his consciousness at that time.

> I came across the marvelous glow of Dalit consciousness. The self-fulfillment that I experienced in connecting with the Dalit movement was truly a new experience for me. The deeper my involvement became with the movement, the further many of my friends moved away from me. In their eyes I had wandered away from the right path and was bent on destroying my talent and creativity… Buddha's philosophy on human freedom had attracted me. He says that there is no such thing as the unchangeable in a constantly changing universe. The human being alone matters. It is *Karuna* (compassion) and wisdom that takes a person towards transcendence.(Ibid, p. 116)

The reconfigured semiotic prism (Figure 2) provides the nuanced understanding of the process of redefined identity of Valmiki as a Hindi Dalit writer.[4] The crucial contribution comes from the social network that he developed and drew motivation from after each relocation. He mobilized his wide knowledge of Hindi and Marathi Dalit literature and also his theatrical capabilities as significant cognitive resources. Coming to the most

crucial of all, the cultural elements that Valmiki mobilized as symbolic resources were the works of Ambedkar and Phule as well as Marxist writings.

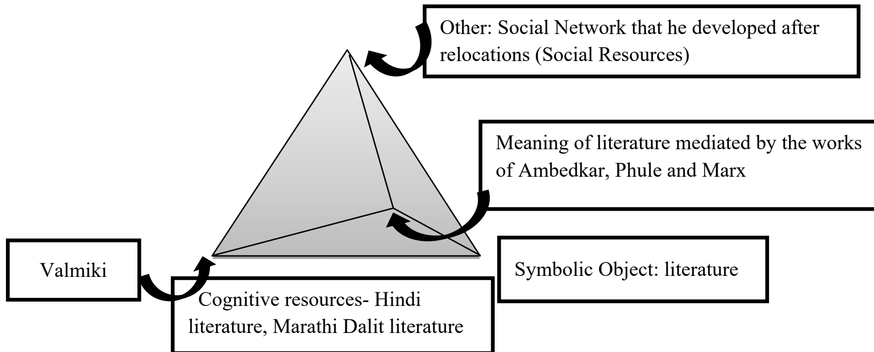

Fig. 2: Reconfigured Semiotic Prism Followed by Relocations

The essence of the symbolic resources was not lost in the process of creation but utilized by Valmiki at the 'reflective' level of reflexivity. Rather, the capability of distancing was eased by the works of Ambedkar, Phule, and Marx. Beyond the immediate cultural value of symbolic resources, he created characters on the plane of fiction. That's why his characters are infused with Dalit consciousness even without making any direct reference to the ideas of anti-caste intellectuals. His stories are inscribed in time as they connect past with the present and weave the realities and subtleties of caste in the village and city simultaneously. Significance of their creation lies in the fact that even the fictional characters are portrayed against the reality of the caste-ridden Indian society.

Conclusion

To conclude, life is to be seen in all its complexities to capture its essence. The resources and transitional processes discussed here are not independent; rather they work as a unified whole and what comes out of their amalgamation is a distinct collective identity that cannot be broken down into the very elements it emerged from. This identity is continuously reified, subjected to deconstructions and reinterpretations. At the highest level of reflexivity the social position sanctioned in social ladder against the backdrop of the caste-ridden society is itself used as a symbolic resource. That's why writers like Valmiki, 'transform this position symbolizing the internalised oppression into an emblem of dissent. They utilize the abhorrence contained in this social position as a weapon to challenge this position. This transformation enables them to imagine a novel and imaginary world of equality amidst the caste-ridden society' (Vyas & Panda, 2019, p.125). And what emerges as a result is the dynamic collective identity of a Dalit writer.

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Endnotes

1 The present paper is a modified extraction from the M.Phil dissertation titled ‘Caste, experience and creativity: a cultural psychological analysis of the life and literature of Om Prakash Valmiki’ by the author submitted to Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University in July 2015.

2 The terms denoting social hierarchy like upper and lower have been used to refer the stratified caste structure of the society, only to maintain the readability of the text wherever it is necessary. The author does not subscribe or encourage the usage of such terms.

3 An ancient Sanskrit maxim that Truth (Satya), God (Shiva) and Beauty (Sundara) are the three manifestations of the same primordial entity. It is translated as Truth (absolute) is God, which is auspicious or holy (the essence which permeates the universe) and God is beauty (that which rejuvenates).

4 Brueck (2014) also elaborates on the three specific features of Hindi Dalit writing namely, social realism, melodrama and heteroglossia. Valmiki’s use of literary rhetoric in his writings is driven by cognitive resources. Standard Hindi that he uses to portray Dalit consciousness was acquired through an in depth study of mainstream Hindi literature. He talks about his bent towards social realism in his autobiography. The aesthetic convention of melodrama can be attributed to his experience resulting from his involvement in theatrical activities in the city.

The Study by Hunt (2014) also substantiates the understanding of the dimensions of the prism. She points out that the genres chosen by Hindi Dalit writers to present their writings are those that are accepted in the field of Hindi mainstream literature and contain more symbolic value as compared to the works of Hindi Dalit pamphlet writers. She considers it as one of the agreed upon strategy by members of the Hindi Dalit literary sphere. In the context of the prism, these writers can be placed at the top of the prism in the category of ‘Other’. Thus, socially shared meaning of Dalit literature now also influenced and got influenced by Valmiki’s sense of Dalit literature.

Article

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Witch Hunting: A Form of Violence against Dalit Women in India

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Abstract

The Caste system is a social reality in India; despite constitutional rights of equality, protection from discrimination, and the ban on untouchability, discrimination against Dalit communities or Schedule Castes, still persists. Outside and within their caste, Dalit women face triple discrimination based on caste, class and-gender resulting in horrific acts of violence directed against them. Among the most common violent attacks on them across rural India, apart from sexual violence, are those related to declaring them witches, or accusing them of witchcraft, often leading to tragic outcomes such as death of victims.

Grabbing property, political jealousy, personal conflicts, getting sexual benefits, or settling old scores are found to be common reasons to declare a woman witch. However, deep down, it is a conspiracy of Brahmanical patriarchy to control resources and sustain caste hierarchy by hitting where it hurts the most – inflicting injuries on Dalit women. They face physical, economic, and cultural violence from social exclusion to being burnt alive. Most witch-hunting victims have been noticed as either, old, widows, or single, women. This paper analyses violence against Dalit women with specific reference to witch- hunting. It explores the caste hierarchy, motives behind such crimes, also the failure of legal mechanisms and judicial institutions in eradicating the menace of witch-hunting.

Keywords

Witch-hunting, Caste hierarchy, Brahmanical patriarchy, Dalit women, superstitions.

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Introduction

In concluding remarks during his presentation in Constituent Assembly, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar had said, 'on January 26, 1950, (founding day of Indian Republic) we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics, we will have equality, and in social and economic life, we will have inequality' (Rodrigues, 2002). The question of inequality in the form of the caste system still exists in India as a social reality even after seven decades of independence. Despite Constitutional provisions of the rights of equality, protection from discrimination, and the ban on untouchability, discrimination based on caste against a particular section officially known as scheduled castes, and socially known as Dalits is deeply rooted in Indian society.

The caste system is a 'legacy' to Indian society given by Brahmanism, whose brunt is borne mostly by women, more so the Dalit among them. It is a profoundly conservative socio-political ideology in which Brahmins occupy the highest place as exclusive guardians of the realm and as sole providers of wisdom on virtually every practical issue of this world; in which they can only take birth and cannot make (Bhargava, 2019). The Dalit[1]woman is particularly the most vulnerable in the caste-gender hierarchy ladder. She has to face discrimination based on caste, class and gender, within her caste and outside. Dalit women face innumerable acts of violence; witch-hunting is one such form in which they suffer physically, psychologically, and economically.

Witch-hunting is a violent form of witchcraft belief. The belief in magic and witchcraft is common to all societies in the world. Witch-hunting had been prevalent even in early modern Europe and colonial America. During the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, many women were put to death by the state in Salem witch trials (America) and Suffolk trials of Europe. In India, also the practice is ancient, and innumerable women have been killed. The patriarchal mindset of societies is considered to be the cause of the globally common phenomenon of witch-hunting. Caste or Brahmanical patriarchy in India is regarded as to be a main factor behind branding women as witches. Dalit activists claim that witch-hunting is part of caste-atrocities against Dalit women and a common way to kill them (Editorial, 2015).

Witch-hunting is a three-stage process viz. accusation, declaration, and persecution. Accusation means and includes 'accusing women of any harm occurred in the community or to the individual, such as the death of any person, child or animal, any disease in the village, natural disaster, or crop loss.' Declaration means to declare or brand the woman as a witch as she possesses some evil power, and exclude her socially. The so-called witches are identified through certain rituals by traditional witch-finders or witch doctors, who are variously known as the *khonses, sokha, janguru,or ojha* , and then perpetrators charge them for persecution (Mallick, 2008).

Persecution includes mental and physical torture, ranging from social exclusion, name-calling, psychological torture, lynching, or putting to death in any way. The concept of persecution refers to strategic attempts encouraged by dominant and influential groups in society, directed at groups that threaten them (Jensen, 2007). Accusing a Dalit woman of witchcraft and persecuting her is a standard weapon of the Brahmanical patriarchal set-up in rural India. It is an acknowledged fact that most of the witch-hunting victims are widows, single, older women, and social-economic marginalized women without any support (Barman, 2002; Kelkar & Nathan, 1991; Mehra & Agrawal, 2016).

Witches are not identifying, at least in the Indian subcontinent. No one acknowledges or announces that they practise witchcraft or rituals that involve black magic and spells. In fact, they are named by powerful groups of society and their followers, who happen to belong to upper castes. In a majority of Indian states, any attempt to find out about a witch in a village invariably leads to Dalit women. The most common reasons to accuse and declare women witches are personal disputes or enmities, sexual desires towards women of the lower caste, coveting property of single women.

Due to existing beliefs on superstitions among people, such victims cannot protect themselves from mob crimes, including physical, emotional harm to ostracization. This paper highlights the nexus between Brahmanical patriarchy and superstitious beliefs, to perpetrate caste atrocities and maintain status quo vis-à-vis a social order based on graded inequality. It discusses the horrors and harassment faced by Dalit women on being branded as witches and points at the failure, and ignorance of laws dealing with the actual problem. The paper results from qualitative research with an exploratory approach, highlighting the Dalit women's issues and suggesting socio-legal solutions to prevent such social evils.

History of Witch-Hunting

In Early Modern Europe and Colonial America, witches were held responsible for disasters like famines, floods, drought, and epidemics resulting in massive deaths. Many of them were subjected to torture and trials by the state and executed. Sometimes to extort a confession, the state used torture on them (Purkiss, 1996). In the Western World, incidents of Witch-hunting disappeared as a consequence of socio-economic reforms after eighteenth century. However, in developing Nations like India, Witch-hunting is still reported across state. In Europe and America, witchcraft was considered *crimen exceptum*, and the judiciary tried victims. Hence, judicial records became useful resources to extract information (Sinha, 2015). But in India, most witches' trials are public (cases of mob-incited violence and justice), and details are not easy to find. However, religious records and some colonial period information show that witch-hunting in the country is an old barbaric act of harassing women.

The term 'witch' or *dayan* is a prominent part of folk literature and culture since the dawn of civilization (Mohapatra, 2014). Saletore (1981) in Indian Witchcraft highlighted that the practice of witchcraft has been pervasively customary in India as well, especially among the rural and relatively isolated precincts.

During the colonial period, mass witch-hunting incidents occurred in 1857 in Chotanagpur region in eastern India (Sinha, 2007). The National Archive Records[2] show that around a thousand women had been killed as witches in central India's plains alone in the early 19th century. During this period, the number of women killed as witches far exceeded those who died as *sati* (widow-immolation on husbands' funeral pyres), but the killings were neither reported nor given importance. *Sati* was apparent killing as a custom, but witch-hunting was a killing based on faith in evil powers with some hidden motives against women, particularly the unprotected and from lower castes. In the Brahmanical caste-based society, the death of Dalit women has no value.

Estimate from the Rajputana community (Rajasthan), most commonly related to widow- immolation, indicate how common witch-killing was (Skaria, 1997).

Cases abound in British India, when authorities confiscated upper caste people's lands, they attributed the blame to witchcraft by Dalit women for their loss and started the *Devi*[3] movement (witch-hunting exercise) against them. Women were singled out and asked to undergo a test conducted by a witch-doctor, especially of the so-called upper caste. In records, scholars found that victims' families often sought assistance from British authorities on the plea that their daughters, sisters, or wives had been identified as witches and needed help (Man, 2003). It was a general practice in rural areas, in the event of epidemics or famines, causing the widespread death of animals and humans, that a woman from the most vulnerable section of society was accused of witchcraft and hunted down as a witch.

Dalit Women under Brahmanical Patriarchy

The *Varna* system is the basis of the caste system in India. Brahmin writer Manu in *Manusmriti* described each caste's duties as a Varna system; he placed his caste on top and took the privilege of declaring other castes (Srinivas, 1995). Varna system includes the *Brahmins*; priests and scholars, *Kshatriyas*; rulers and warriors, *Vaishyas*; agriculturalists and merchants, and *Shudras*; labourers and service providers. Communities from these classes are called *savarna* or Caste Hindu. Apart from the savarnas, there exist a group of people who are *avarna* or *antyaja* i.e., outside the Varna system (Dube, 1990). They are considered the lowest and 'untouchable' in the orthodox Brahmanical beliefs and are expected to do unclean of 'impure and polluting' occupations such as sweeping, scavenging, tanning, and so on. However, Srinivas (1995) argued that if economic, social, and even ritual relations between a region's castes consider, these communities are an integral part of the system. They can be called the fifth Varna.

The caste system has resulted in alienating a group of people from the mainstream and causing their lower participation in societal argumentations, education, and employment, which lower their standard of life. Due to economic and social suppression, the group, officially known as Dalits or scheduled castes, stands excluded. Feminists also hold Manusmriti responsible for their secondary position in Hindu society. In Chapter nine, paragraph 290 of Manusmiriti, Manu wrote that for all types of black magic, a fine of two hundred (panas) should be imposed, as for witchcraft (Olivelle, 2004). Thus, the belief in witchcraft and practice of witch-hunting also prevailed in ancient times. The received texts of Manusmriti date circa 100 CE.

In general, women's subordination occurs across various social institutions and practices, and women's subjection is understood to be a structural condition. Feminists have described this structural subordination of women as patriarchy (Barker, 2010). In India, patriarchy is conjoined with the caste system and called 'Brahmanical patriarchy.' Historian Uma Chakravarti, who coined the term, argues that its crucial aspect was linkage to the caste order and the differential impacts it had on women at different levels in the caste hierarchy. Caste, class, and gender stratification are the three elements in establishing the social order in India, shaping the formation of Brahmanical patriarchy (Chakravarti, 1993).

Brahmanism supported a hierarchical structure with community limited to caste, and with differentiated patriarchal repression of women. Family patriarchy dominates

the high-caste women, but state patriarchy dominates the Dalit women more, which was concerned with maintaining them as exploited labourers (Omvedt, 2000). Brahmanical patriarchy passes on thoughts that are profound and complex. It portrays how we live in social orders moulded by sexual orientation, station, and monetary connections, and shape them through our decisions and actions. Brahmanical patriarchy discusses the links between gender, caste, the economy, and the State. Chakravarti (1993) has inspected how, in ancient India, certain caste groups maintained land control (an economic asset) by regulations, which are endorsed by the state.

In his famous 1916 paper 'Castes in India,' Ambedkar offered the insight that the caste system thrives by its control on women; he deployed several arguments against Brahmanism and its twin, patriarchy (Rege, 2013). Brahmanism has gathered desperate myths like witchcraft and black magic together. Making unified cycles, developed a social fragment and used in holding back the Indian society and bagged down in a swamp of superstitions (Sau, 2003).

The caste system is estimated to affect around 260 million people. The most affected among them are women belonging to Dalit communities, who the so-called upper caste have excluded socially and exploited immensely. The vast majority of Dalit women are poor, landless wage labourers and lack access to basic amenities and entitlements. They are subjugated by patriarchal structures, both in the general community and within their own families (Centre for Alternative Dalit Media, 2001). According to National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), 'every hour two Dalits face assaults, every day three women of Dalit community are raped, two Dalits are murdered, and homes of two Dalits are torched' (Ambedkar, 2017).

Caste-affected women face multiple challenges, including lack of access to resources, lack of education opportunities, land, essential services, and justice. Witchcraft accusation and Witch-hunting is yet another tool to suppress and subordinate women by asserting their so-called inferior status. In rural areas, a Dalit woman lives in terror and fear because she knows that dominated people can target her anytime to seek revenge, or assert authority, or simply suppress.

Motives for Promoting Witch-Hunting

Sustaining Caste and Patriarchy

Brahmanism uses various tactics to keep its control over society; hence even after having equality as the soul of India's constitution, it is full of inequalities. One of the many tactics deployed to sustain the hegemony of caste includes witch-hunting. It helps to terrorize women and reinforce the patriarchal mindset. It has been noticed that most witch-hunting victims hail from schedule castes, blamed for all calamities and misfortune befalling society (Mathur, 2004). Dalit activist P. G. Ambedkar (2017) claims not a single case of witch-hunting against upper Caste or Brahmin women has been identified until now. The victims of witch-hunting suffer physical and mental brutality in shocking forms such as lynching, naked parade, ostracization, and even being burnt alive by mobs (Partners for Law in Development (PLD), 2015).

Such acts of physical violence are so brutal that they are committed with the purpose to terrorize such that the community does not dare to raise their voices for justice. For instance, in a witch- hunting incident in a village in Jharkhand state (East India), four Dalit women were brutally lynched after public shaming in a gory manner.

Before death, they faced public humiliation; their faces were painted black, heads were shaved, stripped and paraded round the village with a mob chasing and beating them brutally with iron rods. The rods were pierced through their body; as a result they bled to death (Sinha, 1984).

Initially, one lower caste woman was branded as a witch by the village authority and blamed for a child's death in a landlord family. When other Dalit women stood in her support, the village authority was offended and planned to set an example so that no other woman in the village dared to have a stand-up with them. In the course of this, all the four women were branded as witches by the village witch doctor, who got 600 rupees from the perpetrators, to identify these four women as witches. During the ritual of witch-identification, the witch-doctor forced the women to drink a solution, after which the women started behaving differently, and were thus branded witches (Sinha 1984).

Ramachandran (2012) cites another incident in which a Dalit woman was branded a witch as upper caste people did not approve of her mother-in-law as the *sarpanch* (elected head of village committee) and the development work that she wanted to do. The victim told press reporters that they had victimized her because she belonged to the Dalit community. The upper caste men of the village had made some unreasonable demands of her mother-in-law; when she refused to fulfill their desires, they started torturing her daughter in law after branding her a witch. The upper caste community decided to socially boycott of the victimized family. Police also took time to file their complaint, the victim alleged.

Only through constitutional provisions and reservation, the Dalit community has found entry in specific spheres such as legislative institutions, government jobs and state-run educational institutions of higher education. However, Brahmanism finds a mode to keep them suppressed and humiliated, and takes control from them in one way or another. One of the most common explanations forwarded by feminists is that witch-hunting is gender violence wherein vulnerable women are targeted by men in power. Power could be manifested in economic wealth, spiritually, or in social positions. The witch hunters, on their part, seemed to be motivated by communitarian religious concerns; personal enmity, or material gain was often the motive behind the murder of witches (Mallick, 2008). Brahmanical patriarchy placed Dalit women at the bottom of the social hierarchy and considered them an object of sexual gratification. Witch-hunting resulted in the successful enforcement of a patriarchal order, forcing women into a position subordinate to men.

Extending Superstitions

The crime of witch-hunting involves masses, where a village is often involved, including the victim's community and sometimes family. It is still debatable how the Dalit men are caught in caste trap and stand against their own community women. In this case, superstitions play an essential role wherein men are blinded by illogical reasoning leading them to believe that women are the reason for their destruction. Witch doctors have a significant role in spreading these propositions and winning the trust of Dalit men. However, it is unfortunate that many people readily accept unscientific views due to lack of quality education and scientific temper.

People have blind faith in religion, culture, and traditions and the associated beliefs and superstitions become a matter of faith rather than logic. In India, the number of religious places is more than educational institutions and hospitals, reflecting people's

inclination towards supernatural powers and fantasies. Sau (2003) quotes historian Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi: 'Ideas (including superstition) become a force once they have gripped the masses. There is less scope for scientific experimentation or proof by other means in the context of spirituality and society.'

In a village in Jharkhand state one day at dusk, nine villagers stormed into the house of a woman, shouting, 'she is a witch' and dragged her out by her hair as her six children watched helplessly. They accused her of casting some evil spell to destroy their crops by fire. They beat her with rods, and tortured her in many ways and locked her in a room for four days. Police investigation established that the attack was spurred by a powerful landowner in the village who used local superstition to maintain his authority over the village (Lakshmi, 2005).

Witch-hunting and superstitions go hand in hand in perpetuating Brahmanical patriarchy. Perpetrators spread superstitions to perform witch-hunting in bid to control Dalit women and manage Dalit men.

Witch-hunting and Hidden Agenda of Brahmanism

The caste system, superstitions, patriarchy, illiteracy, and poverty are the leading causes that have sustained the barbaric practice of witch-hunting. Apart from establishing power over fellow humans, control over use of resources is gained by targeting Dalit women be it with sexual assault or witch hunting. There are some personal gains for the upper caste people that help sustain caste hierarchy.

Grabbing Property and Sexual Advances

After women, the second important thing for caste to capture for its existence is resources. Assets in the form of field, home, land, or livestock are the resources that can easily be grabbed in witch-hunting cases. Barman (2002) argues that witch-hunt in India is the outcome of property disputes. He further stated that victims of witch-hunts are mostly childless widows who have property rights, which will pass on their nearest male relative after their death. By accusing them of witchcraft, these men inherit land immediately.

In specific land related violence in rural areas, women are targeted and victimized in witch-hunting by land mafias together with the dominated caste to grab land and settle their interest behind the veil of superstition. By declaring them 'witches, and forcing them out of the house, or getting them banished from the village, it becomes easy to acquire the victim's relinquished property. Targeting single women with an aim of usurping property is the primary motive of witch-hunting violence (Mehra & Agrawal, 2016). In some rural tribal areas a widow's right to property is denied if other family members can prove that she is a witch. (Kelkar & Nathan, 1991).

In August 2017, 'a 40-year-old Dalit woman was allegedly branded a witch, stripped, beaten up mercilessly and made to eat human excreta in Rajasthan's Ajmer district. The victim was sleeping in her house when people attacked her and dragged her out of her home; the attackers forced her to drink sewer water, eat faeces, and beat her with iron rods. She succumbed to the injuries inflicted on her. The village panchayat (local governing body) asked the attackers to take a bath in Pushkar pond to 'wash their sins'; the panchayat wanted to hush up the matter. However, Tara Ahluwalia, a social activist tracking the case, told reporters, that the victim had been branded as a witch to usurp her property. Her husband had died a month ago and

she had a minor son. The main accused in the case (attackers) had masterminded the conspiracy against her (Wadhawan, 2017).

In the Chandmoni Tea Estate Case of 2002, a man died in the village due to lack of proper medication. The relatives and other villagers took advantage of his death to declare five women witches and killing them because they had some land disputes and personal rivalry (Chaudhuri, 2013). Soma Chaudhuri (2013) found that there are usually some prior conflicts, such as a property dispute between the accuser and the accused. The local beliefs in the 'casting evil eyes superstition' and power were manipulated to launch a witch-hunt against the accused woman.

In some incidents, rejection of sexual advances has been reason for branding a woman witch. In most such cases, the targeted women are helpless and deprived, and fall easy prey to power when they hit back and rejects such advances (Partners for Law in Development, 2014). Witch-hunting violence is mostly associated with caste atrocities perpetrated against Dalits; there is ample evidence that shows that victimization is used to punish social and sexual transgressions (Mehra & Agrawal, 2016). In most cases, after declaring women a witch, the perpetrators keep her outside of the village and take sexual advantage of her. Rape is also common as a witch-hunting punishment, mostly done by the dominant caste in a gang.

Socio-economic and Political Dominance

The witch becomes the symbol of all oppression and misery and thus, witchcraft is no longer a personal matter. It is now a concern of the community, a label that the 'moral' entrepreneurs have successfully exploited to their advantage (Chaudhuri, 2013). Witch-hunting motives are not static or limited to superstitions, or occult beliefs. The violence associated with caste atrocities is often similar to the cruelty perpetrated in witch-hunting (Mehra & Agrawal, 2016). Often, witch-hunting has been used to punish women who question social norms (Lakshmi, 2005).

Politics has also played a part in spreading superstitions and promoting witch hunts in the country. In 2003, at a function in Patna, the Union (federal) Minister from Bihar state felicitated fifty one witch doctors and said: 'I strongly believe that whatever they (witch doctors are) doing is pure science, and they protect villages from evil spirits' (Sau, 2003). Politicians (mostly dominant caste) have used superstitions, black magic, or illogical belief to gain political power. Ranjit Sau (2003) said that we have two kinds of evil spirits, one in a village in the form of witch doctors and others are in cities in the shape of politicians, which arises a dual system of superstition in India.

Politics of superstitions offers an escape for politicians as it helps divert public attention from the need/demand for a better life and inability to provide basic facilities such as education, health services, and transport services in their constituencies. Sometimes class politics within caste politics also has been used to suppress Dalit women in the name of witch-hunting. The improved economic status of scheduled caste men are no different from that of upper caste landlords; their better position has brought no respite to women of their caste from oppression unleashed by the upper caste landlords. The ugly Jharkhand incident (Sinha, 1984) is a tragic example of this.

Sundar (2001) and Federici (2010) have highlighted the need to understand that in-depth causes of Indian witch hunts are related to recent changes that rural people face, such as the social crisis caused by economic liberalism, forcing people to compete for limited resources. Dungdung (2009) in her article Hunting witch or hunting women,

says 'the greed for property and depriving women of traditional property rights is a sidelined fact. Illiteracy, low educational levels, and superstitious beliefs are reasons fit enough to be the icing on the cake.' Thus the misogyny and casteist nature of the State is equally responsible for witch hunts.

The Legal Position in India

Every year, hundreds of unreported incidents of witch-hunting occur in every state. After being declared a witch, women are tonsured, harassed, ostracized, physically tortured, banished from their village, and even forced to consume human excreta (at times) (Das, 2005). A UN report stated that researchers recorded 25000 witch-hunting cases in India between 1987 and 2003 (Federici, 2008)the global expansion of capitalism ensured that this persecution would be planted in the body of colonized societies, and, in time, would be carried out by the subjugated communities in their own name and against their own members. (Federici, 2010) The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) indicates that approximately 2937 women were killed in India from 2001 to 2019 on alleged charges practicing witchcraft. Only in the year 2019, 102 killings took place (NCRB, 2019). Witch-hunting is prevalent in most Indian states; majority cases were reported from Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Assam and Madhya Pradesh.

Despite such disturbing figures on the incidence of witch hunting, there is no national law in the country against this gruesome practice although states like Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Rajasthan and Odisha have already criminalized the practice. However, at the international level, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), 1966, and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1966 stand violated by witch-hunting violence. The UDHR protects against any discrimination and promotes equality before the law. It also confirms the right to life and liberty to every human being. India is associated with ICCPR; it supports equality between women, men, and transgender and ensures equal rights to all humans in civil and the political sphere and prohibits others from subsuming anyone's fundamental rights. India also acceded to ICESCR, six articles of this may be linked with witch-hunting, particularly to the instances of social boycott and property deprivation.

In 1993, India signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It agreed to eliminate discrimination and social cruelty against women. CEDAW Committee[4] categorizes witch-hunts as a form of violence against women and has urged many countries, including India, to take action on witchcraft accusations. In 2009, the CEDAW Special Rapporteur report called upon national governments and the United Nations to 'ensure that all killings of alleged witches are treated as murder and investigated, prosecuted, and punished accordingly.'[5] CEDAW asked governments 'to take all appropriate measures such as modifying or abolishing existing laws, regulations and customs and practices, which constitute discrimination against women.'[6]

Coming back to India, at the national level, the Constitution of India, Indian Penal Code, The Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisement) Act 1954, Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, and The Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993 can be associated with witch-hunting atrocities.

While some states such have specific local Acts on prevention of witch-hunting, others are in the process of criminalizing the offence. Maharashtra state passed India's first anti-superstition law called the Prevention and Eradication of Human sacrifice and other inhuman, evil, and Aghori practices and the Black magic Act 2013. Dr. Narandra Dabholkar, the founding member of the *Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti*, an organization dedicated to eradicating superstitions, demanded the first time anti-superstition law. The Act in its schedule mentioned twelve practices as harmful superstitions, including belief in evil power and black magic, which can be related to witch-hunting. However, this anti-superstition law was dubbed anti-Hindu or anti-Brahmininsm law by fundamentalists, and unfortunately, Dr. Dabholkar was shot dead by two men in August 2013. It suspected that fundamentalist right-wing Hindu forces were behind his murder. Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) as arrested right-wing Hindutva activists but still, justice has not been delivered so far (Banerjee, 2020).

Based on Maharastra's anti-superstition act, in Karnataka state passed the Karnataka Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices and Black Magic Bill, 2017 while in Kerala, Kerala Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil Practices, Sorcery and Black Magic Bill, 2019, is still pending in legislation opposed by right-wing politics. The objective of these anti-superstition laws is to promote scientific temper (Mehra & Agrawal, 2016). The Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations, a body of 65 rationalist organizations from different parts of the country, has also demanded a law to ensure the separation of religion from politics, administration, and education. The law should ban state-sponsored religious activities. The state will never progress unless superstitions are removed; affording the quacks to fool everyone is dangerous for the country (Das, 2005).

The Supreme Court of India laid down that religion is a matter of personal faith. Still, if there is little knowledge or false knowledge of religion or understood in a narrow sense, it breeds superstition, fanaticism, and fundamentalism, which becomes an enemy of humanity. Superstitions that have crept in the name of religion become harmful to society. The court held that superstition could not justify any killing, much less a planned and deliberate one.[7] In Hulikal Nataraju v. the State of Karnataka[8], the court discusses the evils of superstition: Citing examples of human sacrifice and witch-hunting, it held that

> The enormous damage done by these harmful superstitions is that they redirect attention from the primary cause and lead to a defeatist attitude of helpless acceptance. These superstitions promote exploitation, untouchability, complexity, caste, creed, gender, and varna based inequalities. They became instruments in the hands of some to exploit, cheat, and deceive the ignorant people.

Rajasthan high court[9] also laid down that:

> The evil practice of declaring the woman a witch and killing her is an offense which should not be tolerated suppose efficient improvement in these matters is not reported. In that case, the state of Rajasthan will be considered as slow in taking measures and backward and ineffective in bringing out appropriate legislation and taking steps on atrocities committed on women.

In Bhim Turi v. the State of Assam,[10] Gauhati High Court termed witch-hunting as a social menace and observed that 'as a phenomenon (it) is rooted in flawed quasi-religious beliefs, old socio-cultural traditions blended with extreme superstitious

practices.' The Court also held that 'witch hunting is the worst form of human rights violation.'

In the 1991 case, Gaurav Jain v. the State of Bihar,[11] the Supreme Court Bench comprising Justice Joymalya Bagchi J., termed witch-hunting as gross violence of human rights. It laid down specific guidelines directing the state governments to eradicate the social evil of witch-hunting. Based on those guidelines, after more than 20 years, the Prevention of Witch-Hunting Bill, 2016, was framed, but the law still has not been considered a need of the country by the legislative.

The role of police administration is very pathetic in witch-hunting cases; in a study done by Partners of Law Development, out of forty-eight cases, one third never reach the police (PLD, 2013). As per police and judiciary records, witch-hunting incidents in which brutal physical violence occurs and is publicly orchestrated by a group of accused, criminal justice comes into play (Mehra & Agrawal, 2016). The verbal abuses, public humiliation, and social exclusion never count on that account in any law available at the national or local level.

Gender violence is rooted in deep cultural and religious beliefs propounded by Brahmanical patriarchy. 'Change is often intensely resisted by the communities perpetrating the act of hostility. Thus there is a vast gap between human rights and the violence that women face at the local level as gender violence is an ambitious study that creates tensions between global law and local justice' (Merry, 2009). Dalit women are the victims at a large scale of all the physical, sexual, or psychological acts of violence against women mentioned as a crime in both national and international Laws. Witch-hunting is one of the most heinous forms of violence that Dalit women are subjected to in India.

Conclusion

Witchcraft accusations and witch-hunting violate human rights and fundamental freedoms of the right to life, liberty, including social and economic equality. Incidents of witch-hunting shame India's claim of a democracy that provides equality in gender, caste, race, and claims achievements in literacy, humanity, and gender sensitivity. It reflects on the state's failure to spread education and health facilities, inculcate respect for women, promote scientific temperament, and make equality a social reality.

Law and criminal justice system have failed to understand the motives behind witch-hunting and the core reasons for such menace, therefore could not respond effectively. The reality of this problem is deeply ingrained in a society that cannot be highlighted only by data. Only some of the most horrific cases get reported, while most witch-hunting incidents go unreported and unrecorded. Since most atrocities revolve around the fundamental issues of land, wages, and entitlements; poverty and powerlessness, are viewed as the breeding grounds of such violence. However, such reasoning does not go deep enough because it leaves out the primary motive behind such atrocities- Brahmanism.

Faith in witchcraft and witch-hunting in society results from a combination of superstitious belief, socio-economic and political conspiracy by Brahmanical patriarchy. The caste system encourages such evil practices since these are used as a tool to suppress lower caste communities, especially women, and impose control over them. In this set-up, Dalit women bear the triple burden of caste, class, and gender.

Dr. Ambedkar (1979) said caste is nothing but Brahmanism incarnate. Without a robust movement against Brahmanism, Dalit emancipation is impossible. Brahmanism is the poison that has spoiled Hinduism. Non-acceptance is the primary cause of persisting social inequality based on gender and caste in India. The shamefulness is so blatant that people or the state do not even recognize the crimes of witch-hunting. There is a need to understand that witch-hunting is very real in many parts of India and targeted at the women from Dalit communities. Silence is a potent enemy of social justice (Sen, 2005), especially in the form of law and order.

There is an urgent need to fill-up the legal gaps and overcome the loss of livelihoods and property, dislocation, and of human dignity of the victims as witches is a proven tool to conduct atrocities against the marginalized Dalit women. Sensitizing the police and welfare departments and establishment of NGOs for this purpose could prove beneficial. There is a vital need to make a stringent law or add the Indian Penal Code with a rigorous punishment as criminalization is the only an aspect of justice. The law is considered an instrument of change; however, witch-hunting requires more than a social change, such as abolishing the caste system, gender hierarchy, and economic inequality.

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Endnotes

1 The word Dalit means split, broken and scattered in Sanskrit. It also means a person not belonging to one of the four Brahminic castes. The word was popularized by B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), who included all depressed people irrespective of their caste into the definition of Dalits.

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Blackhole

Gaurav J. Pathania[1]

A blackhole;
An attraction fatale.
It swallows planets and stars;
Even light is dispelled in its dark.

Every morning thousands of men,
Armed with ropes and a staff,
Like space explorers, descend into the dark
Of a manhole more horrendous than the blackhole,
And emerge as news or reports:
'More than 2000 people die cleaning manholes every year.'

For centuries, the pull of this blackhole of caste
Has slowed down the pace of our light of knowledge.
We've understood the universe and theories of relativity,
But have been unable to unravel the layout of our cities and streets
We've forgotten the blackholes underneath.

In the globalization race–villages and towns - rush towards cities
Filling its water channels, drains, gutters and sewers
With grease and filth, grime and slime.
Into this poisonous gas chamber infested with insects and parasites,
Wades a human body neck-deep in pitch black sludge
Amidst stink that could stub out life in a single breath.
Think, if you were to descend into this blackhole,
bare-footed, bare bodied;
All your purity, knowledge, vermillion and thread
would disintegrate in the blink of an eye.

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I asked a old man, scraping in a blackhole, searching for his future,
"Uncle, The world has reached the moon, why are you still down there?"
He answered "Son, life has become a moonless night in this hell,
When I look up from here, the moon seems like a manhole from here."

Year after year, people from this manhole have gazed at the sky,
Waiting for a messiah who would pull them out of this abyss.
"Mahatmas have come and mahatmas have gone, but the untouchables have remained as untouchables."
The day these wise words of Dr. Ambedkar
Reaches to the men stuck in the blackhole
There will be a temblor, which in its wake will destroy
Your hollow claims of development, caste, lineage, holiness
and deal a massive blow to your education system, engineers and planners
Who, even in the 21st century, could not transform this manhole into a machine hole.

--
This poem was originally written in Hindi.
The author is grateful to his friend Akshay B. Singh and Dr. Meenu Bhaskar for the English translation, and the reviewers for their comments.

Gaurav J. Pathania is a sociologist and teaches at the Department of Sociology in Georgetown University, Washington DC. He authored his first book *The University as a Site of Resistance: Identity and Student Politics* with Oxford University Press in 2018. Pathania is an anti-caste poet. The Poetry Society of India honoured him with the national award in 2016-2017.

"ब्लैकहोल"

ब्लैकहोल,
एक ऐसी जगह
जहाँ गुरुत्वाकर्षण इतना ख़ौफ़नाक
कि जो विशालकाय ग्रहों और सितारों को भी निगल जाए
यहाँ तक कि प्रकाश भी एक बार इसकी चपेट में आये
तो बाहर का रास्ता खोज़ते–खोज़ते ज़ाया हो जाए।

हर सुबह हज़ारों लोग
काँधे पर एक रस्सी लटकाये और हाथ में एक डंडी लिए निकल पड़ते हैं
अंतरिक्ष यात्री की तरह उतर जाते हैं
इस ब्लैकहोल से भी ज़्यादा ख़तरनाक उस मैनहोल में
और बाहर निकलते हैं या तो एक ख़बर बनकर या रिपोर्ट बनकर
कि "मैनहोल में सफाई करते हुए हर साल 2000 से भी ज़्यादा लोग दम तोड़ देते हैं।"

सदियों से जाति के इस गुरुत्वाकर्शण ने
ज्ञान रुपी प्रकाश की गति इतनी धीमी कर दी है
कि अपने ही घर और मोहल्लों के नीचे का खगोल–शास्त्र नहीं पढ़ पा रहें हैं
"रिलेटिविटी" के सिद्धांत से ब्रह्मांड तो समझ लिया
पर ज़मीन के नीचे के ब्लैकहोल भूल गए।
वैश्वीकरण की दौड़ में शहरों की ओर भागते लोग, गाँव और कस्बे,
शहर के सारे जल–मार्ग, मल–मार्ग, मवाद, अवसाद, और गंदगी वाले
गैसिले, ज़हरीले और सियाह काले हो चुके पानी में
गंदे कीड़े–मकौड़ों और जानवरों के बीच
गर्दन तक डूबा शरीर
बदबू इतनी कि एक साँस में दिमाग ब्लैक–आउट हो जाए।
सोचो अगर तुम्हे
नंगे पैर, नंगे बदन इस ब्लैकहोल में उतरना पड़े
तो तुम्हारी सारी पवित्रता, सारी पंडिताई, तार–तार हो जाए
ब्लैकहोल में अपना भविष्य ख़ूरच रहे एक चाचा से मैंने पूछा:
चचा सुने हो, दुनिया चंद्रयान से चाँद पर पहुँच चुकी है, और आप अभी तक यहाँ?
चचा बोले बेटा, इस नर्क़ में रहते रहते अब तो जीवन एक अमावस सा लगता है
मैं यहाँ से ऊपर देखता हूँ, तो चाँद मैनहोल सा लगता है।

मैनहोल के भीतर से आसमान की ओर देखते ये लोग
बरसों से इंतजार कर रहे है
कि कोई मसीहा, कोई महात्मा आएगा और
खींच निकालेगा उन्हें इस नर्क़ से बाहर
"कितने महात्मा आए और कितने महात्मा चले गये, लेकिन अछूत अछूत ही रहे"
डॉक्टर अंबेडकर की कही ये बात
जिस दिन इस ब्लैक होल में फँसे आदमी तक पहुँच गयी
उस दिन एक ऐसा ज़लज़ला आएगा
और बहा ले जायेगा तुम्हारा काग़ज़ी विकास, तुम्हारी जाति और तुम्हारी राजनीति
और स्वाहा कर देगा तुम्हारा सारा शिक्षा तंत्र
सारे इंजीनियर, प्लानर्स और सारे विकास पुरुष
जो आज तक, 21वीं सदी में भी
इन मैनहोल को मशीनहोल में नहीं बदल पाए ।

गौरव जोगी पठानिया, जॉर्जटाउन यूनिवर्सिटी (वॉशिंगटन डीसी) में समाजशास्त्र पढ़ाते है। हाल ही में उनकी पहली पुस्तक "यूनिवर्सिटी एज ए साइट ऑफ रेसिसटेंस आयडेंटिटी एंड स्टूडेंट पॉलिटिक्स" ऑक्सफोर्ड यूनिवर्सिटी से प्रकाशित हुई है । उनकी कविताएँ जातीय भेदभाव के खिलाफ आवाज बुलंद करती है। पोयट्री सोसाइटी ऑफ इंडिया ने उन्हें २०१६–१७ के राट्रीय पुरस्कार के लिए नवाजा है।

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A Touchable Woman's Untouchable Daughter: Interplay of Caste and Gender in Nepal

Sarita Pariyar[1]

Abstract

Drawing on more than a decade of multidisciplinary engagement with politics of dignity and social justice, this essay critically interrogates the influence of Hindu jurisprudence and its connections to the current Nepali constitution on the lower or 'impure' castes, especially women. The author argues that, notwithstanding the abolition of the caste system more than 50 years ago, the new constitution, which defines secularism as *Sanatan Dharma*–essentially preserving old Hindu traditions and practices under the law–continues to perpetuate discrimination against Dalits and other marginalized groups. She cites her own experience as an 'untouchable' child of a mixed-caste marriage and the tragic experience of an inter-caste alliance that led to the death of the 'lower caste' groom to examine our understanding of and prospects for love, violence, social inclusion/exclusion, family, citizenship, and society in Nepal. The essay succinctly focuses on the intersectionality of caste, class, gender, and religion that continues to shape everyday life and future of the ordinary people in the predominantly Hindu country.

Keywords
Intersectionality, Hinduism, caste, class, gender, inter-caste marriage.

Introduction

I am an 'untouchable' woman born from a 'touchable' womb. My mother was a *Kshatriya*, a 'high-caste touchable' woman. My father was from the *Damai* tailor caste, an 'untouchable'. Because my mother married my father, she lost her caste status; she was labeled 'impure' for the rest of her life.

The history of my family, my society, and my nation–I always carry it with me. This sentiment expressed by James Baldwin in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*, resonates more and more as I examine my own life.

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My mother's name was Binu Thapa. She was 5 feet 8 inches tall, thin, had a fair complexion with sunken eyes. She applied mustard oil in her hair to braid it without a rubber band. She was a hard working, determined person, who would not shy away from doing any kind of work. She used to run a small iron workshop in Hetauda, a small Nepali city in the Terai region where the Indo-Gangetic plains meet the Himalayan Range. She used to return to our village home late at night sitting in the rear of a truck, with toddlers in one hand and food in the other. Fetching water in the dark from the Rapti river was not a problem; compulsions made her fearless. She could never have imagined that her marriage to an 'untouchable' person would so drastically change her life and that she would give birth to seven 'untouchable' children.

My mother's parents were modest farmers. Buwa, my father, was the neighborhood tailor. He had a wheatish complexion and sharp eyes, spoke more than six languages, and liked to work. He was fond of singing too.

I was a normal child, like any other kid – How would I have known the meaning of being touchable or untouchable? But people reminded me every day that I was different.

Basamadi village, where my parents lived, is seven kilometers west of Hetauda. It sits below beautiful green hills, near the Rapti river. Basamadi is named after a nearby Shiva temple, Basaha Mahadeva. We lived right on Nepal's major East-West Highway, named for one of Nepal's recent monarchs, King Mahendra. The highway was like our front yard. I grew up in a concrete house with electricity.

One day, nearly twenty years ago, when I was twelve, I went to the village shop to buy bread. When I got home, my father saw the bread was stale. 'Return the bread,' he told me. The high-caste shopkeeper refused to take the bread back because I had touched the package. When I told my father, he was angry. 'Go, return it,' he ordered. 'If he won't take it, throw it in his face. I'll take care of whatever comes after that.'

I was frightened. Neither did I have the courage to throw the bread at the shopkeeper nor could I defy my father. I sat by the road for a long time, scared. I wondered why I hadn't been given the right goods even though I had paid for them. The bread hadn't turned stale from my touch – and I had paid full price for a fresh loaf. I gathered all of my courage and confronted the shopkeeper. 'Please return my money, and please take your bread back.'

'What a stubborn girl!' he muttered as he returned the money. I clutched the paper bills in my sweaty hands and rushed home. I began to ask myself: Why had the shopkeeper refused to take the bread back? If the bread had become impure because of me, did it mean that my body was dirty or impure?

When I was about eight years old, I realized that people came in two groups – touchable or pure, and untouchable or impure. Even as a child, whenever I was told that I shouldn't touch someone or something because I would pollute them, it made me ask – *What am I*? The rules seemed so arbitrary. Who and what could I not touch, where, and when? Who could be touched and who not? I wanted to be a touchable person, just like everybody else. But there is no freedom to transform into a touchable person if you're born an untouchable.

Later, another curiosity arose: What is caste? Why is one group ranked above another from birth? I never stopped thinking about my originally touchable mother, who gave birth to untouchable children, and the history tied to it. In her work, Uma Chakravarti examines Brahminical patriarchy as a unique structure of the Hindu caste order, in which caste and gender are interlinked and reinforce each other. Through

continuation of brahmanical patriarchy, sexual control over upper caste women is not only to subordinate them but also to maintain caste purity (Chakravarti, 2003, p. 34).

My mother is a victim of that system. Because she fell in love with an 'untouchable' man, she was forced to abandon her family and friends, the village of her birth, and her lineage. My mother's family couldn't visit her, nor could she see them. My mother was treated like a dead cow. One day, my mother's sister wanted to visit but her family forbade it. It seemed everyone in my mother's family stopped loving her. Caste hatred grew in their bellies; they also feared that their relatives and neighbors would shun them.

Five years ago, twenty-six years after my mother's passing, I met my mother's brother and uncle – my uncle and great-uncle – for the first time. It was at an event to mourn the loss of a relative.

My uncle repeatedly told me to lie about my full name when meeting my great uncle. If he knew my caste, he might not accept me. But I told my great uncle my full name, loudly and clearly. He was in his eighties and went on sharing his old memories like live radio. It was delightful listening to him. He did not care about my caste. My uncle was surprised, but even afterwards kept warning me with his eyes and gestures. 'Sorry niece!' he said. 'Although it has been a long time, I still cannot take you to the village home where your mother grew up. Your aunty is very traditional. She would not let you into the house if she knew you were a Dalit.' He wanted to keep the family skeletons in the closet.

Seeing this long history of social boycott of my mother and untouchables made me more determined to learn and fight for dignity. That became the passion of my life. After marrying my mother in the 1960s, fortunately, my father wasn't killed. Back then, so-called 'untouchable' people were sometimes killed for falling in love with so-called 'touchable' persons. It still happens today. On July 14, 2016, Ajit Mijar Dhakal, a Dalit boy, was found dead at Kumpur-3 in Dhading District. The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) claims that Ajit did not die because of suicide; rather, it was a staged murder. Ajit's neck was loosely tied by a tent rope and his legs touched the floor. He had been threatened with murder within the past 72 hours. Police quickly buried his body without publicizing about the unclaimed corpse and they harassed his family when they demanded for the body.

Ajit married Kalpana Parajuli, a Brahmin girl. Although Ajit's grandfather was a Brahmin, he had married an 'untouchable', so Ajit's father had become an 'untouchable', as did Ajit. He was 18 and Kalpana was 17. Despite Kalpana's family dis-agreement, they got married. They were both residents of Panchkhal in Kavre District.

It has been over four years, but the body of that young lover still hasn't received its funerary rites. His family won't let that happen; they believe the district court denied them justice. Ajit's corpse is lying on a slab of ice in a hospital morgue in Kathmandu, still awaiting justice (Pariyar, 2018).

In Nepal, many have been killed for falling in love with high caste women, and many Brahmin men have lost their caste status for marrying 'untouchable' women. According to historians Tulasi Ram Vaidya and Tri Ratna Manandhar, in ancient Nepal 'If a *Shudra (low caste)* had physical relations with a *Dwija* woman (high caste), there were laws that called for the man's body to be mutilated, his property, everything to be confiscated; even life.' Punishments were given on the basis of caste (Vaidya and Manandhar, 1985, p. 47).

During the Rana period (1846-1951), the Nepali king appointed a Brahmin as the *dharmadhikari* (pontiff) to decide on religious matters such as restriction of food and water, and cases of sexual relations between the lower caste and other caste groups (Regmi, 2002, p. 61; Pariyar 2018).

What the *dharmadhikaris* did in the past, judges and lawyers are doing today. The lawyer for Ajit's killers reportedly told the court, 'Your Honour – what else would be the outcome if the son of (an untouchable) cobbler elopes with the daughter of a Brahmin?'

Ancient Hindu texts contain many examples of caste status of people being raised or lowered to justify retribution in case of inter-caste alliances. Provisions for 'lowering' caste status are listed in the *Manusmriti*, the ancient Hindu legal text codified over two thousand years ago. In fourteenth century Nepal, during the reign of King Jaya Sthiti Malla, jurisprudence was codified as *Manav Nyayashashtra.* It describes the conditions and circumstances for conferring lower caste-status on people. The caste system was further entrenched in society with the adoption of the legal code *Muluki-ain* in 1854 under the Ranas. For over a hundred years (1854-1963), the *Muluki-ain* of 1854 formally divided the Nepali society into the touchable (pure) and the untouchable (impure)[1] – those whose touch necessitated purifying rituals and those whose touch didn't; those who could be enslaved and those who couldn't. The government even had different penalties for the same crime, depending on caste (Vaidya and Manandhar, 1985, p. 133).

The Rana prime ministers possessed the power to take away or confer caste-status on people. When someone was punished for a crime, their caste-status was stripped. But if the Rana rulers were pleased, they could elevate someone from a *pani-nachalne* caste – that rendered water impure by their touch – into a caste that could touch water that was shared with the 'upper-castes'. In the 1880s, Prime minister Bir Shamsher elevated a woman from the Kau caste – a group whose touch rendered water impure – to a higher status because she was his consort (Gautam,1993, p. 115).

I recount these details because although the *Muluki-ain* of 1854 has been replaced, twice, the social structure strengthened by that set of laws still persists. My mother, who chose to marry the man she loved two years after the caste system was outlawed in 1963, was forced to forfeit everything that was familiar to her. Even decades later, Ajit Mijar Dhakal lost his life for marrying the woman he loved.

My family home was a laboratory for this inhumane, inflexible social system. The list of places where we couldn't go to was longer than that of places where we could go. There were more things we couldn't touch than we could touch; more acts forbidden than permitted; more which couldn't be imagined than could be; more things we couldn't choose for ourselves than we could.

As I voiced my opposition to these prohibitions, people started calling me a sharp-tongued girl because I spoke my mind. My family and society wanted a girl who was quiet, did not ask questions, obeyed, didn't talk too much, didn't laugh, minded her legs while she sat, and kept away from boys – these were the attributes of a 'good girl'. If a woman spoke out, she was called a loud-mouth. My family faced a desperate time trying to save its daughters from being seen as a troublemaker.

Generally, daughters in Dalit families have to go outside their home for work – but we were exceptions. My brothers didn't like it if their teenage sisters went outside. My sister and I were like soldiers on a parade ground, obeying our older brothers' orders. If they said turn left, we turned left. If they said turn right, we turned right. As

soon as they arrived at home, we would run like crazy to get inside through the back door with our legs still soiled from playing. Sometimes, in a rush, we even used to hold our books upside down. Whenever one of our brothers saw my sister, or me he would command – 'Go, study!'

I was more scared of my brothers than of the graveyard near our home. I got sick of life like a prisoner. But slowly I realized that education is a powerful weapon to escape from darkness. Our brothers wove a strong cordon of love that imprisoned us inside our home. However, their love was suffocating; as if they were holding my head under the waters of the Rapti. It took a long time for me to understand why.

Then we started hearing from villagers that my sister had been sold off. Villagers used to tell me, '*Saru, tero Kiran didi bechiyeko thaha cha talai?'* Do you know your sister Kiran has been sold? I could not make sense of this – was my sister like biscuits, for sale? How can a human being be sold? Whenever I asked my bothers and father about Kiran didi, they would make angry faces. My sister's disappearance became a mystery. I learned later that she had been taken to India. Later, I learned, she was not only sold but also raped. Sadly, many similar cases continue to occur, especially involving Dalits and other marginalized communities in Nepal.

The trauma of that incident made my brothers bring us up under strict military discipline. If we sat inside the house, the chances of us falling into trouble decreased. My brothers insisted that we study hard, believing that an educated sister would be safe. To gain education was to rescue oneself. Accompanying their need to protect our bodies and virtue was their preoccupation with protecting the family honor. If the bodies of the wives and daughters of a household are not secured, the prestige and honor of its men are imperiled. In order to protect their honor, every morning I was told to worship God, not to play with other children, not to go afar to herd the cows and goats. In my teens, I loved swimming in the Rapti, fishing, lying on my stomach on a sun-soaked rock after swimming, running after fishermen to collect small leftover fish, herding cows and goats, stealing grass for the cattle, and collecting dry foliage and firewood. All these activities were curtailed to protect the family honor.

The men of my family were also trapped by caste. Even though my sister's rapist walked free in the village, there was nothing we could do because he was high-caste. What else could a calf do except run away from the cheetah? We were the only Dalit family in the neighborhood. And our family worried about *ijjat* (honor). I can still recall my family bemoaning more about *ijjat* rather than my sister. Walking out in daylight was a kind of nightmare. I still remember, I used to get scared even of the rapist's shadow. To me, he seemed like a warlock, an old man wearing traditional *daura suruwal* (loose shirt and trousers) clothes with a Dhaka *topi* (cap), holding a stick. He had big red eyes and a hooked nose. His teeth looked like a crumbling Stonehenge. I saw him herding cows, bulls, and goats. He walked like a leopard searching for prey. My heart would burn. The fire is still burning. I grew up in anguish, with a sense of helplessness.

We were young girls growing up – we, too, could have become victims of the tendency to withdraw. But in the course of securing and rescuing myself, I learned how not to silence myself for the sake of *ijjat* (honor) or to make my family happy. Rather, I stood up for truth. Since then, my job has become not to make people happy but to ask them uncomfortable questions; to stand up against unfairness within and outside the family.

I have shared the history we carry, and the tragic story of Ajit Mijar Dhakal – to illustrate how caste pollutes and dehumanizes the Nepali society. Nepal has recently become a democratic republic after a long-drawn political and social struggle, including a civil war that killed about seventeen thousand people. It has adopted the principle of proportional inclusiveness. But the drafters of the new constitution have sometimes behaved like the *dharmadhikaris* of the past. For one thing, they attempted, absurdly, to limit the definition of secularism to mean the continuation of *Sanatan* traditions and domination of Hinduism over other faiths. For another, women have been made second-class citizens, denied the right to pass citizenship on to their children. The new *dharmadhikaris* seem eager to take away even the smallest reservations made to benefit those kept in exclusion for centuries. When Dalits stand up to demand justice, they are put on a slab of ice like Ajit Mijar Dhakal.

Must we, even now, continue to fight for equality in this new republic? Does Ajit Dhakal have to lose his life for the mere fact of falling in love with a so-called high-caste woman? Can there be a more cruel democracy than this? Let the examination of how caste continues to strip people of their humanity become an issue for intellectual discourse not just in Nepal and South Asia but in every international democratic forum.

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Endnotes

1 The caste groups of the Muluki Ain 1854

2. *Tagadhari*: Wearers of the holy cord

3. *Namasinya matwali*: Non-enslavable Alcohol-Drinkers

4. *Masinya matwali*: Enslavable Alcohol-Drinkers

5. *Pani nacalnya chhoi chhito halnu-naparnya*: Impure, but touchable castes)

6. *Pani nacalnya chhoi chhito halnu-parnya*: Impure and untouchable castes (Hofer, 2012 p. 10)

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Assessing the Impact of Public-Private Funded Midday Meal Programs on the Educational Attainment and Well-being of School Children in Uttar Pradesh, India

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Abstract

The provision of free midday meals at schools is considered to have the potential to enhance human dignity and facilitate equitable access to students from low socio-economic backgrounds, low social status (including caste), and poor households. The paper examines the impact of an internationally funded Indian foundation's Midday Meal (MDM) school feeding program on educational access, performance, participation, and well-being of the beneficiaries. Our study has sampled students and teachers from predominantly Dalit, lower caste, ethnic, and religious minority households within state-run schools in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state with the largest number of poor people, as its unit of analysis. The study sought to evaluate the implementation of the MDM program in Lucknow, the state capital, to ascertain whether the strategic program implementation protocols also ensure social inclusion and address various forms of discrimination commonly reported in the literature. The study revealed that students were satisfied with most of the indicators on implementation of the program, serving, and food satisfaction. Nevertheless, we argue that the implementation process could benefit from a more integrated inter-agency coordination to address concerns regarding at-risk Dalit, lower caste

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and marginalized children and improve sanitation and health facilities that are not directly associated with the MDM program. The study concludes that the foundation's MDM programs could serve as a model for an inclusive and non-discriminatory school feeding system where all children, will equally benefit with dignity. Such an approach, we argue, could also enhance structural equity, youth development, and the attainment of the SDG targets in India.

Keywords

India, Uttar Pradesh, midday meal, school feeding program, equity, well-being, social inclusion, Dalit, SDGs.

Introduction

Improving and ensuring access to education for children from low social, economic, caste, ethnic, and other marginalized backgrounds has increased in importance in the academic and policy discourse. This view is also considered to be critical for the attainment of the key educational and human development/dignity targets of the United Nations Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The provision of educational resources including school lunches to children from deprived and marginalized groups could have a significant impact on their educational performance, school participation, and socio-economic development (Drake *et al*, 2017). Drake *et al*. argue that such programs could gain 0.5-2.5 extra years in school and increase income and individuals' future earning potential by five per cent (Ibid).

Nevertheless, it is argued that the implementation of such programs by government and local agencies is, unfortunately, influenced by stereotypical norms used to reinforce discriminatory attitudes and values which then defeat their purpose. Nakkeeran *et al*. (2020) provide an ethnographic analysis of how the pre-school Supplementary Nutrition Program in India is fraught with institutional barriers and sociological processes that result in the exclusion of families and children from Dalit, lower caste, ethnic and religious minority households from accessing these essential services. The purpose of this study is to conduct an assessment of the performance of an internationally funded Indian foundation and non-government organization (NGO) as Midday Meal (MDM) school feeding program implementers in contributing to the programs' objectives, including equal access to high-quality nutritious meals by children from Dalit, lower caste, ethnic and religious minority, deprived and marginalized households with low social and economic status within public (government-funded) schools in Lucknow, the capital of India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh. Thorat (2020) argues that although the caste system seems to have diminished or waned in several aspects of societal life, some of its worst features persist. He refers to human development indicators such a per capita income, poverty, malnutrition, education, and assets ownership to illustrate the persistence of inter-caste inequalities and the practice of caste discrimination (Ibid, 2020).

In 2001, the Supreme Court of India mandated that all primary and upper primary school children in government-sponsored and partly sponsored schools shall be provided a midday meal. The School Lunch Program, popularly known as the Midday Meal program, was previously known as the 'National Program for Nutrition Support to Primary Education' (NP-NSPE). It was piloted in 1960 in select states to alleviate

malnourishment and illiteracy, and has subsequently been expanded nationwide (Chutani, 2012). Its scope was also broadened to include children in upper primary school, thus, making it one of the largest food and nutrition assistance programs in the world (Ibid, 2012).

Several international development organizations and foundations are partnering with the Indian government through public-private partnerships schemes to achieve the objectives of this program. These include increasing school enrolment; increasing school attendance, reducing school dropout rate; and improving the performance of students in class with respect to attention span and academic progress, and finally to improve the nutritional status of participating school children.

This paper offers conclusions in response to two cardinal research questions. First, we seek to ascertain whether the beneficiaries of the MDM program (participating schoolteachers and pupils) International and the World are satisfied with its delivery. Second, whether the MDM scheme has achieved its primary objectives to increase the beneficiaries' school participation and improve their nutritional status. The paper has five sections. Section One outlines the aims and scope of the study, as well as a brief synthesis of previous studies on the MDM scheme whilst Section Two, outlines the methodology and the analytical processes employed to examine the empirical data. Sections Three and Four present the results of the bivariate and multivariate analysis for both teachers and students while Section Five examines the findings to provide the study's conclusions and strategic recommendations.

The overarching goal of MDM, as outlined by the Indian government, is to reduce malnutrition among children of school-going age and improve school enrolment and attendance. These goals, as well as others in the core objectives of the program, are outlined by Chutani (2012) in seven cardinal issues: The program seeks to improve the nutritional status of children and protect them from classroom hunger thus addressing the problem of malnutrition. It is also expected to help increase school enrolment and promote regular school attendance, especially to encourage children belonging to disadvantaged sections of the society. Furthermore, it is expected to provide nutritional support to children of primary school classes in drought-affected areas during summer vacation. The feeding process within the school setting is also likely to improve socialization among children belonging to all castes thus helping to undermine caste prejudices by teaching children to sit together and share a common meal. Thus, the school lunch program acts as a strong social equalizer by reducing the gender gap in school participation. There is also the expectation of creating social empowerment through the provision of employment to women from lower social status and castes and liberate working women from the task of having to feed children at home during the day. Finally, it is anticipated to serve as a source of economic support for the poorer sections of society, particularly Dalits, lower caste, ethnic and religious minority households, and also impart nutrition education to children.

Nevertheless, previous evaluations of the MDM program have focused on the assessment of the different approaches towards the implementation of the program and its achievements. Some such implementation studies have been carried out in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, and in Karnataka states (Deshpande, Baru, and Nundy, 2014; Ali and Akbar, 2014; Dreze and Goyal, 2003; the Government of India, 2013; CUTS International and the World Bank, n.d.; State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT), 2014). Applying both quantitative and qualitative methods, these studies interview students, teachers, parents, and other

stakeholders related to the MDM scheme, to ascertain if the implementation fulfills their expectations. Some of the topics covered by these studies include the quality, taste, quantity, and variation of the foods served; as well as hygiene and inclusiveness of the serving process.

In general, the findings of these studies suggest that a majority of the students and program stakeholders are satisfied with the quality of MDM food (Deshpande, Baru, and Nundy, 2014; Dreze and Goyal, 2003; CUTS International and the World Bank, n.d.; SCERT, 2014). However, some concerns expressed in other studies include the inadequate quantity of meals and lack of menu variation which are consistently mentioned as major concerns (Deshpande *et al*, 2014; Ali and Akbar, 2014; SCERT, 2014). Hygiene is also a common issue. This tends to relate to the absence of handwashing facilities, the availability of a decent source of drinking water, and the use of adequate and appropriate eating utensils during the meal-serving time (Government of India, 2013; CUTS International and the World Bank, n.d.). Also, while open caste-based discrimination is rare, some reports have highlighted the incidence of caste resistance towards Dalit cooks (Dreze and Goyal, 2003; CUTS International and the World Bank, n.d.).

Furthermore, some evaluation studies have sought to understand the influence of the MDM program on students' nutritional intake and status, motivation, school attendance, as well as school achievement. For example, the Government of India's study in Uttar Pradesh in 2013 found that students receiving MDM in that state, in general, have a lower nutritional status. However, almost all MDM studies probing impact on nutritional status conclude that MDM can be associated with better nutritional intake and status of the students (Laxmaiah *et al*., 1999; Afridi, 2010; Sharma, Singh, Meena, and Kannan, 2010; Singh, Park, and Dercon, 2013;).

Moreover, with regard to school participation, interviews with parents or teachers reveal that MDM has helped them in motivating the students to participate more regularly in their school activities (Dreze and Goyal, 2003; Jain and Shah, 2005; Deshpande, Baru, and Nundy, 2014;). Using various quantitative methods, some researchers established an association between MDM program and higher school enrolment and attendance (especially for girls), as well as better school achievement (higher probability to finish school and secure better grades) (Laxmaiah *et al*., 1999; Dreze and Kingdon, 2001; Afridi, 2011).

Study Background and Methodology

Study Background: Description of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.)

Located in the northern part of the country, Uttar Pradesh is India's most populous state and home to 200 million people of whom 60 million are poor (World Bank, 2016a). According to the Census (2011), more than seventy seven percent of the state population still resides in rural areas. While U.P. spends approximately US$ 59.8 billion on the development of the state (PRS Legislative Research, 2017), with large portions spent on health, sanitation, education, youth employment, agriculture, and rural development, it remains home to the largest number of India's poor (World Bank, 2016b).

According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) 2015-16 (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, (2015), U.P. has the worst record in the country for infant

and under-five mortality. The infant mortality rate (IMR) in the state is 64 per 1,000 while the under-five mortality rate (U5MR) is as high as 78 compared to the national averages of 34 (PIB-Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2016) and 43 (World Bank, 2016b), respectively. The report also shows poor vaccination numbers in the state where one in two children is not fully immunized. U.P. also has the country's second-highest Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) with only 26.4 percent of expecting mothers having access to at least four antenatal care visits (NFHS-4 2015-16). The state has a severe child malnutrition problem, an alarming 63.2 percent of children between six and fifty-nine months are anaemic. Rural-out migration of young people and youth has subsequently become a major concern (Assan and Hill, 2011).

The state also fares low in other indicators like access to clean drinking water and toilet facilities. A report by Tiwari & Nayak (2013) shows that as much as ninety percent of the households in U.P. do not have access to tap water; and while 34.9 percent of urban households have access to piped drinking water, only two percent of rural households have the same facility albeit relying on other sources (tubewell/handpump/well/surface water). Additionally, NFHS-4 (2015-16) shows that in U.P. only 23.2 percent of households in rural areas have access to improved sanitation facilities (flush to-piped sewer system, septic tank, pit latrine; ventilated improved pit/biogas latrine, and composting toilet) and 37.7 percent to electricity.

Study Design

The study aims to evaluate the implementation of the local foundation's Midday Meal (MDM) program in Lucknow. The study sample consists of students and teachers from Dalit, lower caste, ethnic, and religious minority households in government-funded schools covered by the program to ascertain the perspectives of the program's stakeholders.

Several methods were applied to assess program performance. First, close-ended questions were put to respondents to measure their satisfaction level with the program. Some of the program's aspects covered in the questionnaire included quality of meal (general quality, taste, flavor, presentation, variety), the quantity of meal/potion served (general quantity, freedom to ask more, quantity per week), serving process (server attitude, personnel handling the foods, inclusiveness, serving order, temperature, hygiene), and time arrangement (serving time, time allocation, punctuality). A set of close-ended questions on respondents' perceptions of the program's motivational impact was also included. Several different scales were implemented in the closed-ended questions. Questions regarding program satisfaction used either a four-scale (poor, good, very good, excellent) or three-scale (not satisfied, satisfied, very satisfied) satisfaction measurement. The motivational impact questions applied four-scale possible responses including the very small, small, large, and very large extent of the motivational impact.

Second, open-ended questions on concerns and suggestions were used to collect respondents' inputs for further program improvement. Third, interviewers were also instructed to conduct simple observation on food distribution and eating process in some of the sampled schools. This study is a part of bigger research evaluating the program's impact on nutritional status (anthropometric measurement and other physical characteristics)[1], attendance rate, and school achievement (subject-based grades). Thus, information on these subjects was also collected along with demographic status and food intake at home.

Sample Size and Selection Method

The study generated a sample size of 1,338 Dalit, lower caste, ethnic, and religious minority students in public schools within the Lucknow area, during July-October 2016. The sampling method was clustered random sampling with the school as the cluster unit. The survey included sixty-two schools and interviewed twenty-two Dalit, lower caste, ethnic, and religious minority students per school on average. However, the variation of cluster size is quite big (a standard deviation of 8.74) due to a large variation of the number of students per school.

Allowing for a design effect of two, a clustered sample size of 1,189 should be enough for the study to detect a one per cent proportion/prevalence of a certain event, with a ninety five percent level of confidence and around eighty percent margin of error (or about 0.8 percentage point in absolute term). The usual benchmark for the nutritional study is three percent based on the cut off percentile generally used in determining malnutrition status.[2] However, no specific benchmark has been advised for the food policy satisfaction level. Thus, a fifty percent prevalence is commonly used. Since a sample size of 1,189 should be good enough to detect a one percent prevalence of any event, the 1,338-sample size should be more than sufficient to provide a precise detection of the research interest (Ahmed, 2009; Charan, & Biswas, 2013).

However, since the main research object is the students, teachers were not sampled in the same way. About two to three teachers were chosen per school and interviewed. The study ended up with 175 teachers representing all schools. This sample size is good to detect the prevalence of any event of about four percent with a hundred percent margin error, under a ninety five percent level of confidence.

Data Analysis Strategy

This study employs various data analysis strategies. First, a statistical descriptive analysis is employed to discover the satisfaction level of the respondents, both students and teachers, in various aspects (Assan and Kharisma, 2019). The analysis is grouped based on the categories of questions: food quality, food quantity, serving process, and time arrangement. The analysis uses the proportion of respondents' responses based on the satisfaction scale. When four-scale and three-scale questions are analyzed together, 'poor' is treated as the equivalent of 'not satisfied', 'good' is the equivalent of 'satisfied', and 'very good' and 'excellent' are considered equivalent to 'very satisfied' (Moustakas, 1994).

Second, a qualitative analysis is conducted along with quantitative descriptive analysis. The quantitative analysis categorizes and summarizes the concerns and suggestions based on the categorization used in the descriptive analysis. The prevalence rate of certain suggestion categories is also shown to emphasize the importance of the recommendations.

Third, a multivariate analysis is employed for a deeper understanding of: (1) the determinants of respondents' satisfaction level and tendency to provide suggestions, and (2) the characteristics of respondents, especially those who felt less satisfied and gave more suggestions. By understanding this information, this study tries to define the urgency level and potential benefit of certain program/policy improvements.

Two sets of equations, one for students [equation (1) and (2)] and another set for teachers[equation (3) and (4)], will be used for the multivariate analysis:

$$SSat_i = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1{}'NS_i + \gamma_2{}'SP_i + \gamma_3 SMI_i + \gamma_4 FI_i + \gamma_5 Z_i + \gamma_6{}'A_i + v_i \quad (1)$$

$$SSug_i = \partial_0 + \partial_1 SSat_i + \partial_2{}'NS_i + \partial_3{}'SP_i + \partial_4 SMI_i + \partial_5 FI_i + \partial_6 Z_i + \partial_7{}'A_i + u_i \quad (2)$$

$$TSat_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Z_i + \alpha_2 TMI_i + \alpha_3{}'T_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

$$TSug_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 TSat_i + \beta_2 Z_i + \beta_3 TMI_i + \beta_4{}'T_i + \theta_i \quad (4)$$

SSat/TSat : students'/teachers' satisfaction level

SSug/TSug : students'/teachers' number of suggestions given

'NS : a vector consisting of indicators of students' nutritional status

'SP : a vector consisting of indicators of students' school performance

SMI/TMI : students'/teachers' perception of the program's motivational impact

FI : students' foods intake (number of meals) at home

Z : zone/location of the school

'A : a vector consisting of other control variables (demographic status)

Several measures are used to represent students' and teachers' satisfaction level: satisfaction on quantity-related aspects, satisfaction on quality-related aspects, and general satisfaction on all aspects. All satisfaction measures are in the form of composite indicators produced by factor analysis.[3]The suggestion indicator is in the form of the continuous variable describing the number of concerns and recommendations provided by each respondent.

The vector of nutritional status indicators consists of a composite indicator of anthropometric-based nutritional status[4], MUAC for height[5], fainting experience, as well as an indicator of skin, hair, and stomach condition. All nutritional status indicators are in a negative direction, showing higher values when the nutritional status is low. The vector of students' performance consists of students' number of attending days in the week preceding the survey and a composite indicator of students' last performance (self-report, four scales: below average, average, very good, excellent) on Mathematics, Science, Hindi, and their best subjects.

The perception of the program's motivational intake is a composite indicator of students' and teachers' opinions on whether the program had increased students' motivation in attending school, participating in school's physical activities, as well as doing and concentrating better in class. The zone variable describes the school location among four zones served by the organization, namely Chinhat, Kakori, Sarojni Nagar, and Mohanlalganj. Students' control variables include age, gender, grade, guardians' employment status, birth order, and the number of siblings. Teachers' control variables include age, gender, rank/position, and the length of teaching in the current school.

Ordinary least square (OLS) approach is applied for all equations. For the factor analysis, the tetrachoric correlation approach is used to create the anthropometric-based nutritional status composite indicator, since all indicators in this theme are binary. For other composite indicators, including satisfaction level, students' subject grades, perception of motivational and impact, polychoric correlation is applied. Polychoric correlation is more appropriate for categorical variables with more than two categories. Stata is used for all the quantitative data analysis, including the module of *tetrachoric* and *polychoric* for the factor analysis.

Lastly, the study provides an analysis of the program and policy recommendations for improvement. Information gathered from the interviewers' observations is mostly employed in this part, especially regarding the food serving process.

Analysis and Results

Results from the Descriptive Analysis

The interviewed students consisted of fifty nine percent females. Most of them were aged between ten and thirteen years, with an average age of 11.36 years (standard deviation of 2.06). About fifty three percent of respondents were students in a five grade lower-primary school, and the rest were three-grade upper-primary school pupils. Almost eighty percent of student respondents tend to belong to the highest grade in their schools- grades four and five for lower primary school and grades seven and eight for upper primary school. The teacher respondents consisted of seventy eight percent females. A little more than half of them were forty years old or more, and on average, they had taught in the current school for 7.19 years (standard deviation of 7.08). About twenty-three percent of the interviewed teachers had senior positions, such as headmaster, headmistress, principal, or the head-teacher. Among the four served zones, in Mohanlalganj teachers were the most represented (thirty one percent) while in Kakori students were the most interviewed (thirty percent).

In general, students' and teachers' satisfaction with the midday meal program operated by the foundation is high. In all aspects, more than ninety percent of respondents expressed their satisfaction. However, respondents have expressed their dissatisfaction more in some specific areas than in others, such as food taste, menu variation, and quantity, as well as serving area hygiene.

Quality, Flavor, and Taste of Food Served

In terms of general quality, flavor, and taste pupils show a slightly higher dissatisfaction compared to teachers. About three to five percent of pupils rated the food quality, flavor, and taste as 'poor', while only one to three percent of the teachers thought so. However, students were significantly more likely to say that the meals were very good or excellent when compared to teachers, in terms of quality, taste, and flavor (Figure 1).

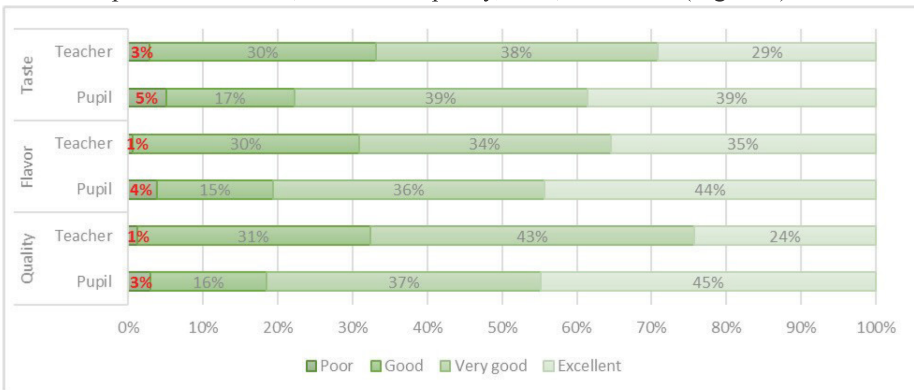

Fig. I: Perception of General Quality, Flavor, and Taste of MDM

Source: Field survey

In terms of food presentation, students and teachers were consistently satisfied although menu variation seemed to be a significant concern. Among both pupils and teachers, nine percent expressed their dissatisfaction with the menu variation. This is the highest dissatisfaction rate compared to the other aspects of the program. It is also the only area with negative perception far above five percent in both respondent groups (Figure 2).

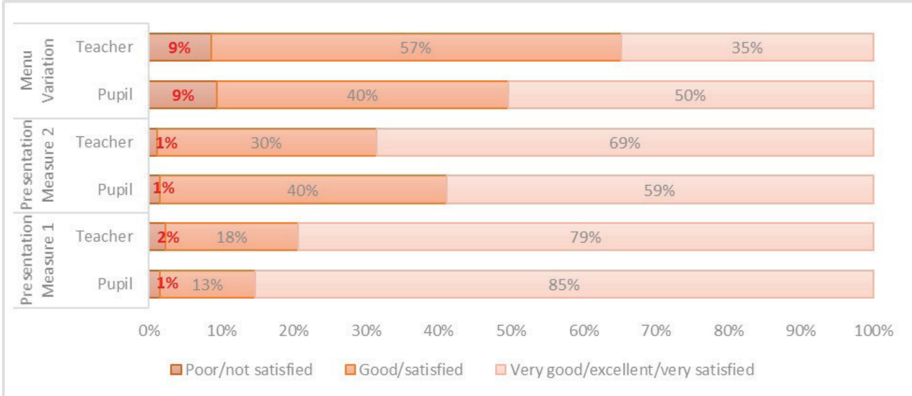

Fig. 2: Perception of the Food Presentation and Menu Variation

Source: Field survey

While the respondents' perception of the food quality is in general positive, the percentage of respondents who provide suggestions related to food quality improvement is quite large. Among the students, six percent provided suggestions related to quality, nine percent mentioned recommendations on taste and flavor improvement, and twenty seven percent suggested options for increasing menu variation. This accounts for up to two-thirds of a total of the 542 students who provided any suggestions. Teachers were more active in terms of providing their suggestions. About thirty four percent of them provided suggestions on quality improvement, twenty seven percent recommended taste or flavor enhancement, and fifty six percent advised better menu variation (Figure 3).

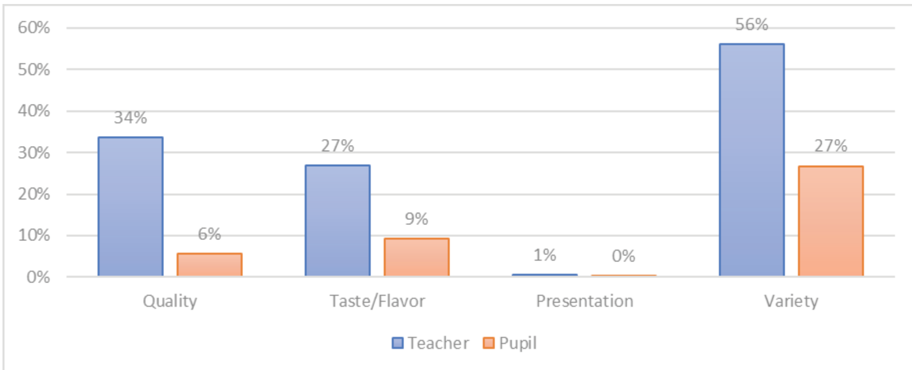

Fig. 3: Percentage of Students and Teachers Giving Quality Improvement Suggestions

Source: Field survey

In terms of content, both students and teachers generally provided similar types of suggestions. For quality improvement, both groups of respondents suggested that *chapatis* (traditional wheat flour bread baked on a griddle), rice, and vegetables should be cooked more properly, indicating that there were some events when the food served was undercooked (the chapatis were too hard, etc.). Some suggestions also included requests to provide fresher and better-quality fruits. Regarding taste and flavor, a significant number of suggestions stressed the need to improve the taste, especially by adding salt and spices. Teachers were more specific and listed vegetables, curry rice, and soybeans as dishes in which flavor needed to be enhanced. For menu variation, both teachers and students requested more variety of fruits and vegetables. Some popular traditional dishes such as *cheese/paneer, chola, Bengal,* gram, *kadhi chawal,* and *poori,* and also sweets and milk were added to their respective wish lists.

Quantity of Food

In contrast to food quality, taste, and flavor, students seemed less concerned as compared to teachers about the quantity of meal served. While five percent of teachers expressed their dissatisfaction only two percent of students did not find the quantity adequate. The gap is wider when the question was about 'amount of the foods weekly,' to which six percent of teachers but only one percent of students stated their disappointment. Students show a slightly higher rate of dissatisfaction only under the topic of 'ability to ask for more', even though in general respondents are very satisfied with this aspect (Figure 4).

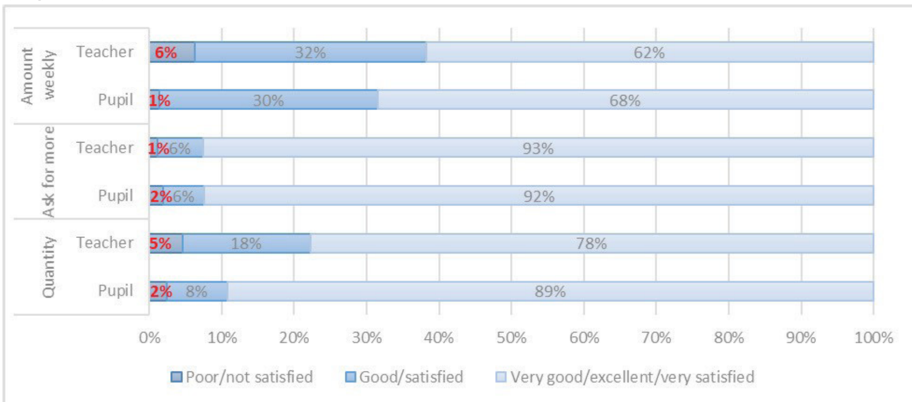

Fig. 4: Perception of Quantity-Related Aspects

Source: Field survey

The same pattern is seen in the subsequent suggestion as well. Only about two percent of students mentioned that the quantity of food served needed to be increased while almost nine percent of teachers suggested more food quantity.

Serving Process

Both students and teachers mostly expressed high satisfaction over the serving process. Regarding server attitude, inclusiveness, personnel handling the food, and order of serving, only less than one percent among the respondent groups felt dissatisfied. However, the respondents expressed higher concern about the hygiene of the serving

area, the temperature of food served, the distribution process, and the availability of proper eating/serving utensils (Assan and Chambers, 2014) (Figure 5).

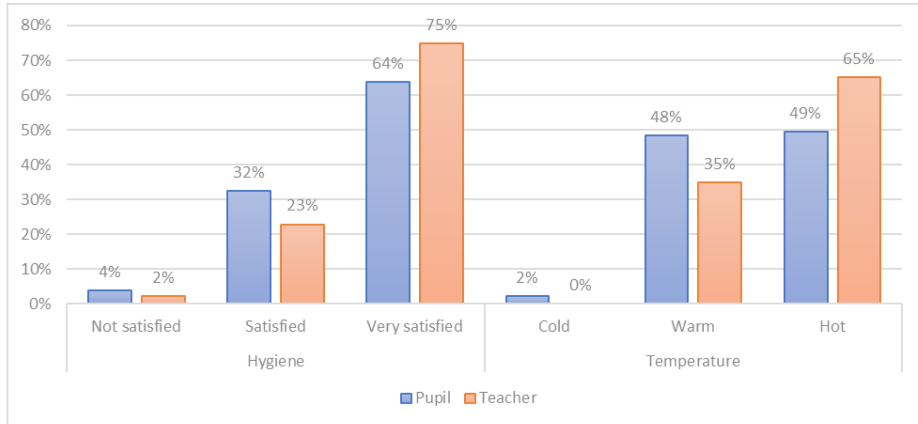

Fig. 5: Perception of Hygiene in the Serving Area and Temperature of Food Served

Source: Field survey

In terms of hygiene of the serving area, students are more concerned than teachers. About four percent of pupils mentioned that hygiene in the serving area is poor, which is almost twice as compared to two percent of teachers who found the hygiene of the area wanting. Students were also less likely than teachers to be very satisfied with the level of hygiene of the area. Students' suggestions on hygiene were mainly asking for a cleaner eating area. Interestingly, teachers' hygiene-related concerns were mostly regarding the cleanliness of the serving utensils rather than the eating area.

As regards food safety, students showed more concern than teachers. While none of the teachers felt that the food served was cold, two percent of students said that the food was served cold. About half of them considered that the food was warm as compared to a significant sixty five percent of teachers who felt that the served food was hot. Thus, no suggestion on this count was forthcoming from teachers regarding temperature, while one percent of students suggested that the food served could be hot or hotter.

Finally, regarding the distribution process, a few teachers hinted that servers were needed because, at present, students were serving themselves under the supervision of teachers. While hardly any students were concerned about utensils, a significant number of teachers suggested the need for providing eating utensils. About fourteen percent of teachers proposed that the program should also offer plates and spoons.

Time Arrangement and Punctuality

Satisfaction regarding the time of serving food was over ninety eight percent in both respondent groups. Only about one percent of pupils and teachers had concerns about the serving time. About one percent of students and two percent of teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with the time allocation for eating, implying that a longer eating period is needed.

In general, respondents' satisfaction with the punctuality of food arrival at school is high. Only very few students and teachers suggested that food must arrive on time at the schools. When asked to elaborate, at least seventy seven percent of students and

eighty six percent of teachers said that the arrival of food was never delayed. However, thirteen to fourteen percent of teachers and fifteen to sixteen percent of students acknowledged that arrival of food was delayed at least once in a week, while six percent of students pointed that arrival of food was delayed twice in a week (Figure 6).

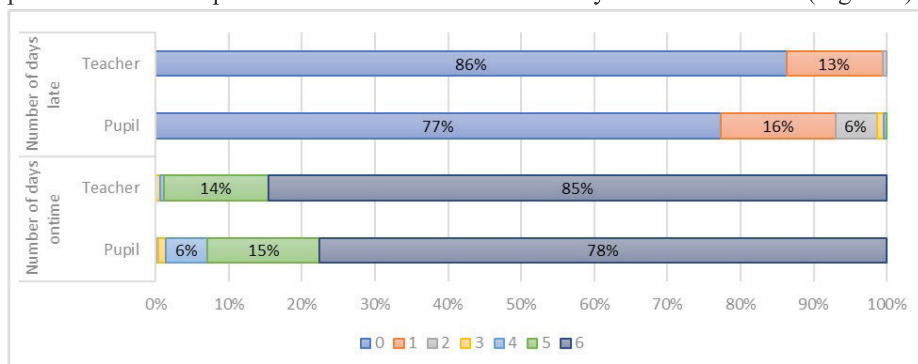

Fig. 6: Perception of Punctuality Regarding the Arrival of Meals at Schools

Source: Field survey

Multivariate Analysis

The multivariate analysis suggests that there were some strong determinants of students' satisfaction and likelihood to provide a higher number of suggestions for the MDM program. Students' nutritional status significantly influenced their satisfaction with the program. Students with an indication of stomach protrusion (a sign of malnutrition) were significantly more likely to be satisfied with the feeding program, either in terms of quantity, quality, or general satisfaction. However, students with unhealthy hair, or skin showed different tendencies. These students are significantly more likely to be dissatisfied with the program.

Table 1: Regression analysis on students' satisfaction and number of suggestions

	I Satisfaction on Quantity	**II Satisfaction on Quality**	**III General Satisfaction**	**IV Number of Suggestion Given**
Nutritional Status				
Low anthropometric-based nutritional status	0.047	0.007	-0.018	0.057
	[-0.040,0.133]	[-0.100,0.114]	[-0.101,0.065]	[-0.043,0.157]
MUAC for height lower than -2 std. dev.	-0.022	0.039	0.021	-0.048
	[-0.096,0.052]	[-0.052,0.130]	[-0.050,0.091]	[-0.133,0.038]
Unhealthy hair	-0.080*	-0.069	-0.077*	0.092*
	[-0.145,-0.016]	[-0.149,0.010]	[-0.138,-0.015]	[0.017,0.166]
Unhealthy skin	-0.138***	-0.140***	-0.177***	0.099*
	[-0.205,-0.071]	[-0.222,-0.057]	[-0.240,-0.113]	[0.021,0.178]
Indication of stomach protrusion	0.155**	0.162*	0.243***	0.017
	[0.051,0.258]	[0.034,0.290]	[0.144,0.342]	[-0.104,0.138]

	I Satisfaction on Quantity	II Satisfaction on Quality	III General Satisfaction	IV Number of Suggestion Given
Nutritional Status				
Fainting experience last week	-0.002	0.034	0.017	0.078
	[-0.087,0.083]	[-0.070,0.139]	[-0.064,0.098]	[-0.020,0.176]
School performance				
Number of attendance days last week	0.033**	0.048**	0.047***	-0.008
	[0.009,0.057]	[0.019,0.078]	[0.024,0.070]	[-0.036,0.020]
Performance in class	0.02	0.019	0.01	0.033
	[-0.020,0.060]	[-0.030,0.069]	[-0.028,0.048]	[-0.013,0.080]
Age	0.008	-0.008	0.01	-0.006
	[-0.018,0.033]	[-0.039,0.024]	[-0.014,0.034]	[-0.035,0.024]
Grade	0.012	-0.002	0.006	0.016
	[-0.014,0.038]	[-0.035,0.030]	[-0.019,0.031]	[-0.014,0.047]
Male	-0.011	-0.04	-0.032	-0.052
	[-0.074,0.053]	[-0.118,0.039]	[-0.093,0.029]	[-0.125,0.022]
Guardians work in agricultural sector	0.064	0.104*	0.132***	-0.048
	[-0.009,0.137]	[0.015,0.194]	[0.063,0.201]	[-0.132,0.036]
Number of meals received at home	0.133***	0.201***	0.147***	0.035
	[0.084,0.182]	[0.140,0.261]	[0.101,0.194]	[-0.023,0.093]
Order of birth	0.021	0.018	0.017	-0.034*
	[-0.002,0.044]	[-0.011,0.047]	[-0.006,0.039]	[-0.061,-0.007]
Number of siblings	-0.016	-0.027	-0.011	0.034*
	[-0.043,0.012]	[-0.061,0.007]	[-0.037,0.015]	[0.002,0.066]
Perception on MDM motivational impact	0.127***	0.169***	0.119***	0.042
	[0.084,0.171]	[0.116,0.223]	[0.078,0.161]	[-0.010,0.093]
Location in Chinhat	-0.475***	-0.639***	-0.599***	-0.302***
	[-0.574,-0.376]	[-0.761,-0.516]	[-0.694,-0.505]	[-0.425,-0.179]
Location in Kakori	-0.234***	-0.459***	-0.340***	-0.436***
	[-0.322,-0.146]	[-0.568,-0.350]	[-0.424,-0.255]	[-0.541,-0.330]
Location in Sarojni Nagar	0.051	-0.297***	-0.157***	-0.076
	[-0.037,0.138]	[-0.405,-0.189]	[-0.240,-0.073]	[-0.177,0.026]
General satisfaction				-0.319***
				[-0.394,-0.245]
Constant	2.366***	2.736***	2.903***	1.536***
	[1.999,2.733]	[2.284,3.188]	[2.553,3.253]	[1.061,2.011]
N	1,040	1,038	1,037	1,037
R-Squared	0.225	0.212	0.278	0.152

Source: Field data

Other than nutritional status, guardians' type of job, number of meals received at home, and school location were also significantly correlated with satisfaction levels. Students with guardians working in the agricultural sector tended to be more satisfied with the program. Students who received more frequent meals at home also seemed to be less dissatisfied with meals at schools. In terms of location, students studying in Chinhat and Kakori zones had the highest satisfaction level, while students in Mohanlalganj had the lowest satisfaction level. An observation that is worthy of note is that, students with higher attendance rates and better perception of the program's motivational impact are also those with higher satisfaction levels.

Regarding suggestions, students with unhealthy hair or unhealthy skin, statistically significantly provided more suggestions, keeping other variables constant. While not statistically significant, other nutritional status indicators, except MUAC for height, also indicate that students with lower nutritional status expressed more suggestions. The satisfaction level is proven to be a strong determinant for providing suggestions. A higher satisfaction level is significantly associated with a lower number of suggestions. Also consistent with the regional pattern of satisfaction, students in Chinhat and Kakori who had the highest satisfaction level were also the ones with the lowest number of suggestions. Mohanlalganj students, on the other hand, had both the lowest satisfaction level and the highest number of suggestions (Refer to Table 2).

Table 2: regression Analysis of Teachers' Satisfaction and Number of Suggestions

	Satisfaction on Quantity	**Satisfaction on Quality**	**General Satisfaction 1**	**General Satisfaction 2**	**Number of Suggestions Given**
Male	-0.214*	-0.081	-0.035	-0.254*	0.088
	[-0.427,-0.002]	[-0.324,0.161]	[-0.219,0.149]	[-0.486,-0.021]	[-0.260,0.436]
Number of years teaching in current school	0.003	0.003	0.004	0.001	-0.001
	[-0.011,0.018]	[-0.014,0.019]	[-0.008,0.016]	[-0.015,0.017]	[-0.024,0.022]
Rank	-0.003	-0.012	-0.034	0.127	0.221
	[-0.214,0.207]	[-0.249,0.225]	[-0.214,0.146]	[-0.100,0.355]	[-0.117,0.558]
Age 40+	0.04	0.069	0.057	0.013	0.242
	[-0.144,0.224]	[-0.140,0.279]	[-0.102,0.215]	[-0.188,0.213]	[-0.054,0.539]
Location in Chinhat	-0.704***	-0.555**	-0.593***	-0.19	-0.890***
	[-0.994,-0.413]	[-0.883,-0.228]	[-0.841,-0.344]	[-0.504,0.124]	[-1.384,-0.396]
Location in Kakori	-0.663***	-0.897***	-0.725***	-0.174	-1.024***
	[-0.896,-0.430]	[-1.162,-0.633]	[-0.926,-0.525]	[-0.427,0.079]	[-1.453,-0.595]
Location in Sarojni Nagar	-0.253*	-0.251	-0.274**	-0.137	-0.348
	[-0.480,-0.026]	[-0.508,0.006]	[-0.469,-0.079]	[-0.383,0.110]	[-0.721,0.025]
Perception on MDM motivational impact	0.083	0.099	0.052	0.115	-0.048
	[-0.041,0.207]	[-0.040,0.239]	[-0.054,0.158]	[-0.018,0.249]	[-0.248,0.151]
General satisfaction 1					-0.173
					[-0.473,0.126]

	Satisfaction on Quantity	Satisfaction on Quality	General Satisfaction 1	General Satisfaction 2	Number of Suggestions Given
General satisfaction 2					-0.261*
					[-0.498,-0.024]
Constant	3.152***	3.381***	4.073***	-0.132	2.654***
	[2.709,3.596]	[2.879,3.883]	[3.693,4.454]	[-0.613,0.349]	[1.234,4.073]
N	175	173	173	173	173
R-Squared	0.237	0.256	0.28	0.067	0.192

Source: Field data

The same analysis on teachers' data shows considerably consistent results, especially regarding locational patterns and negative correlation between satisfaction level and tendency to provide suggestions. Holding everything else constant, teachers with higher satisfaction levels have statistically significantly provided fewer suggestions. Teachers in Chinhat and Kakori had the highest satisfaction level and lowest number of proposed recommendations, while teachers of Mohanlalganj zone expressed the least satisfaction and highest number of suggestions.

Discussion

Discussion of Results

This study managed to analyze satisfaction levels and suggestions of students and teachers from marginalized groups with respect to various aspects of the MDM program in their school supported by the local foundation. In general, the overall satisfaction levels of students as well as teachers were over ninety percent. However, there are some aspects such as taste, quantity, menu variation, and eating area hygiene in which the dissatisfaction level was higher. A deeper analysis of respondents' suggestions helped the study to detect more detailed concerns on these aspects. Furthermore, the multivariate analysis suggested some strong determinants of satisfaction level, such as nutritional status, food intake at home, and school location. The analysis also implied that nutritional status, location, and satisfaction level contributed significantly to the number of suggestions provided by respondents. These are critical to the well-being, attainment of educational goals, participation, and academic improvement of the study sample.

The quality, taste, flavor, and menu variation are the most frequent concerns voiced by the respondents. To address challenges related to quality, taste, and flavor, as much as possible the food served should be consistent with local expectations. For instance, suggestions to add salt and spices, as well as to cook chapatis, rice, and vegetables more properly, should be followed up accordingly. To address challenges pertaining to variety, the program implementers need to expand the menu options and include a wider assortment of fruits and vegetables in their meals, which have been popularly requested.

Regarding quantity, teachers seemed to be the ones stating greater concern about inadequacy. The number of suggestions to increase the amount of food is not very high among students. However, the multivariate analysis suggests that students with unhealthy hair, unhealthy skin, and fewer meals received at home had a statistically significantly lower satisfaction level on the quantity of food provided through the scheme. This indicates that increasing the quantity of the meals may help Dalit, lower caste, ethnic, and religious minority students, who tend to have lower nutritional status and receive less food intake at home (Nakkeeran, *et al*., 2020).

In terms of the serving process, the study discovered that students and teachers did not agree on the temperature of the served meals. While students' responses on food temperature varied from warm to cold, most teachers described the meals served as hot. To address this concern in maintaining the temperature of the meals served, the food should be delivered in hot trolleys or and containers which may be plugged into electrical sockets in the school kitchen in ideal situations. The temperature of the food should be noted at the time of departure from the central kitchen in Lucknow and on arrival at the receiving school to ensure that its temperature is within the prescribed range recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) or the Ministry of Health in India. In the absence of electricity, the food should be transported in appropriate containers and placed on Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) stoves/warmers on arrival in the school. Alternative heating arrangements should be used depending on locally available resources.

Given that Indians culturally tend to eat with their hands, it was striking to observe that a significant number of teachers indicated the need to have spoons, along with utensils. It is important to note that while children currently eat their meals with their hands and do not use cutlery, it is probable that the teachers would prefer to see a shift from this pattern or cultural expectation and practice, given that these meals are being served in a school setting. It could also be an expression of concern as children do not wash their hands at all or do so improperly for want of water. After all, they tend to sit on the ground on what appears to be a dirty floor and surely touch the floor with their hands upon sitting. That would be reason enough to want utensils and even tables that could be cleaned daily. It is important to note that similar requests were also expressed by students, even though their number was fewer compared to teachers.

Besides, the sampled teachers requested better-organized seating arrangements, and the provision of appropriate utensils including spoons, plates, and cutlery. This may seem culturally contradictory, given that it is considered culturally acceptable and common practice to eat by hand in India. It is also probable that the teachers' request for such facilities is to help minimize the possibility of the common pattern of social isolation of Dalit, lower caste, ethnic and religious minority groups as well as redress contamination and infection that occur from children eating with hands that have not been washed properly. This concern is even more urgent given the recent novel COVID-19 pandemic, which is reported by the media to disproportionately affect individuals from lower-social status and poor backgrounds including groups represented by our study sample. It becomes even more significant as states reconsider reopening schools.

Given that handwashing is done voluntarily by students and also depends on the availability of water, improper supervision of handwashing can lead to students contracting diseases like cholera and diarrhea. Such an occurrence could then be wrongfully attributed to the quality of meals rather than the unhygienic handling of

food by children. Also, hygiene around food service areas needs to be improved. There are reports of flies and other insects hovering around the food preparation and service areas. This particular challenge can be addressed by providing screened areas where food is served and consumed. Implementers can take steps to improve hygiene related to their food service. However, general sanitation in schools is outside the remit of MDM program implementers even though general school hygiene can potentially impact on nutritional and health outcomes of students. Implementing organizations can address some of these external factors by collaborating with appropriate stakeholders such as the municipal councils and the local education department to reduce potential negative impacts on their program.

The present study also makes several noteworthy observations regarding the personnel serving food. One major concern is the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as protective clothing, gloves, and masks for the serving personnel. International hygiene standards require persons who handle food to wear clean protective over-clothing, for example, disposable aprons or overalls. Also, hair should be covered with a hairnet. It was evident that this was not the case in all the schools visited during the field survey. Implementing such protocols would significantly enhance the level of hygiene associated with the management of food at the school level. A reasonable approach to tackle this issue could be to train all personnel responsible for the preparation, handling, and or serving of food in all aspects of food safety and hygiene with emphasis on the hazards and risks involved in food preparation, handling, and service.

Following up on the findings from the multivariate analysis, nutritional status and food intake at home significantly matter in determining students' satisfaction and subsequent suggestions. While students with stomach protrusion tended to be satisfied with the foods and program's general implementation, students with unhealthy hair or unhealthy skin were more likely to have a lower satisfaction rate. The second group was also more likely to provide suggestions. Students who received fewer meals at home had lower satisfaction as well in all aspects. This finding implies that the better-off students might feel more satisfied because they had lower needs, in terms of food and nutrition intakes. On the other hand, the worse-off students, those with lower nutritional status and fewer meals at home, felt the need to receive more and better meals. Thus, they feel more dissatisfied with what had been served. Improving the quality, quantity, and serving process of the food may then provide larger benefits to the worse-off students.

The analysis finds a strong positive correlation between attendance rate and satisfaction level, as well as motivational impact and satisfaction level. Further research is needed to find out the direction of the causality connection. For instance, it could be either that the highly satisfied students attend school more to get meals, or those who attend school more have a more complete picture of the program and feel more satisfied. If the first scenario was the case, further improving satisfaction levels may be of further help to increase students' attendance rates. Regarding motivational impact, the same analysis applies. It might either be that high satisfaction leads to a higher belief that the program had motivated them in school, or the students felt motivated by the program and expressed their satisfaction more. If the first applies, improving satisfaction may also lead to an improvement in their motivation which is critical for students from low social status and marginalized backgrounds.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study indicate that for all performance indicators including food quality, variety, and presentation, as well as timeliness and overall service delivery, a significant majority of both students and teachers, are extremely satisfied. The local foundation's internationally funded feeding programs have been effective and performed equitably. Our analysis reveals that the non-discrimination model of the internationally funded local foundation is also shown to be a strong factor in students' motivation for school attendance and participation; and therefore effective in improving the well-being of marginalized school children. More than fifty percent of student respondents indicated that MDM played a large or very large role in their school attendance, participation, ability to concentrate in class, and their ability to do well in school. An even larger percentage of teachers (above sixty five percent on all relevant indicators) acknowledged that MDM was a large motivating factor in pupils' school attendance, engagement in physical activities, classroom concentration, and overall performance.

The impact of MDM on nutritional status is relatively difficult to assess due to the absence of reliable baseline data and comparison groups. Nevertheless, we were able to identify reliable data from studies conducted by the Indian Government in Uttar Pradesh and Cross-National Data for India, as sources of comparison with our data. Comparing students in our sample to Indian national averages shows significant proportions of Lucknow students lagging on indicators like height, weight, BMI, mid-upper arm, and waist circumference for age. A small percentage of students also showed evidence of malnourishment such as stomach protrusion and fainting. However, these are more likely to be a function of existing or pre-existing social and economic deprivation due to their socio-economic and cultural status, and the degree of impoverishment present in the districts/resident households represented by the sampled students/schools.

On the contrary, a comparative analysis between our findings and studies by the federal government in U.P. revealed striking results. The analysis shows that while state-runs school students covered by local foundation MDM in Lucknow appeared to have lower nutritional status as compared to national standards, they were much better off when compared to students in other districts of U.P. Comparing disaggregated anthropometric data by age and gender of students from our study sample in Lucknow with students in other districts in the state, we see that across almost all age groups and genders, students in our study sample from Lucknow had higher nutritional status than those from other districts in U.P. This pattern was also consistent with results from our comparison of BMI and MUAC indicators, by age and gender between the two sample groups.

Nevertheless, in spite of the notable success of the local foundation's MDM implementation in Lucknow, there are several changes or improvements that can be made to enhance the program's impact. Teachers made both strategic and logistical recommendations for the advancement of the program. They identified specific areas of concern that could be improved: variety, taste, quantity, and general food quality were most cited by respondents as areas needing improvement. Specific suggestions for improving meals were wide-ranging: they included ideas on how to cook certain dishes (some traditionally sweet dishes were reportedly served salty and vice versa), the use of salt and spices to improve the taste of food, and the inclusion of other foods especially fruits and vegetables.

In addition to the factors that directly impact the implementation of the local foundation's MDM in Lucknow, there are other external factors that can potentially impact its overall success. Demographic and household characteristics like gender, the number of siblings a student has, the number of meals they have at home, and overall nutritional status affect program satisfaction and its impact on beneficiaries.

Another important finding that requires policy attention is that our analysis revealed that several of the Dalit and lower caste students who have been on the local foundation's feeding program are yet to exhibit positive nutritional improvement. This finding confirms the notion that nutritional programs may take years to have the desired impact on the individuals involved in them. In this case, our study suggests that MDM implementers would have to offer consistent and sustained feeding programs to many of the schools in our sample over a longer period to allow the students to derive the expected benefits of nutrition intervention. This is very important as such an observation could be easily misconstrued to imply a lack of impact, which would be inaccurate. It is particularly important for a state like U.P. where a large proportion of the young population, particularly from Dalit, lower caste, ethnic, and religious minority households have been reported to have low nutritional status (Nakkeeran *et al.* 2020, Assan and Gupta, 2018).

Above all, such evaluation surveys could serve as baseline data for future longitudinal studies to help track students currently receiving MDM through the local foundation's feeding programs. A comparative study of schools currently receiving MDM through such programs and schools listed to receive MDM through such public-private initiatives will also help implementers to develop a new baseline database that could be utilized in assessing school-level performance. It would be interesting to have longitudinal studies that would then track such pupils along their educational paths to ascertain how many of them would progress into further and higher educational institutions.

To conclude, a cardinal value that could be engendered from this study is that the non-discriminatory protocols and approach used by internationally funded foundations and local organizations supported by international donors in their school feeding programs could be emulated as a model in the state government's work towards addressing social exclusion and marginalization associated with the provision of social protection programs and services to poor and low-income households and the wider society (Nakkeeran *et al.* 2020; Assan and Chambers, 2014). This approach could be particularly helpful for school feeding programs operated by national and local organizations. Also, policy officials and key stakeholders of this initiative are now able to identify and advocate for *at-risk children* and their *households* in the sampled schools and beyond. Again, program implementers and funding agencies can collaborate with other development agencies to initiate and coordinate follow up programs for such individuals and their households. This model could ensure scaling up so that the overall impact of feeding children at school would ultimately translate into the attainment of their long-term human development and dignity (Assan and Gupta, 2018). Such an effort would ultimately contribute toward improving the human development index of India and the attainment of local and national targets for 2030 SDGs. Thus, the study demonstrates that enhancing the voice, participation, confidence, dignity, and well-being of individuals from low social and economic strata within the Indian society could contribute to overall national development.

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Endnotes

1 The physical features collected included weight, height, waist circumference, mid-upper arm circumference (MUAC), as well as an indication of unhealthy hair, unhealthy skin, stomach protrusion, and fainting experiences last week.

2 For instance, WHO suggests that children and adolescents experience stunting when their weight for age falls below the 3rd percentiles of the reference population.

3 For students' satisfaction level, the factor analysis results in a single composite indicator. However, factor analysis on teachers' satisfaction level produces two composite indicators: the first factor with a strong representation of all aspects, except for menu variation; and the second factor with a strong representation of menu variation.

4 Including weight for age (WfA), height for age (HfA), body mass index (BMI) for age (BMIfA), waist circumference for age (WCfA), and waist circumference/height for age (WCHfA). The Indian Academy of Pediatrics growth tables of 2015 are used to define percentile cut-off for WfA, HfA, and BMIfA (Khadilkar *et al*., 2015). Results from a waist-circumference study in Urban South India in 2010 are used to determine percentile cut-off for WCfA and WCHfA (Kuriyan *et al*.,2010).

5 A USA-based study is used to define a standard deviation cut-off for MUAC for height (Mei *et al*., 1997).

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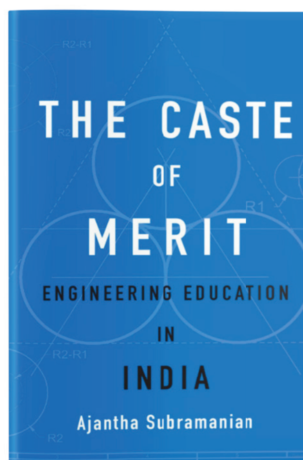

Engineering Caste Privilege

In *The Caste of Merit,* Ajantha Subramanian unpacks the precise mechanics that power the engines of caste privilege

> [*The Caste of Merit*] maintains that it is as precisely this gap between the social life of meritocracy and its universalistic promise that allows for the retrenchment of privilege. The hope for meritocracy as the transcendence of identity is a profoundly ahistorical aspiration that works against the actual redress of inequality. (p. 5)

On 30 June 2020, the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) filed a federal lawsuit under the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA) of California against Cisco Systems and two managers—Sundar Iyer and Ramana Kompella—for discrimination, harassment, and retaliation[1]. The suit alleges that managers at Cisco's San Jose headquarters campus, which employs a predominantly South Asian workforce, 'harassed, discriminated, and retaliated against an engineer because he is Dalit Indian' (DFEH, 2020). The complainant was 'expected to accept a caste hierarchy within the workplace where he held the lowest status within a team of higher-caste colleagues, receiving less pay, fewer opportunities, and other inferior terms and conditions of employment because of his religion, ancestry, national origin/

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ethnicity, and race/color.' As Thenmozhi Soundararajan of the US-based Ambedkarite organization Equality Labs points out, the Cisco case serves as a reminder 'that tech is not a neutral place when it comes to caste' (Sircar, 2020).

At stake in the Cisco case is the larger question of how engineering circles elide caste status and the notion of 'merit' in ways that protect *savarna* (or, 'upper' caste) privilege and marginalize Dalits. This is also the question that animates the anthropologist Ajantha Subramanian's new book, *The Caste of Merit: Engineering Education in India*. Subramanian contends that the inherited status of caste and the ostensibly earned notion of merit are, in fact, deeply entwined. The Indian Institutes of Technology (or, IITs)—whose alumni include both the defendants as well as the complainant in the Cisco case—play a role in 'transforming caste privilege into merit.' The precise mechanics through which the system of meritocracy engineers caste privilege in technical education forms the subject of this book.

Subramanian argues that meritocracy is far from being a universal form of achievement that erases ascribed identities. Instead, merit takes the rearticulation of caste as its explicit basis by intertwining ascription and achievement. Such rearticulation is 'not simply the assertion of already constituted caste identities' but, 'claims to merit generate newly consolidated forms of upper casteness that become the basis for capital accumulation'. In other words, merit is caste made new.

Subramanian takes as her field of study one of the oldest and most prestigious institutes of technical education in India: the Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IITM). Research in the colonial archives along with oral history interviews with early IITM alumni supplement ethnographic fieldwork in her efforts. The resulting interdisciplinary work tells the history of IITM and the larger debates around technical education in the colonial and postcolonial periods, focusing specifically on the ways in which caste and the ideology of merit overlap and sustain each other in technical education. *The Caste of Merit* is a major contribution to our understanding of caste in contemporary India and presents an exemplary case of 'studying up'[2] to unpack the workings of this protean and enduring system of discrimination and privilege. In Subramanian's telling, caste is neither a remnant of old-fashioned thinking nor a passive failure of the liberal promise; rather, it is an active process of discrimination and a privileged closing of ranks that hides behind the attractive and misleading label of 'meritocracy.'

The theoretical backdrop against which Subramanian stages her account is an invigorating mix of Dalit Studies, especially its trenchant criticisms of caste in modern and unmarked space such as the university, and critical race theory, particularly the study of whiteness as privilege and property. Numerous scholars, journalists, and activists have written about the forms of caste discrimination on university campuses in post-Mandal India.[3] Most existing work, however, leaves untouched the logic of meritocracy, with the exception of Satish Deshpande, whose influential formulation of 'castelessness' makes him an important theoretical interlocutor for this book's arguments. In contrast to Deshpande's formulation of upper caste identity in university spaces as 'the unmarked universal citizen,' which allows them to claim a 'casteless' position (Deshpande, 2013), Subramanian argues that meritocracy is first and foremost

a caste-marked form of identity whose social practice undermines its universalistic promise.

Subramanian's nuanced understanding of merit as privilege and property develops in dialogue with theorizations of whiteness within critical race theory. Among these scholars, George Lipsitz's study of the 'possessive investment' of white identity politics, and Cheryl Harris's analysis of the ways in which white privilege took subtler forms following the segregation-ending ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, prove most helpful to Subramanian in theorizing 'upper casteness' as privilege and property.

The first chapter traces the colonial development of technical education in India through a strategic deployment of caste imaginaries, distinguishing between professional engineering education and industrial technical training. Subramanian shows that the social distinction between the mathematical knowledge of an engineer and the manual skill of a technician—or, put another way, the unbreachable walls separating the world of the IITs from the world of the ITIs[4]—are a product of caste thinking, policy, and practice.

In chapter two, Subramanian attributes the IITs' particular brand of institutional exceptionalism to the Sarkar Committee Report of 1945, which recommended the formation of higher technical institutions that were 'to be set apart, not only from industrial schools for artisans and workers but also from the regional engineering colleges.' The IITs' autonomy from regional state governments, local university administrative structures, and their centralized national-level examination allowed them to realize 'a vision of further institutional stratification' with higher technical institutions at the top. Caste permeated these stratified institutions as social reality and metaphor: while autonomy insulated the IITs from democratic politics and ensured the reproduction of caste, the metaphor of caste continued to signal merit. The persistence of caste as metaphor was, in fact, foundational to the nascent state's technological ambitions: if Nehru consecrated massive technological projects as 'the temples of modern India,' he also valorized the engineer as nation-builder infused with 'the Brahminic spirit of service.'

The ways in which various value systems collided to define IITM's ethos forms the subject of chapter three. The first of these was, of course, caste. The struggle against Brahminism in Tamil Nadu by the Justice Party and later the Dravidian movement enabled the emergence of a strident critique of technical institutions as *agraharams*[5] of privilege. Another collision formative to IITM was brought about by the collaboration between West German engineers, who valued practicality and hands-on experience, and their Brahmin counterparts, who hierarchalized mind over body through a casteist distinction between mathematical conceptual knowledge and manual skilled labour.

The fourth chapter anchors the book's narrative in the life histories of early IITians. Subramanian introduces key themes here that get fuller treatment in the following chapters; among them, the 'unmarked' nature of upper caste presence in (and entitlement to) IIT, and the attraction that IITs held especially for Tamil Brahmins (so well-known that the Tamil press[6] dubbed the institute as 'Iyer Iyengar Technology'). Reflecting upon a 1960s alumnus bemoaning the newly-emergent post-

Mandal 'caste consciousness' that had even 'infected' IITM, Subramanian points out that 'the comfortable inhabitation of an unmarked upper-caste category in the early post-independence years, especially within elite spaces like the IITs […was] made possible by the near absence of anyone who was explicitly marked as lower caste.'

Such reticence in acknowledging caste did not extend to Tamil Brahmins who were attracted to the IIT examination because it allowed them to evade the regional quotas for lower castes. Subramanian notes the Tamil Brahmin self-image as 'ordinary, middle-class people [who] prioritized education,' but analytically resists this savarna perspective to emphasize the 'structural and affective entanglements' of caste and class.

The two chapters that follow describe the pressures put on the ideology of merit as a proxy for 'the dialectic between ascription and achievement.' Chapter five describes the role of the IIT-JEE examination in positing the IITs as meritocracy in action, and the changing demographics enabled by the 'coaching factories,' which bring in non-Brahmins caste elites who are seen to be the 'wrong kind of upper castes.' Chapter six describes the ways in which reservations enable Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) to access these exclusive spaces of caste privilege, and the resentful savarna view of reservations as unmeritorious because it 'dilutes the gene pool.' These two chapters show the challenges to the ideology of merit: first, from the market through the JEE coaching industry, and second, through the legal and political route through reservations. Together, they make the book's key argument that 'meritocracy is rarely just a universalistic politics of achievement [… rather it is] also always about particularistic ascription.' In other words, merit is never neutral, particularly in those spaces where it purports to be so, and its unmarked presence nearly always obscures savarna hegemony.

The modern competitive examination plays a prominent role in perpetuating the myth of meritocracy by supposedly creating a level playing field that values achievement and not ascription, the exam comes to 'symbolize meritocracy.' The IIT-JEE, in particular, is seen as 'a national arbiter of merit.' Subramanian argues that examinations act as 'filtering mechanisms [that] favour those who come from histories of education and have a facility with this technical instrument.' They 'reinforce rather than unsettle commonsense understandings of relative merit.' The examination mobilizes the dialectic between ascription and achievement in three specific ways: first, they provide a gatekeeping function by regulating access in ways that eliminate most aspirants from candidature[7]; second, they offer cultural certification that act as 'proxies for ascription'[8] which eventually contribute to the naturalization of talent; and third, the examination generates gradations of rank that are important not only during their time at IIT but throughout their careers.

The IIT-JEE rank—a serialized technocratic analogue of the graded inequality of caste—is 'common currency at the IITs.' Since 'everyone knows one another's rank, and this knowledge is part of everyday discourse,' it indicates not a one-time performance in an examination but future success or failure. The overlap between IIT-JEE rank and the ascription-achievement dialectic becomes apparent in the commonsense understanding of knowledge and intelligence as 'innate' or 'true merit.'

The pressures to conform to the ascriptive logic of possessing innate true merit led students to 'feign a lack of effort.' 'You have to act,' admits one alumnus, 'like it all somehow just comes to you.'

The growth of the coaching industry as a mass phenomenon generated anxieties among the upper castes that led to new distinctions such as 'boutique classes' versus 'coaching factories' and the related binary of 'the gifted' versus 'the coached.' The boutique classes emphasize conceptual knowledge and cater to the (exceptional, cerebral) gifted student while the coaching factories merely produce the (generic, mechanistic) coached student. Once again, technical education in India hinges upon the caste-coded value binary of knowledge versus labour. These distinctions are 'exercises in social boundary making,' which echo the colonial distinction between the cerebral mathematical conceptual knowledge of engineers and the embodied mechanistic labour of technicians.

Reservations mounted 'a more fundamental challenge than the coaching industry to the IITs' claim to meritocracy.' However, while reservations 'acknowledged caste discrimination as the basis of non-achievement,' they did not address 'caste inheritances as the basis of achievement.' Reservations thus offer 'only a partial critique of meritocracy.'

The Tamil Brahmins are a case in point: they presented themselves, on the one hand as 'citizens of a liberal democracy' who challenge reservations on the grounds that it violated constitutional principles of formal equality and non-discrimination, while on the other, they argued that 'as Brahmins, they were quintessentially meritocratic.' The interplay between 'their civic unmarking as liberal democratic citizens and their cultural marking as caste subjects' has given their claims to merit both 'a universalistic and an identitarian character.'

The tension between formal equality and substantive inequality—or, between constitutional mandate and lived reality—is not a recent phenomenon. Subramanian discusses three landmark Supreme Court judgements—the 1951 Champakam Dorairajan case, the 1992 Indira Sawhney case, and the 2008 Ashoka Kumar Thakur case—to point out that the language and logic of the judiciary had shifted from being 'upholders of a liberal legalist vision' to that of 'technocrats working to engineer the perfect balance of outcomes.' This propensity for technocratic language paralleled that of the upper castes, who 'similarly shifted from using only the language of formal equality to increasingly relying on the terms of reservation policy.' The logic of opposing reservations has given the upper castes 'a new language of hierarchical classification,' allowing them to position themselves as 'members of the meritorious 'general category' [which has become] the basis not only for caste distinction but increasingly for caste consolidation.'[9]

Subramanian's emphasis on meritocracy as a technology for caste consolidation leads her to advance Deshpande's influential argument about the normative 'castelessness' of upper castes. Subramanian asserts that 'the marking of caste as culture, as natural aptitude [or, innateness], as the very basis for merit' meant that 'upper castes did not think of themselves as casteless.' Rather, 'there was a tension between marking and unmarking at the heart of claims to merit.' Tamil Brahmin

claims to merit—characterized by civic unmarking and cultural marking—show that meritocracy is never only 'a universalistic politics of achievement' but remains caste-marked by being always also 'about particularistic ascription.' The importance of this argument, coming at a time when the judiciary rules to undermine reservations, wholesale privatization moves public sector jobs beyond the ambit of reservations, and the legislature misrepresents the spirit of reservations by extending it to savarnas, cannot be overstated.

The rethinking of merit as product, technology, and ideology of caste privilege is this book's central offering to the study of caste. In particular, the theoretical shift from Deshpande's argument about the normative unmarked castelessness of upper castes to Subramanian's understanding of meritocracy as a technocratic logic of caste-marked discrimination has tremendous political significance for India's rapidly transforming higher education sector. Contrary to Deshpande's view of casteless upper caste identity as the absence of disadvantage, Subramanian extends our understanding of caste-marked meritocracy as first, a property that solidifies a possessive investment in caste capital; second, a technocratic means of consolidating caste distinction; and third, a new ideology that obscures the social transformation of caste. Merit, in Subramanian's view, is not a neutral measure of accumulated talent possessed by casteless moderns. Rather, merit is a form of caste privilege that consolidates and veils the ways in which caste controls access to opportunity, defines talent, and above all, measures success.

Merit, as a technocratic means of caste consolidation, depends on accurate identification of an individual's caste. Subramanian provides a gloss of these 'diagnostic practices' which includes (casteist and unreliable) assumptions on the part of alumni that reserved candidates struggle with academic performance, lack English language fluency, and that their roll numbers are grouped. That each of these diagnostic practices is unreliable suggests the complex ways in which caste is embodied, perceived, and understood in contemporary India.

The only reliable diagnostic practice is, ironically, the one with the greatest claim to indicate neutral merit: the IIT-JEE rank. The JEE rank functioned as 'the marker of social and intellectual standing on campus,' which followed students well beyond graduation into their jobs. A JEE rank below a certain cutoff automatically outed students as reserved candidates and therefore as unmeritorious. The (unethical) practice of prospective employers collecting JEE ranks on job application forms means that this diagnostic practice effectively transfers into their employment records and becomes a mode of caste discrimination through technocratic means. Subramanian cites a Facebook post by an anonymous Dalit alumnus, which concludes: 'What's the difference between your grandfathers who might have called my grandfather an untouchable? You have changed the name to reserved candidate.' Merit, the anonymous author leaves us in no doubt, is caste by another name.

The final chapter traces the global expansion of 'Brand IIT,' and the shift in the gatekeeping logic of meritocracy from 'gene pool dilution' of the homeland to 'brand dilution' of the diaspora. 'The absence of caste as a public identity in the diaspora, cautions Subramanian, 'does not preclude its structural and affective workings.' Indeed, the significance of the Cisco case is not that it represents the first instance of

diasporic caste discrimination but that it is the first major public recognition of the pervasive presence of caste as an often veiled, occasionally disavowed, but always practised identity.

Given the historical significance of mobility to caste, Subramanian characterizes 'elite and private domestic and transnational arenas as spaces of upper-caste flight and retrenchment away from the pressures of lower-caste politics.' The historical processes that have led to the diasporic Brand IIT—a combination of Indian state developmentalism, the rise of lower-caste politics, and US immigration policy—have equated being upper caste, being Indian, and having 'merit.' Moreover, they have shifted the meaning of merit from intellectualism to entrepreneurship. The IITians of Silicon Valley, in particular, have reinforced notions of Indian technical merit—with its roots in casteist policy and practice—while shrouding from view the presence of caste.

The arrival of the Silicon Valley IITian enmeshed the diasporic engineer and the entrepreneur through a four-stage process that began with, first, the IITians flagging their institutional pedigree more explicitly; second, creating a pan-IIT institutional kinship; third, giving tangible form to this kinship sentiment through organizations such as the Pan-IIT Alumni Association; and finally, ensuring media coverage of Brand IIT. Subramanian presents a fluent—and chilling—retelling of the diasporic IITian worldview, which she memorably describes as 'diasporic liberation theology [that] places the nation's deliverance squarely in the hands of the U.S.-based IITian.' In this self-congratulatory worldview, the IITs were 'a beacon of light' dispelling the darkness of Indian state socialism, whose graduates had to migrate to avoid 'the mediocrity produced by socialist conditions.' By bringing 'the spirit of entrepreneurship' back to the homeland, the diasporic IITian would cultivate a new generation of capitalists who could 'once and for all remove the nation's shackles of socialism.' What the entrepreneurs feared most of all was 'brand dilution' of IITs, and by extension, of the Indian entrepreneur, and, therefore, of all of India!

One of the most significant contributions of this book is its formulation of 'upper casteness.' This concept is both more accurate in describing the emergent forms of caste capital accumulation and more nimble-footed in keeping pace with the rapid transformations of caste in the twenty-first century than existing concepts describing upper caste consolidation such as M N Srinivas's dominant caste, Rajni Kothari's entrenched castes, K. Balagopal's provincial propertied classes, or Kancha Iliaih's neo-Kshatriyas. Subramanian's capacious formulation of upper casteness joins cause with similar articulations within Dalit Studies that have insisted on taking into account the ideological, ritual, and performative forms of domination as well as the material, technological, and institutional forms of caste consolidation.

If thinkers of Dalit Studies have understood caste to be 'institutionalized in the modern state as a form of power and as a source of privilege,' they have also 'contested the tendency to treat caste only as an instrument of oppression (untouchability, violence and dehumanization) and recreated it into a new identity of self-assertion and pride' (Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2011). These emergent forms of solidarity and community on higher education campuses such as IITM appear in the concluding

chapter. There, Subramanian notes the impact of the May 2014 election of Narendra Modi on the campuses of IIT Madras, University of Hyderabad, and Jawaharlal Nehru University. Particularly significant developments are the formation of the Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle at IITM and its growth at other institutes across the country in response to temporary 'de-recognition' by IITM administration, and the rapid growth of the Ambedkar Student Association across the country following the tragic suicide of Rohith Vemula, which was widely interpreted as institutional murder. Both groups have followed a similar trajectory of emergence, institutional opposition, and defiant growth. In the coming years, this book will be a critical resource to understand the growth of these anti-caste student groups and the changing dynamics between caste and merit brought about by the newly-instituted Economically Weaker Section quota.[10] Perhaps with an eye on this emergent scenario, Subramanian cautions that while 'meritocracy as a principle continues to animate calls for equalization,' we must call into question the assumption that meritocracy can ever be 'a leveler of opportunity' for it has historically serviced the reproduction of inequality.

This book challenges theorizations of caste that focus on its systematization, givenness, or textuality, and instead turns our gaze towards political processes of exclusion through which caste privilege is gathered, reproduced, and protected. Caste, this book shows, is neither survival from the pre-modern past—a nauseating claim repeated most often by those who continue to benefit from it—nor is it only a ritual or religious phenomenon. In Subramanian's telling, it becomes clear that caste informs and inflects even that hallowed core belief of neoliberal capitalism: merit. Moreover, the portrait of caste that emerges here is neither one that can be entirely systematized by, say, *varnashrama* or the colonial ethnographic state, nor is it so localized as to defy any attempt at capacious theorization. Rather, the consolidation of upper casteness made possible through the notion of meritocracy—and built on the separation of embodied practical industrial skilled labour and conceptual mathematical theoretical knowledge—constitute a new poetics of caste practice that bridge the old and the new, the colonial and the postcolonial, the local and the global.

To return to the Cisco case: it is the entrenched casteist logic of this poetics of practice that allowed the Brahmin defendants to harass the Dalit engineer. They are—as one character gushes in Sandipan Deb's hagiography, *The IITians*, which Subramanian re-reads critically—the 'new Brahmins, except that they wouldn't be reading the scriptures, they would be technocrats.' If anything, Subramanian demonstrates the continuities between the old and 'new Brahmins,' and, in the process, provides a clear portrait of caste in contemporary India and its grasping transnational tentacles.

The Caste of Merit is Subramanian's second book, coming after *Shorelines: Space and Rights in South India*. If *Shorelines* studied the rights claims and caste modernity of the fisher community, *The Caste of Merit* shows the exclusionary mechanisms of caste privilege within the framework of modernity. Together, these two works represent the ways in which the protean dangers of caste interact with the enduring possibilities of modernity.

The Caste of Merit will appeal most particularly to anthropologists of caste, historians of modern India, and scholars of Dalit Studies, and more generally, to

anyone working in or on South Asia. Moreover, the book is relevant to anyone living with South Asians, for, as the Cisco case shows, caste is a malaise that we South Asians have taken with us wherever we have gone. In a time when struggles across the world are forging transnational solidarities, this book situates the reproduction of upper casteness through meritocracy within a global context by making generative connections with critical race theory.

The Caste of Merit is, ultimately, the case against merit. In revealing the precise mechanics through which the ideology of merit becomes a technocratic tool of caste, Subramanian makes a significant contribution not only to the study of caste but, more importantly, to the struggle against caste.

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Endnotes

1 As this article was going to press in late October 2020, news emerged that the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) voluntarily dropped the federal lawsuit against Cisco for caste discrimination. The DFEH has however suggested that it will re-file the complaint in a state court. For more, see *The Wire* (2020). Subsequent reports have quoted DFEH spokesperson that the case has been filed in the county court at Santa Clara, California. For more, see *Money Control* (2020, October 22) and *Indica News* (2020, October 23).

2 'Studying up' refers to Laura Nader's famous exhortation to analyze 'the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty' (289). This task of studying up involves 'principally studying the most powerful strata of urban society' (289), which would involve studying down as well, leading to a comparative framework which anthropology is uniquely equipped to deal with for it has 'specialized in understanding whole cultures in a cross-cultural context' (293, original emphasis). See Nader (1972). Up the Anthropologist, *Reinventing Anthropology*.

3 To name only a few scholarly accounts: Sukhdeo Thorat and Katherine S. Newman, *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India* (2012); numerous articles including the introduction in the dossiers edited by K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu: *No Alphabet in Sight* (2011), and *Steels Nibs are Sprouting* (2013); Uma Chakravarti, Gendering caste (2003); K. Balagopal, Ear to the Ground (2011); Samson Ovichegan, *Faces of Discrimination in Higher Education in India: Quota Policy, Social Justice and the Dalits* (2015); Satish Deshpande, Caste and Castelessness: Towards a Biography of the 'General Category', (2013); Exclusive Inequalities: Merit, Caste and Discrimination in Indian Higher Education Today, (2006); and Pass, Fail, Distinction: The Examination as a Social Institution, (2010); as well as more recently, Gaurav Pathania, *The University as a Site of Resistance: Identity and Student Politics* (2018). Excellent journalistic accounts in the wake of Rohith Vemula's institutional murder by Sudipto Mondal, Praveen Donthi, and Nikhila Henry, including her book *The Ferment: Youth Unrest in India*, have made significant contribution towards our understanding of caste in contemporary India. Important reports by activist-scholar collectives include, most notably, the Thorat Committee Report of discrimination at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi (2007), and Anweshi Report of student suicide at the University of Hyderabad (2013).

4 ITIs are Industrial Training Institutes which are, as their name suggests, dedicated to technical training that produce skilled labour for engineering industries. The alliterative similarity to IITs notwithstanding, the ITIs produce manual labour—'technicians'—while IITs produce knowledgeable managers—'engineers'. This difference between IITs and ITIs, Subramanian shows, is one of caste reproduced through the ideology of meritocracy.

5 Exclusive Brahmin settlements in South India are called agraharams. The usage of this term by the Justice Party and the Dravidian movement criticises technical institutes as exclusive Brahmin spaces by comparing them to agraharams.

6 This reference to the Tamil press is one of only two such instances in the book: the other being a quote by an interviewee who refers to two leading Tamil magazines, *Kalki* and *Ananda Vikatan* (234). Given the robust print culture in Tamil Nadu and the history of non-Brahmin critical thought, this chapter in particular and perhaps the book as a whole may have benefitted from greater engagement with Tamil language mainstream media and critical thought.

7 Subramanian relies on the important study by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean- Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (1977), which argues that 'the inequalities between the classes are incomparably greater when measured by the probabilities of candidature […] than when measured by the probabilities of passing' (p.155). The concern articulated by Bourdieu and Passeron, which Subramanian echoes, is not that non-elite candidates will not make the jump, rather they are not permitted entry into the arena.

8 The term is Satish Deshpande's. See 'Pass, Fail, Distinction.'

9 The months following the book's publication have shown this dynamic between the judicial opinions on reservations policy and upper caste consolidation through the logic of merit even more apparent: the Supreme Court has ruled on two separate occasions in the first half of 2020 that reservations were not a fundamental right in appointments and promotions. Once again, targeted technocratic chiselling allows savarna discourse to weaken the logic of representation and equity that lies at the base of reservations. Feb 7, 2020, and June 11, 2020. See Jeenger, 'The Supreme Court Must Note That Reservation Is a Fundamental Right,' *The Wire*.

10 The EWS quota, which came into force in 2019, sets aside 10 percent of higher education seats and public sector jobs for communities hitherto not eligible for reservations and meeting various other criteria such as having an income below eight hundred thousand per annum and owning less than five acres of agricultural land. In effect, the EWS is reservations for savarna communities. See '10% reservation for economically weak in general category comes into force,' *The Times of India*, and Faizan Mustafa, 'An Expert Explains: New quota and basic structure,' The Indian Express. Appeals against the EWS quota are currently under consideration by a constitutional bench at the time of writing in August 2020. See Apurva Vishwanath, 'EWS quota law: what a five-judge Constitution Bench will look into,' *The Indian Express*.

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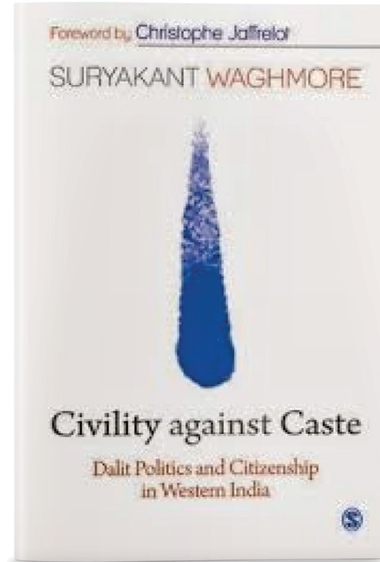
Title: *Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India*



Author: Suryakant Waghmore

Publishers: Sage Publications,
New Delhi: India (2013), xxxvii, 235 pp

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The concept of civil society flourished after the undoing of the global communist bloc in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The disintegration of the Soviet Union captured the imagination of intellectuals, policy makers, social movements, and non-governmental organizations keen to imagine a space beyond a putatively authoritarian communist state. Democracy, private enterprise, and globalization now became the abiding mantras of social and political life. The history of 'civil society' though is much older: its antecedents lay in pre-modern Europe. The early modern liberal theorist, John Locke, dwelled on it, the Scottish and French enlightenments reflected on it, and German philosophers like Hegel and Marx in the nineteenth century, and Marxists in the twentieth century weighed on it to theorize a space in which individuals and groups conducted their activities (Kaviraj & Khilnani, 2002).The European provenance of the concept did not impede its relevance to India. It was deployed during the British colonial period of the nineteen and twentieth centuries as well as in postcolonial India where it signified the numerous associations that were created to engender newer forms of sociability and also to access or put pressure on the State at particular historical moments. An influential postcolonial theorist, Partha Chatterjee, described civil society as the domain of the Westernized elite who may have willingly or

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unwittingly imbibed the concept's 'secularized Christian' ethos. He introduced the notion of political society, a conceptual category distinct from the attenuated civil society, to capture the drama of subaltern or non-elite politics that thrived beyond the sterilized associations of India's elites.

Suryakant Waghmore, in *Civility against Caste*, upends this distinction. Waghmore terms the dilution of civil society - 'absolutist' (p.7) – an essentialist reading of the concept that does not pay heed to the process through which it was formed in colonial India. The author argues that caste played a seminal role in the making of civil society and the anti-caste and anti-Brahmin movements thrived in this domain too. To cordon off civil society from political society and offset its relevance would be akin to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. As he says, caste engenders inequality 'but is also a resource to mobilize against inequality' (p.21). That mobilization happens in civil society. Waghmore illustrates its germaneness to the lives and politics of one of the most economically marginalized and socially stigmatized groups, Dalits, in a non-metropolitan setting: villages in the Beed district of Maharashtra. According to Waghmore, civil society is the domain in which Dalits of Beed form solidarities with each other and other marginalized groups and contest the dominance of the upper castes. In fact, civil society, with its moral expectations of civility, holds the dominant castes and the state responsible for instances of incivility, which includes routine violence against Dalitsand their humiliation. By deploying the concept of civil society, Waghmore underlines the aspirations for respect and tolerance among Dalits of Beed and their desire for equal rights of citizenship enshrined within India's constitution. Thus, Waghmore and Chatterjee's works leave us with two distinct understandings of the term civil society. For Chatterjee, civil society is not hegemonic precisely because the subalterns are/were outside this domain. For Waghmore, civil society as it existed in Beed, was hegemonic and dominated by the Maratha castes. Dalits in the region engaged with civil society, reactivated its expectations of civility, and sought to transform it.

Waghmore highlights the role of a political party – Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)- and a non-profit organization, *Manavi Hakk Abhiyaan (MHA*) or (human rights campaign) in mobilizing Beed's Dalits (particularly those belonging, but not restricted, to the *Mang* caste) and engaging with and countering elite dominance. The book is based on field work and interviews conducted in the region during 2008-09. The chapters of the book lay out the process of the engagement. In the introduction and chapter one Waghmore lays the conceptual framework and thesis: civil society as it existed (and still exists) in India was/is inflected by caste and its attendant inequities. However, Dalit politics views this space as critical to its 'political freedom and self-realisation which can reform, politicise, and civilise caste relations. 'They, therefore, work within it. Chapter two elucidates the context in which Dalit politics operates in Beed. The decline of the earlier vehicles of Dalit politics in the region – the Republican Party of India and the radical Dalit Panther movement, created the space for the rise of the BSP and the NGO which works at the grassroots and is networked with transnational human rights organizations. Thus, MHA vernacularizes the discourse of human rights

(p.115). Waghmore imagines the relationship between the local and global NGOs to be 'dialectical' (p.29). Chapter three reveals the economic transformations in the region particularly among Dalits. They work as labourers in sugarcane fields and industries which provided them with income. Dalits, leveraged their changing economic status to renegotiate their social and political status in the rural public sphere (p.63). This incited more violence against them which they countered by demanding justice and invoking laws designed to protect them. Dalit mobilization is not just about the recognition of their dignity, but they also made substantive claims to land redistribution. With the help of MHA they claimed rights to the cultivation of *gairaan* (common village lands designated for grazing cattle). Chapter four sheds light on the politics of the demands Dalits make on the state; the local and transnational NGOs play an important role here. Chapter five focuses on the cultural repertoires devised by BSP to form a viable electoral front in Beed. The BSP envisioned itself as a multi-ethnic party of the lower castes and was open to forming alliances with other religious and caste groups. It emphasized its commitment to the Indian constitution and invoked the cultural traditions of protests by saints of the *bahujan* (majority of the lower castes) castes to cement this alliance (p.119). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was projected as an important icon of the political community of Bahujans. Chapter six charts the political effects of the Bahujan imaginary. One important outcome was the dilution of rivalries among Dalit castes particularly the *Mangs* and *Mahars*. The latter had hitherto dominated Dalit politics. Mangs, through the MHA and the BSP and leaders like Eknath Awad, engaged with intellectual and cultural legacies of older Dalit politics, particularly the ideas of Jotirao Phule, and Ambedkar, and the latter's conversion to Buddhism. This facilitated solidarity among Mangs and Mahars. These alliances were formed and dissipated in the heat of electoral politics. This theatre of politics during the 2009 elections is the focus of chapter seven. The BSP contested the elections but MHA did not support it and instead aligned with a political formation of the dominant Maratha caste, the Nationalist Congress Party. This chapter provides a fascinating account of political calculations and decisions made by individuals and parties. Chapter eight, the final chapter of the book, reiterates the case for Dalit aspiration for civility and civil society.

Waghmore's book makes many riveting theoretical and empirical interventions. For instance, theoretically, Waghmore's case for the resonance of civility and civil society in Dalit politics helps us reimagine the transformative power of these concepts. When the categories are untethered from their European origins and the attendant charge of Euro-centrism, we can pay attention to their translation and vernacularization in unfamiliar contexts and appreciate their relevance for Dalit lives. Similarly, Waghmore's attention to rural settings in Beed and Marathwada and the politics there provides a welcome addition to literature on this woefully understudied region. However, Waghmore's consideration of caste as the bane and the balm of Dalit lives make one wonder about his stance on Ambedkar's forceful demand for the annihilation of caste. Ambedkar is the icon of the Dalit movements in Beed and invoked frequently in actions for substantial transformations there, but his radical desire for an end to caste is edited out of the picture. Similarly, Waghmore's depiction

of Dalit movements as vehicles for social and economic change, but not for revolution, perhaps attenuates the horizon of Dalit politics.

However, these are minor quibbles about an otherwise excellent book. Political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and scholars of agrarian studies and development studies will benefit tremendously from engaging with it. The compelling account of the intersection of policy making and politics will also be of great interest to policy makers, graduate students, and readers interested in the dynamics of caste in South Asia.

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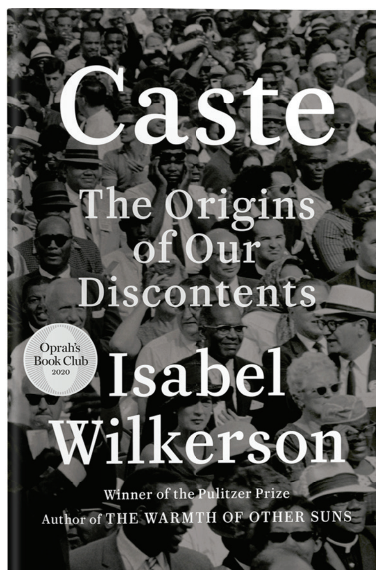
Title: *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*



Author: Isabel Wilkerson

Publishers: New York:
Random House. 2020. 388 pp.

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Isabel Wilkerson, in her latest book *Caste: The origins of our discontents*, is not the first to draw comparisons between the norms and rules that regulated and perpetuated exclusion of Dalits in Hinduism and of enslaved African Americans and their descendants. Nor is *Caste* the first to examine the philosophy, systems, and regulations that legitimized the dehumanization and murder of Jews and others in the shorter lived Third Reich.

The audience for this book is clearly the citizenry of the United States—particularly white Americans, but it has lessons for all humans who are appalled by the inhumanities we as humans can wreak on our peers. Why does this happen, why does it persist, and what can we, should we, be doing? Wilkerson wants white Americans to confront, not to be silent on, these issues. She wants us to understand, at a deep level, how we benefit from our upper caste status in large ways yes, but also in the subtle ways of which we are not aware. The confrontation she urges holds true for upper caste Hindus, and for any human living amidst antisemitism or other embedded exclusion.

The timing of the publication of *Caste* brings a new urgency to the examination of these cruelties. *Caste's* release coincides with three larger trends. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's India has fostered a surge of Hindu nationalism and accompanying violence. Donald Trump's presidency has reignited white supremacist activism and legitimized antisemitism, as we have seen in Charlottesville, Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, and across the U.S. Neo-Nazis are re-emerging in Germany, despite the efforts, which Wilkerson describes, to

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address the horrors of the holocaust. This moment calls for a renewed examination of why the cruelties exacted by historical exclusion of and violence against Dalits, African Americans, and Jews continues, even as national laws have outlawed caste and exclusion and as the world has committed to international standards of human rights.

To engage with this book requires the reader to grapple with and accept the concept of *caste* as the analytical framework and to understand the distinctive difference between caste and race. Wilkerson suggests that while concepts of racism and caste may overlap, caste is a more useful way of understanding the persistent exclusion and maltreatment of African Americans (and of Dalits and Jews). Caste helps to explain what is different and why exclusion persists even after discrimination is outlawed and no longer tolerated by the state.

> The modern-day version of easily deniable racism may be able to cloak the invisible structure that created and maintains hierarchy and inequality. But caste does not allow us to ignore structure. Caste *is* structure. Caste is ranking. Caste is the boundaries that reinforce the fixed assignments based upon what people look like. Caste is a living breathing entity…To achieve a truly egalitarian world requires looking deeper than what we think we see.(69-70)

Caste, she asserts, is embedded--like DNA. We can address, through law and its enforcement, discrimination in hiring, lending, and housing, voting suppression, lynching, or segregation. As societies we cannot legislate away caste. It is here in our culture, our norms and our unacknowledged ways of behaving.

The institution of slavery is not unique to the United States. It existed among the ancients, in Mesopotamia, in ancient Greece and Rome, in Africa, and it continues to exist today in what the International Organization on Migration considers modern forms of slavery. So, what is it, if anything, that makes enslavement, Jim Crow practices, and continuing exclusion of African Americans different? Isn't the problem in the U.S. a problem of racism, full stop? Wilkerson says 'no'. It is about power. Racism may be defined

> …as the combination of racial bias and systemic power, seeing racism, like sexism,as primarily the action of people or systems with personal or group power over another person or group with less power, as men have power over women, whites over people of color, and the dominant over the subordinate. (68)

Wilkerson reminds us that racism has come to mean for many 'overt and declared hatred of a person or group because of the race ascribed to them'. Few today will admit to being racist. A prominent example of this is President Donald Trump who has periodically and publicly claimed: 'I am the least racist person there is.''I don't have a racist bone in my body.' At the same time, he has encouraged white nationalists and white supremacists in remarks and actions throughout his career. He is attempting to punish the state of California for introducing curriculum changes that explore the history of enslavement; he has condemned anti-bias training as racist and he has taken actions to resurrect barriers tovoting by African Americans. Discussing racism has become difficult in American society. This past year a New York Times article noted differences between textbooks published for school systems in the state of California as opposed to those in Texas. The textbooks offer very different histories of enslavement or about the treatment of indigenous peoples. Children in California and Texas are presented with different sets of 'facts.' Americans cannot have a national dialogue on racism. In a debate prior to the 2020 November election, Republican candidate vice

president Mike Pence dismissed the concepts of implicit bias and of systemic racism in police forces. The Trump Department of Justice instituted a law suit against Yale University, charging that admission procedures aimed at diversity penalize Asian and white students. As I wrote this review, I was interrupted by a telephone call from a police group asking me to donate money to support the police and help guarantee police safety. The caller and his supervisor were not willing to talk about the unjustified deaths of multiple African Americans at the hands of police, increasing in number over the past four years. Nor were they willing to engage in a 'political discussion' about the fear that African-Americans have of the police.

Wilkerson uses a large segment of her book to describe what she calls the Eight Pillars of Caste.

This is where the power of caste as an analytical concept emerges. Wilkerson is an able story teller and the stories she tells here make concrete the ways in which caste entrenches attitudes and behaviors in structures and processes so that maintaining the dominance of whites (or the upper castes) is nearly invisible and seamless. She ably distinguishes among the different levels of caste in the U.S.—just as there are different levels of castes in India that exclude only the Dalits. Some whites may be at the top of the dominant caste in the U.S. because of money, education or heritage, but the dominant caste also includes less educated and less wealthy whites and Asians, and it creates space for Latinx. She describes the perverse effects of being part of the dominant caste even as you do not enjoy the benefits of those at the very top. This helps to explain why some at the bottom of the dominant caste oppose progressive legislation such as funding education, reforming regressive tax systems, or providing health insurance for all. Preserving their caste position over the long run trumps getting near-term economic benefits.

Her stories are powerful because they move reality from the theoretical to the personal, human level. Wilkerson clearly believes that these stories are important for Americans; stories comparing South Asian and American caste systems can help Americans dig deep to understand the complexity of America's sad history of white power and privilege.

The creation and maintenance of caste systems is embedded in religion and justified by religion (Pillar One). In the Hindu origin stories, Brahma, the 'grandfather of all worlds' ordained the four Hindu castes or *Varnas*, starting with Brahmins as the highest caste. Unmentioned in the description of the *Varnas* were the lowest, or untouchables, who were living out the *karma* of their past. They were outside the caste system. The American origin story harks back to Noah and his son the accursed Ham, whose son Canaan was consigned to be the lowest of slaves (and assumed subsequently to be black). Americans enslaved were sons of Ham. Wilkerson quotes Thomas R. R. Cobb, a confederate defender of slavery, who argued that God created Africans as physically and mentally suited to 'the degraded position they were destined to occupy.' Thus, God takes responsibility for this subordination and abuse of the enslaved; humans of the dominant caste don't need to concern themselves.

Another Pillar, the seventh, is a painful to read set of stories of how terror and cruelty have been used and are used to enforce caste strictures and to exert control. Dalits in India and Jews in the Third Reich have been and were at the mercy of the dominant caste, subjected to terror to keep them in their subordinate position. The same has been true in the U.S. In the antebellum South, excessive whipping might be used as punishment for an enslaved person whose performance was seen as lagging,

or who was seen as insufficiently insubordinate. Ultimately cruelty was a device to terrorize the lowest caste—African Americans. Remember that for much of the antebellum period, the Black population (enslaved persons) in the South exceeded that of whites, often by a large margin. Fearing for their security, whites relied on cruelty and terror as the tools to keep enslaved populations in place. Terrorism was carried out via lynching during the later Jim Crow period. Lynching was much more than a simple hanging but included various forms of torture, and was often carried out in front of large crowds. Sometimes schools were closed so that children could attend. One needs to understand the impact of terror on the lowest or out-caste people, but also the effect these lynching spectacles had on members of the dominant caste: desensitization to violence and dehumanization of the lower caste.

Reading *Caste* as a white American is painful, but then I think about how painful it must be for African Americans, descendants of enslaved people who continue to experience the residual consequences of Jim Crow and casteism. Wilkerson wants white Americans to confront the casteism/racism that she says is in their DNA. It will be painful she knows. Identifying, understanding, and owning America's original sin is the first step toward resolving the legacies of 400 years of enslavement, terrorization, and exclusion. Confronting this history comes at a time when the United States approaches a 'demographic inversion.' In 2042 people of color are expected to outnumber people of the dominant white caste in the U.S.

Wilkerson is an optimist: 'To imagine an end to caste in America, we need only look at the history of Germany. It is living proof that if a caste system—the twelve-year reign of the Nazis—can be created, it can be dismantled' (383). She draws on her experiences in Berlin, which today is filled with monuments, educational displays, and other artefacts that testify to the German attempt to reckon with its past. Antisemitism in the Third Reich was different in its details from the racism in the U.S., but they are similar in terms of their structure and cultural embeddedness. We know that now antisemitism and antisemitic violence are on the rise in Germany. Some analysts suggest that much of this antisemitism originates in the East, where the previous communist government failed to confront the evils of the Third Reich and where demonizing Jews remained acceptable. One lesson one can take from this disparity between West and East Germany is that leadership matters. Conrad Adenauer, Willi Brandt, and others (even if imperfectly at times) provided leadership over years in enabling Germans to confront the evils perpetuated by leaders and citizens in the Third Reich. Leadership needs to continue and it may not be enough.

Ultimately, change relies on individual actions, actions of courage. Wilkerson argues that confronting the true nature of casteism is an awakening. One may be born to a dominant caste but one does not have to dominate. It is a choice. 'The challenge has long been that many in the dominant caste, who are in a better position to fix caste inequity, have often been the least likely to want to' (380). Deconstructing casteism and its systems may first mean that the dominant caste needs to give up its privilege. That may be a difficult sacrifice. In times of challenge, Americans have been capable of great change. In the thought often attributed to Winston Churchill, 'Americans will do the right thing, after they have tried everything else'. That time is now.