FREEDOM FROM CASTE: ANTI-CASTE THOUGHT, POLITICS AND CULTURE

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Freedom From Caste: New Beginnings in Transdisciplinary Scholarship

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The ten papers included in this special issue of *J-Caste* on 'Freedom From Caste: Anti-Caste Thought, Politics and Culture' are a culmination of a long process of selection. We received fifty-five abstracts to a call for papers issued in February 2021. We had invited academic papers focusing on the anti-caste thought of important theorists, thinkers and movements in South Asia. In recent scholarship, new critical works have engaged extensively with the writings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), the most celebrated of anti-caste theorists but to a lesser extent with Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879–1973), the iconoclastic anti-caste leader from the state of Tamil Nadu and a central figure in Dravidian politics. Their precursor, Mahatma Jotirao Phule (1827–1890), one of the most prominent anti-caste leaders in the colonial period and founder of Satyashodak Samaj in the state of Maharashtra in India, along with his wife Savitribai Phule, has also increasingly become the subject of academic study. Our aim was to invite new scholarship bringing their thought into conversation with each other, and beyond, to develop a deeper understanding of radical humanism embedded in anti-caste thinking and thus to understand the meaning of freedom from caste in its fullest sense.

We were particularly interested in an exploration of lesser-known anti-caste thinkers especially from the 'regions', and marginalized communities in South Asia. Our leading questions were: How have anti-caste themes emerged in cinema, literature, and poetry, and how does anti-caste thought inform social and political movements and vice-versa? How have left, feminist and ecological movements dealt with caste? We

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sought critiques of the impact of religion on anti-caste discourse, its possibilities and limitations, including, but not limited to, discussions on conversions, Hindu reform movements, the neo-Buddhist movement, modern Sikhi, Islam and the Pasmanda question, and the work of Christian missionaries. Contributors were encouraged to offer analyses of anti-caste thought from a range of perspectives of cultural theory, sociology, linguistics, history, political theory, area studies, or philosophy.

Following the life-lessons of iconic anti-caste thinkers, we hold that anti-caste thought or thought of how to end caste is as much a matter of practice, of changing the way we do things, as it is about theorising. In this special issue we were seeking linkages between thoughts encapsulated in texts and the manner in which these thoughts of bringing about the end of caste get enacted in practice.

We must also state why it is important now to pay attention to the thought of these people. There are two main reasons. Firstly, it is very easy to celebrate these thinkers as mere icons—indeed, various political formations seek to appropriate them—but we want to locate the importance of these thinkers in the social and historical context from which their thought arose. These people were exceptionally alive to the demands of their times and faced life-long struggles. Secondly, there is a danger of misappropriation and celebration coming from perspectives that may be fundamentally contrary to the core of these thinkers' works: for instance, it is not uncommon to witness right wing politicians, with antithetical views to the anti-caste thought of Ambedkar, trying to appropriate him. as Anand Teltumbde warned of the tactics of the Hindu Right two decades ago: 'Once it realised the difficulty in directly opposing Dr. Ambedkar, it adopted its proven strategy of cooptation' (Teltumbde, 2003, p.78). We have to remind ourselves of the thinking which grounds the actions, policies and principles of anti-casteism to resist the seduction of this insidious appropriation.

An ongoing further concern is one of positionality: always there in the background is the question of the standpoint of the political agent. A certain kind of identity politics has led sometimes to the odd conundrum that one wants to write about anti-casteism but a question mark is raised about one's privileged positionality and right to be speaking. We take caste as a problem which everyone has to deal with. We do not think that this responsibility is only of those who by birth status are made direct victims of casteism. Being born in a privileged background enjoins specific responsibilities towards dismantling caste: it's not an expression of privilege to fight against caste, it is a categorical duty (Jaoul and Dhanda, 2021).

The papers that finally made it to publication following a rigorous process of blind review offer a rich variety of perspectives, covering a range of themes, and making bold, thought-provoking and theoretically rich analyses of anti-caste thought. Prior to submissions to *J-Caste* for blind-review, some of the contributors made paper presentations in a 2-day conference on 'Anti-Caste Thought: Theory, Politics and Culture' convened by the guest editors at the University of Wolverhampton on 29–30 October 2021, (a full recording of the conference proceedings in nine videos

is available at: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNjCggSu2jhnumvtqYf-t-Zd9F1tq0u1P). The conference was a part of the project *Freedom from Caste: The Political Thought of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy in a Global Context*, funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 895514. Here contributors had the benefit of expert comments from the chairs of panels. To the conference contributors who could not be included in our special issue, we suggest making submission to future issues of *J-Caste.*

In naming 'Anti-Caste Thought' as the subject of our conference we took something important for granted: that anti-caste thought was a distinct body of knowledge worth examining intellectually. For too long we have been held back by recurrent discussions about the meaning of the 'term' caste, and its usefulness in capturing group identifications that are evidently at work on many levels in the lives of South Asians. In the UK, we have faced trenchant opposition to including caste within the scope of race as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010. In public debates on this topic, we are accused of colonial consciousness, of self-hatred, and worse, of instigating hatred against Hindus, just because we raise the caste question. The language of anti-colonialism has also been weaponised to shield the interests of a misplaced nativism (Dhanda 2015).

By foregrounding anti-caste thought, we wanted to offer a secure platform for discussion amongst those who are willing to engage in serious reflection about the limits and possibilities of anti-caste thought. We wanted critical readings of the great and the good—our friends, our own heroes and heroines, our idols—because we know that to offer such readings we need to read diligently and with attachment.

The quest for freedom from caste is not new. Several religious movements in South Asia have envisioned a society without casteism, but their method of challenging caste was mainly in the domain of the spiritual. It was with the onset of colonial modernity that caste began to be seen as a secular problem and several movements and leaders arose to challenge it. They imagined freedom from caste not just as an escape from spiritual restrictions and religiously sanctioned hierarchy, but as a way of articulating new forms of social life unshackled from the 'graded inequality' of caste, through novel means of political consolidation and mobilization.

The path to freedom from caste was conceptualised differently by iconic anti-caste thinkers. For Phule, a united front of the oppressed castes, reclaiming their histories, welcoming modern education and opposing upper-caste domination was a step towards freedom from caste. For Periyar, the founder of the Self-Respect movement, a rationalist ought to have no attachment to nation, state, god, religion or language, and in a humanism guided by rationalism, he found the possibility of freedom from caste. Babasaheb Ambedkar devised robust civil and political rights for the protection of the caste-oppressed, enshrined in the Constitution of independent India, and sought freedom from caste in nothing short of the 'annihilation' of caste, which he personally espoused through righteous living by the twenty-two vows of his Navayana Buddhism.

These three anti-caste thinkers are known well in their regions and beyond. Phule is seen as an important Dalit-Bahujan thinker in India (Omvedt, 2008). With the rise of global Dalit activism in the 21st Century and a corresponding academic interest in Dalit politics, history and culture, scholarship on Ambedkar's extensive writings has reached new heights (Omvedt, 1994; Jaffrelot, 2005; Yengde and Teltumbde, 2018). A five-volume collection of essays *B.R. Ambedkar: The Quest for Justice (5 Vols., OUP, 2021)* was featured in a book panel we hosted with the editor Aakash Singh Rathore, in discussion with Kancha Ilaiah, Kanchana Mahadevan and Mathew Baxter at the Wolverhampton October conference. While Periyar is a household name in Tamil Nadu and is routinely commemorated by Dravidian and Dalit parties, the complex nature of his thoughts has only just begun to reach a wider audience. Recent scholarship (Anandhi et al., 2020; Baxter, 2019; Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar, 2021; Manoharan, 2020, 2022; Venkatachalapathy, 2017) has pushed the boundaries of existing work on Periyar and has sought to place him in global conversations on identity, political economy, secularism, socialism and social justice. This special issue on 'Freedom from Caste' contributes to this growing literature.

This special issue is divided into three sections—anti-caste thought, politics and culture. In addition to the selected papers for these three sections, an independent article on caste-based discrimination among the Nepali diaspora in the San Francisco Bay Area, USA by Prem Pariyar, Bikash Gupta and Ruvani W. Fonseka is included in the Policy Arena regular feature. This article adds to the growing literature on the global reach of caste beyond South Asia. The UK Equality and Human Rights Commission project *Caste in Britain* (2013–2014) led by Dhanda included examples of caste discrimination experienced by Nepali migrants to Britain. This article shares findings from a USA focussed study of twenty-seven Dalit migrants from the hill regions of Nepal. Many of them have faced caste discrimination in housing, microaggressions in interpersonal relations, and workplace caste prejudice, severe enough to affect their mental health. The absence of explicit policies covering caste discrimination leaves them insecure, pushing them at times to hide their Dalit identity rather than taking recourse to anti-discrimination laws. Evidence of caste discrimination globally makes it ever more pertinent to find means of challenging the malady of caste by examining the strength of anti-caste thought, and its materialisation in politics and culture. Finally, this issue includes two book reviews: Helen Chukka reviews Sunder John Boopalan's *Memory, Grief and Agency: A Political Theological Account of Wrongs and Rites* and Gaurav J. Pathania reviews Chinnaiah Jangam's *Dalits and the Making of Modern India.*

The first section of papers dwells on anti-caste thought, featuring lesser-known thinkers from West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, and a paper that critiques the intersectional feminist discourse in India. Anti-caste thought at the turn of the twentieth century was immersed in the complex parameters of the emerging nationalist imagination. The figures who gained prominence were at the forefront of negotiations with the outgoing British colonial government. Thus, Ambedkar's arguments with Gandhi, are

well known by now (Dhanda, 2020; Kumar, 2015; Omvedt, 1994; Rathore, 2017) but there were others too who were quietly chipping away at the edifice of caste built over millennia, as the papers included here demonstrate.

Mahitosh Mandal's 'Dalit Resistance during the Bengal Renaissance: Five Anti-Caste Thinkers from Colonial Bengal, India' debunks the idea that Bengal is casteless. He argues that the existence of multiple anti-caste social/political organizations in Bengal for over a century, the proliferation of Bengali Dalit literature in the past few decades, and the eclectic documentation of Dalit atrocities in mainstream newspapers, all demonstrate that Bengal as a casteless land is a myth. Mandal picks five Dalit intellectuals from three Dalit communities (there are sixty in all in Bengal), and challenging nationalist, Marxist and subaltern historiographies from the state, he foregrounds the contributions of these thinkers, highlighting how they were critical of caste supremacy and the Swadeshi movement. The paper theorizes the indigenous and complex anti-caste intellectual tradition of Bengal, excluded from the intellectual history of Bengal. It argues that Bengal Renaissance was fundamentally an upper-caste Hindu renaissance that did not (effectively) address the issue of caste subalternity. Ignoring the parallel Dalit renaissance, Mandal argues, is 'epistemic violence'.

Shrinidhi Narasimhan's 'Between the Global and Regional: Asia in the Tamil Buddhist Imagination' looks at the Tamil Dalit-Buddhist thinker Iyothee Thass' Sakya Buddhist Society and explores how this organization, founded in 1898, imagined the Tamil Dalits as indigenous Buddhists and examines its intersection with other Asian Buddhist revivalist movements of the day. Using the category of 'pararegional', Narasimhan engages with how Thass and his Sakya Buddhism dealt with transregional developments in Buddhism, even while they remained grounded in regional intellectual and socio-cultural traditions. Thass, she claims, aimed to locate the Tamil Dalits in a 'global community of faith'. Her paper reflects on how Thass and the movement he led not only reinterpreted the past but also reimagined place, and thus she brings critical geography into conversation with historical analysis to rethink the spatial and temporal contours of late nineteenth and early twentieth century anticaste movements.

Santvana Kumar and Ekata Bakshi in their paper 'The Dominant Post-constitutional Indian Feminist Discourse: A Critique of its Intersectional Reading of Caste and Gender' highlight the limitations of 'mainstream' Indian feminisms, including their intersectional variants, in their approach to caste and gender. The authors argue that, despite its utility in highlighting the specificities of caste and the oppression of Dalits in discussions on gender, intersectionality nevertheless homogenizes the category of the 'Dalit woman', and thus, seek to destabilize these readings. Kumar and Bakshi reflect on post-Partition experiences of rehabilitation in West Bengal and caste violence in Uttar Pradesh to argue that Dalit women and upper-caste women need to be read as relational categories, and in this process, try to complicate the understanding of intersectional feminism.

The second section looks at anti-caste politics, with papers on the political movement of the Ezhava community in Kerala, Periyar's approach to the politics of region, and how institutional Dravidian politics approached the issues of representation and redistribution. The 'region' has been seen in relation to the 'centre/nation' often in terms of linguistic nationalism. Ideas of regionalism significantly influence political discourse in not just the South Indian states, but also in Maharashtra, Punjab, West Bengal and the North-Eastern states. The politics of both 'region' and 'nation' is affected by, and in turn shapes, the politics of caste. In his now classic work *Nationalism Without a Nation in India,* Aloysius argues that the elites in India used an anti-colonial cultural nationalism to enable themselves to take over the modern nation-state, while also defining the nation in terms of archaic traditions. On the other hand, political nationalism was articulated by leaders from the 'region' like Ayyankali, Phule, Periyar and Mangoo Ram, as a pluralist concept to defend the interests of the diverse masses (Aloysius, 1997, pp. 148–149). The articles in the section contribute to the debates on 'region' and 'nation', by critically foregrounding the issues of caste and social justice.

Anish KK in his paper 'Conceptions of Community, Nation and Politics: The Ezhavas of South Malabar, India and their Quest for Equality' draws attention to the political movement of a populous subaltern caste in Kerala, the Ezhavas. Drawing attention to how the Ezhava movement was critical of the Congress-led Indian anti-colonial movement, Anish notes how the formation of the Ezhava political identity contended with the various broad political currents of the time. Anish makes a case for considering the Ezhava assertion in the colonial period as an 'autonomous anti-caste movement' and notes how they broadened the public sphere by articulating an anti-caste ideology and challenging the dominance of the Brahmins through counter-narratives.

Ganeshwar's paper 'Periyar's Spatial Thought: Region as Non-Brahmin Discursive Space' foregrounds Periyar's 'politics of space' as a radical attempt to subvert the cultural logic of hegemonic Indian nationalism which, Ganeshwar argues through his reading of Periyar, sustained caste privileges. Engaging with the theoretical framework of Henri Lefebvre, Ganeshwar claims that to Periyar, the region was a 'counter-discursive space' that would facilitate the movement of non-Brahmin politics from rarity to materiality, further asserting that Periyar's movement popularized the Tamil region as a force with a distinct set of egalitarian values, bringing about an amalgamation of regional and non-brahmin consciousness not with a nostalgia for cultural pasts, but by prioritizing an ethic of self-respect.

Vignesh Karthik KR and Vishal Vasanthakumar in 'Caste, then Class: Redistribution and Representation in the Dravidian Model' build on Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar's work *The Dravidian Model* (2021) to claim that in the political programme of the Dravidian parties that were at the helm of the state in Tamil Nadu since 1967, social justice was given as much priority as economic development. The authors claim what underpins this approach is the impact of Periyar's thought,

especially his position that caste inequalities must first be addressed before the question of class could be. In this, the authors highlight the strong differences which Periyar had with communists in Tamil Nadu. They further argue that the approach of Periyar and his followers in the Dravidar Kazhagam and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam led to some of the 'strongest affirmative action reforms seen in India', noting how different policies in the state led to a largely inclusive development.

The last section deals with cultural interventions and their significance to conversations on caste. This section features papers on a Bengali novel about a Dalit leader from that state, the autobiography of a Tamil Dalit leader, and two articles on recent critically acclaimed anti-caste Tamil films. As far as Tamil cinema is concerned, scholars have drawn attention to how attacks on superstition and caste, and a promotion of social harmony have been hallmarks of films influenced by the Dravidian Movement (Hardgrave Jr, 1973; Sivathambi, 1981). Others like Pandian (1996) have noted how the medium of Tamil cinema itself challenged elite (caste) culture and opened up possibilities for blurring the lines between 'high' and 'low' culture. Much has been written on the interconnections of cinema and politics, notably, how this has been influenced by and in turn influences, the Tamil social landscape (Jacob, 2009; Prasad, 2014; Pillai, 2015). More recent scholarship, such as the essays in the volume *Tamil Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* (Velayutham and Devadas, 2020), critically look at caste and anti-caste themes in contemporary Tamil films. In the 'Dravidian cinema' of the 1950s and early 60s, addressing casteism and promoting an anti-caste message were mandatory. The more explicitly anti-caste films in the twenty-first century were based on this foundation, and new generation filmmakers like Pa. Ranjith often refer to films like *Parasakthi* (1952), directed by Krishnan-Panju and written by M. Karunanidhi, as inspirations. Arul Valan contributes to these debates through his reading of *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018). However, not much scholarly attention has been paid to independent Tamil cinema and especially to the work of women directors. Eswaran remedies this neglect in his paper on Leena Manimekalai's *Maadathy* (2019).

Suhasini Roy's 'Barishaler Jogen Mandal: Construal of the Undisputed Dalit Leader of Undivided Bengal Through a Twenty-first Century Bengali Novel' critically looks at Debes Ray's 2010 Bengali novel *Barishaler Jogen Mandal*. The novel is based on the life of Jogendranath Mandal, an important leader of the Namasudra Dalit community, and revisits the socio-political arena of undivided Bengal. Roy undertakes a Bakhtinian reading of the novel, and notes how it navigates into history, pushing the disciplinary boundaries of reading and interpreting history. She explains how Mandal's politico-ideological agenda of establishing separate/distinct political identity for the Dalits and in Bengal's context finding solidarity with their Muslim counterparts in the agrarian population was lost in the post-War years and abandoned by the new nations since 1947. As a historical novel grounded in a Dalit lifeworld, Roy claims that the novelization of the life of Mandal is in itself an act of resistance, given its account

of the plurality of the nation and the centering of Dalit self-declaration and sudra autonomy as 'sudratva'.

Malarvizhi Jayanth in 'Struggling for Freedom from Caste in Colonial India: The Story of Rettaimalai Srinivasan' brings attention to a Tamil Dalit leader Rettamalai Srinivasan's work. Jayanth states that Srinivasan's autobiography, written in 1938, was the 'oldest known Dalit autobiography' and reads this work along with his other writings to emphasize Srinivasan's important contributions to the anti-caste discourse. Srinivasan was Ambedkar's contemporary and attended the Round Table Conference in 1930–31 along with him, and was involved in struggles in the Madras Presidency in the colonial period to improve Dalit political representation. To Srinivasan, representation of Dalits and leadership of their own communities was crucial to challenge the social hurdles they faced. Through a critical reading of his life history, Jayanth shows how categories like 'Dravidian' and 'Pariah' were re-signified by Srinivasan and how they continue to influence contemporary cultural and political ideas.

Swarnavel Eswaran's paper '*Maadathy*–An Unfairy Tale: Caste, Space, and Gaze' undertakes a Lacanian reading of the film *Maadathy* (2019) directed by independent Tamil filmmaker Leena Manimekalai. Eswaran uses the Lacanian concept of 'gaze' and the Lefebvrian concept of 'space' to understand the creation of mythical space in the film and its representation of caste and gender issues. *Maadathy* is based in South Tamil Nadu and revolves around a girl from the Puthirai Vannar Dalit community. The Puthirai Vannars are among the most oppressed Dalit castes in the state, an 'unseeable' caste, whose issues are often not addressed by mainstream Dalit formations. The film provides an insight into their world, and Eswaran's paper highlights the different axes through which Manimekalai brings their lives to the fore.

Antony Arul Valan's '*Pariyerum Perumal* and a Periyarite Note on Political Engagement' undertakes a psychoanalytic reading, relying on the work of D.W. Winnicott, of Tamil filmmaker Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018). This film shows the struggles of Pariyan, a protagonist from a Scheduled Caste in South Tamil Nadu (from the Devendra Kula Vellalar caste, many leaders of which community resist the 'Dalit' identity) for education, empowerment, and recognition as equal. Apart from the film, a key text for Valan's article, the other main reference point he uses is a speech delivered by Periyar in Nagapattinam in 1931, to 'explore the salience of the self as a site of political action'. Valan charts out the dimensions of 'creative play' in these two works to understand the anti-caste message of Periyar and *Pariyerum Perumal*.

The articles presented in this issue showcase diverse struggles for freedom from caste in the modern period, from colonial times to contemporary times. There will, very likely, be biases, prejudices and blind spots which escape critical scrutiny. And there is no guarantee that we are in a better position in the present to make conclusive assessments of inherited knowledge. However, to give truth and critical thinking a chance to succeed, it is crucial to foster academic freedom. Anti-caste thinkers need

the protection of this space of freedom more now than ever before. We invite the readers to engage with the transdisciplinary, contemporary scholarship on anti-caste thought on offer here as a freely available resource, to draw upon in intellectual and political pursuits of social transformation towards a caste-free world.

We would like to convey our thanks to the panel chairs of the 'Anti-Caste Thought' conference—Gajendra Ayyathurai, Dag Erik Berg, Gaurav Pathania, Malini Ranganathan, Scott Stroud and Selvaraj Velayutham, for their enormously beneficial and thoughtful feedback on papers, some of which are featured in this issue. We thank the reviewers for *J-Caste* who gave their time generously.

Anti-caste thought is produced like all thought in particular circumstances. Intellectual histories enable us to chart the webs of interaction—the opening or closing of doors—the serendipities that create the possibility of the birth of new ideas. It seems opportune to note at this point that the conditions for jointly writing this editorial were constrained by personal circumstances. Writing under distress caused by the untimely death on 22.2.22 of her younger brother, Raj Dhanda, Meena wishes to dedicate this special issue to him. A multiple fracture in her arm from a fall during her bereavement added to the strain, and towards the nail-biting finish, the production process was jolted by her Covid infection. As Guest Editors, we owe a huge debt to the Joint Editors-in-Chief and the production team at Brandeis University for their patience and efficiency in working around these mishaps and ensuring timely production of this special issue.

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Dalit Resistance during the Bengal Renaissance: Five Anti-Caste Thinkers from Colonial Bengal, India

Mahitosh Mandal[1]

Abstract

This article debunks the myth that Bengal is a casteless land or that Bengalis have no understanding of caste, by excavating, from within a Dalit historiographical framework, the rich and heterogeneous anti-caste politico-intellectual tradition launched and carried forward by the Dalits in colonial Bengal. Due to the paucity of space, it focuses only on three among sixty Dalit communities residing in Bengal and demonstrates the radical edge of five diverse anti-caste thinkers, namely, Harichand Thakur, Guruchand Thakur, Mahendranath Karan, Rajendranath Sarkar, and Mahendranath Mallabarman. Through a critical rejection of nationalist, Marxist and subaltern historiographies and interrogation of the Brahmanical appropriation of Bengal's anti-caste tradition, it foregrounds the independent and self-critical intellectual history of the Dalits of colonial Bengal. It exposes the epistemic violence suffered by Dalit thinkers and reformers in the textbook historical narratives that glorify a Brahmanical Bengal Renaissance and highlights the neglected discourse of Dalit resistance and renaissance that had taken place at the same time in the same province. It shows how these anti-caste organic intellectuals fought the Brahmanical supremacists during the anti-British movement led by the Brahmins and upper castes, and how their agendas of self-respect and redistribution of wealth conflicted with the Swadeshi movement. Finally, the article demonstrates that while in the history of the anti-caste movement, Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar justifiably occupy much of the discursive space, a significant and unacknowledged intellectual and political contribution was also made by their contemporary Bengali counterparts.

Keywords

Dalit historiography, Dalit resistance, Dalit renaissance, anti-caste thought, Colonial Bengal, Bengal Renaissance

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Introduction: Conceptualizing Dalit Historiography of Bengal

Kancha Ilaiah, a leading anti-caste thinker of our time, noted in a 2018-lecture held in Kolkata that, "In Bengal, there is a caste cancer without diagnosis" (C.S. Bhattacharya, 2018, September 22). He emphasized that there is casteism in Bengal but Bengalis have failed to make sense of and articulate its gravity. By extension, he implied that Bengalis have been unable to launch any effective anti-caste movement. It is undeniable that resistance against casteism is not as strong, scathing, and successful as it is to be found in Indian states like Maharashtra—the land of the Phules (Jyotirao Phule and Savitrivai Phule) and Babasaheb (B. R. Ambedkar), and Tamil Nadu—the land of Periyar (E.V. Ramasamy). But it might be problematic if one takes Ilaiah's comment at a face value and imagines a total absence of anti-caste resistance in Bengal. Instead, this article investigates the reason someone like Ilaiah might be compelled to reach such a conclusion. It is now well-known among those researching the caste question in Bengal that the discourse of caste had been completely sidelined and repressed for thirty-four years in the Communist regime in postcolonial Bengal. The state-sponsored massacres of Dalits in the Morichjhapi Island, the public denial of the existence of "backward castes" by the chief minister Jyoti Basu in the context of Mandal Commission agitations (Mandal, 2021, May 17), and the murder of nine Dalits in the Nandigram violence (Teltumbde, 2010, pp. 168–169) are some of the instances of how the repressive state apparatus of the Communist regime had maltreated the Dalits and sidelined the caste question in Bengal. This has been supplemented by nationalist and Marxist historians who, under the garb of writing the history of Bengal's anti-colonial resistance and excavating its subaltern history, reinforced a Brahmanical and class-centric interpretation of history, thereby suppressing and ignoring the caste question. None of the history textbooks for school students in Bengal mention anything about anti-caste movement in colonial Bengal although these are replete with references to the so-called Bengal Renaissance. The nationalist historiography was developed to glorify the so-called powerful resistance the caste Hindu Bengalis had put forth against the British Raj, be it politically, or in terms of revivalism and reformation. The Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) of historians, on the other hand, reduced the Gramscian notion of the "subaltern" to the proletariat or the class-subaltern and substantially ignored the multiple other forms of subalternity including those related to caste, religion, race, and territory, the last three being proposed by Gramsci himself (Green, 2011, p. 394). It is the class-centric dimension of subaltern historiography informed by Marxian political philosophy that completely prevented the possibility of the emergence of an anti-caste or Dalit historiography in Bengal. It may not be completely out of place to note that the bulk of the members of the SSG group are Brahmins and that their assumptions remain deeply Brahmanical. Gayatri Chakravorty, for instance, argued that the subaltern cannot speak because either she cannot be found in the elite and colonial documents or she is embedded within the dominant discourse only as an "Other" (Green, 2002, p. 16 & Spivak, 1995, pp. 27–28). Nevertheless, while looking for non-elite archives, the SSG historians did not necessarily explore the archives produced by the Dalits or even the tribals. The caste-subalterns of Bengal made use of the print culture brought to India by the British and from the later nineteenth century onwards they started documenting their struggles and creative output, largely in the vernacular Bengali but also occasionally in English. Rup

Kumar Barman's (2016) aptly titled article "Yes! The Scheduled Castes Can Write," therefore, produces a strong rebuttal against the Brahmanical assumptions of the SSG. Historians, not officially affiliated to the SSG, particularly Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, have also been writing on the caste question in Bengal. Bandyopadhyay though an ubiquitous presence in caste scholarship on Bengal has nevertheless neglected to look into the vast range and heterogeneity of Dalit archives of colonial and postcolonial Bengal. Therefore, almost condescendingly and sweepingly, he claims that the Dalits of colonial Bengal could not transcend Brahmanical "imagination" and launch any substantially subversive protest (Bandyopadhyay, 2004, p. 38). If one reads his works one is forced to feel that Bengal did not witness any radical anti-caste movement. But nothing could be far from the truth. On the other hand, a recent book by Dwaipayan Sen (2018) elaborately analyses the historical importance of Jogendranath Mandal (1904–1968) as a Dalit leader during and in the aftermath of India's independence from the British colonial rule and the decline of Dalit politics following his mysterious demise. While Mandal had been a towering Dalit leader and perhaps the most significant Ambedkarite from Bengal, he was certainly not the only anti-caste thinker either in colonial or postcolonial Bengal. Nor was the Namasudra sub-caste, to which he belonged, the only Dalit caste from Bengal to have launched and been launching anti-Brahmanical resistance. Therefore, this article seeks to highlight the plurality and diversity of anti-caste thought in colonial Bengal of which Jogendranath formed just a part, however major, and thereby open up further possibilities of exploring the multi-layered and multi-faceted anti-caste resistance in postcolonial Bengal as well.

This article argues that the long history of anti-caste movement in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Bengal has not really been documented in English language scholarship or translations. Whereas there are hundreds of pages written by the Dalits in the vernacular Bengali language that document Dalit history, hardly any professional historian has referred to these. One example could be the eight volumes of *Poundra-Monisha* reprinted by Poundra Mahasangha in recent times. These volumes comprise autobiographies, literary writings, political pamphlets, manifestoes and news reports produced by the Poundras, a Dalit community, in colonial Bengal. A reading of these volumes—almost none of which has been translated into English nor referred to in any of the scholarly works including those of Sekhar Bandyopadhyay—will give one a fair idea of the history of anti-caste struggle of this particular Dalit community. And, this is the output of just one Dalit community from a specific historical period and if their contemporary publications are considered then their output would be much larger than eight volumes. Bengal is home to sixty different scheduled caste communities. If one reads the literature and pamphlets produced by all these Dalit communities and studies the scores of anti-caste organizations based in Bengal, some of whom are explicitly named after Buddha or Ambedkar, then one might have to rethink the proposition that Bengalis have failed to diagnose the cancer of caste or that they have no understanding of caste. But there is a barrier between a knowledge transmissible nationally and internationally and the knowledge produced locally, confined to vernacular language, and completely ignored by the class-centric and Brahmanical scholarship. It is this barrier that justifies Ilaiah's statement.

This article is an attempt to demonstrate the radical edge of anti-caste thought in five Dalit thinkers from colonial Bengal. Positioned within Dalit historiography—something totally absent in the bulk of the historians mentioned above—it intends to

be a critique of the Marxist and nationalist historiographies that have monopolized Bengal's intellectual history. The article proposes that such historiographies are silent about a Dalit renaissance and resistance that had taken place in Bengal at exactly the same time when the so-called Bengal Renaissance happened. To emphasize the range of anti-caste thought and avoid homogenization (as found in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, for instance, as mentioned earlier), it chooses four thinkers from two numerically large Dalit communities (Namasudra and Poundra) and one thinker from a numerically small Dalit community (Malo). The thinkers discussed are—Harichand Thakur (Namasudra), Guruchand Thakur (Namasudra), Mahendranath Karan (Poundra), Rajendranath Sarkar (Poundra), and Mahendranath Mallabarman (Malo). It may be mentioned that all these thinkers were also at the same time reformers from the untouchable communities and were committed to anti-caste and self-respect movements through political resistance and social organizations. That is why they might be described better as "thinker-reformers," implying their intellectual output was intricately linked to their social commitment, and they were thus organic intellectuals. Of course, a focus on just three communities does not do justice to fifty-seven other Dalit communities residing in Bengal. Nevertheless, within the permissible word-length, this is the most one can do in an article that proposes to be one of the initiators of anti-caste discourse on Bengal's Dalit history written by Bengali Dalits from a Dalit point of view.

This article uses the term "anti-caste" in the sense in which Gail Omvedt uses it in *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals*. For her, anti-caste movement is to be understood as "nonbrahman movement" and "dalit movement" (Omvedt, 2016, p. 24). In a similar vein, Dalit historiography is defined in this article as alternative histories written by Dalit, non-brahman and Ambedkarite intellectuals from within an anti-Brahmanical, anti-Hindu, anti-caste and Buddhist perspective. This article argues that Dalit historiography should be exclusively based on and inspired by an unequivocally anti-caste framework of thinking. A radical Dalit historiography of Bengal, this article contends, can emerge only through a critical rejection of nationalist and Marxist (SSG being predominantly a class-centric enterprise) historiographies which have symptomatically glossed over Dalit history in constructing Bengal's intellectual history.

Harichand Thakur (1812–1878)

Harichand Thakur is the earliest Dalit thinker of colonial Bengal. He was born in 1812 into a family of Chandals, eventually renamed as Namasudras,[1] residing in the village of Safaldanga in East Bengal. Harichand's radicalism manifested in multiple areas including politics, religion, economy and education. He was critical of Buddhism, Vaishnavism, and Vedantism, but arguably molded his religion, Matuaism, through a combination of Vaishnavism and Shaktism. (His wife was Shakta and the poet, Tarak Chandra Sarkar, who documented his words in verse was a Malo by caste and a Shakta by religion). For Harichand, Buddhism, admittedly a philosophy that appealed

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[1]The census reports demonstrate the trajectory of naming of the community: Chandal (1872), Namasudra or Chandal (1891), Namasudra (Chandal) (1901), Namasudra (1911). The struggle to replace "Chandal" with "Namasudra" was a part of the identity formation movement led by Harichand's son Guruchand Thakur along with assistance from many including the Christian Missionary C. S. Mead.

to the masses because of its anti-caste commitment (*Horilīlamrito* quoted in Mohanta, 2015, p. 170), degenerated due to its emphasis on ascetic life away from the family or *grihodhôrmo* (literally, family-centric religion). According to him, *garhosthyo ashrom dhôri nôrôkul bnache/ grihike koriya bhôr sôkolei royeche/ tai dekhi grihodhôrmo sôkoler mul/ eikhane buddhodeb korilen bhul*. This translates to: the humans are familial beings/ everyone depends on the family persons/ hence, *girhodhôrmo* is the root of all/ and Buddha's mistake was to ignore it. Such ideas insisting on the family life are replete in *Horilīlamrito*. Another instance could be: *Grihete thakiya jar hôy vadhodôy/ sei se pôrom sadhu janibe nischôy* (He who realizes divinity while living a family life is the greatest monk) (Sarkar, 2016, p. 24).

On the other hand, Vaishnavism had turned the devotees of the early nineteenth century Bengal into irresponsible religious beggars of alms and practitioners of unrestrained sexual acts. Harichand observed how a clear caste division emerged among the Vaishnavites themselves—the 'lower caste' and untouchable devotees were looked down upon by their upper caste and Brahmin counterparts (Sarkar, 2016, pp. 54–55). Furthermore, as noted by many including Bandyopadhyay, Harichand's religion was critical of the Vedantism of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and the prevalent notion of renunciation involving giving up of desire for sexuality and wealth. Instead, he wanted to foreground material desire over spiritual bhakti, dismissing the abstract and metaphysical idea of a Brahman, the ultimate reality, as being of no use to the toiling masses (Bandyopadhyay, 2014, n.p.). Furthermore, he opposed the Vedic religion and the Brahmins on several occasions (*ved-vidhi nahi mane na mane brahmôn* and *ved-vidhi shoucacar nahi mani tai*.) (Sarkar, 2016, pp. 94, 138). The point is, Harichand was not "influenced" by these religious traditions as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay would have us believe but radically opposed them to mold the distinctness of his political theology (Bandyopadhyay, 2014, n.p.).

Harichand's theology was a spiritual discourse structured in terms of material requirements of the poor Dalits. His famous dictum *hate kam, mukhe nam* (work with hands, sing god's praise with mouth) is therefore to be considered as an aphorism against metaphysical, non-materialistic, abstract theologies (Sarkar, 2016, pp. 23, 55, 73). This is how the Matua religion of Harichand Thakur avoided being an "opium of the people" to borrow a phrase from Karl Marx. Marx argued that "The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is a demand for their true happiness" (Marx, 1982, p. 131). Harichand's religion, unlike Brahmanical religions, did not promise illusory happiness. It did not ask the devotees to concentrate on the happiness in the *there and then* while suffering in the *here and now*. Instead, it inspired them to achieve material success in this world and that alone could be the source of spiritual happiness, according to him. This is uncannily similar to how Protestantism gave moral sanction to the economic prosperity of the Christian (prosperity being a sign of divine "grace"), a fact elaborated by Max Weber (2001) in his classic work. One could in fact talk about a Matua religion that supported the spirit and pursuit of capitalism.

Harichand was a Dalit among the Dalits. He faced overlapping forms of discrimination due to being a) a Dalit and b) a poor peasant. Several revolutionary moments from his life attest to his experience and resistance to casteism. He was invited

to a funeral ceremony which the Brahmins refused to attend because they did not want to be at the same place as the Chandals. Harichand could not take this lying down and subsequently launched his anti-Brahmanical agenda. Harichand found that the Dalits had been suffering from dire poverty lacking lands for cultivation. He asked them to till the waste lands (*potit jomi*) and harvest rice (Sarkar, 2016, pp. 71–73). He emphasized that Dalits needed to be economically empowered to eventually overcome the state of being downtrodden. Hence, he foregrounded the economic pursuit: *Grihosther mulbhitti ôrthôniti bôte/ banijye bôsoti lokkhi ei bani rôte* (money is the familial base/ the goddess of wealth blesses the man of commerce); or *ôrthoke ônortho bôla kôtobôro vul* (it is a grave mistake to consider money as worthless) (*Horilīlamrito* quoted in Biswas, 2015, p. 30). Furthermore, he realized that the key to the community's success is to make it free of superstition and bring education to them. To this end, he inspired his son to set up the first school for Dalits in the village of Orakandi (Biswas, 2015, p. 31). He dealt a blow at Brahmanical patriarchy by promoting equality between men and women, prohibiting polygamy (*ek nari, brohmochari*), and empowering women through education and job prospects (Sarkar, 2016, p. 192).

In addition, Harichand motivated the Dalits to organize, participate, and lead in politics because political and administrative power was considered crucial for their liberation. He wanted them to become "raj-shokti." The religion of the Matuas, Harichand emphasized, was not meant for the Namasudras alone. It was open to all Dalits, embraced even Muslims, and preached inter-dining for all. In this way, it aimed at developing into a Bahujan religion (*Horilīlamrito* quoted in Thakur, 2015, pp. 18–19).

Harichand, himself uneducated, gave twelve commandments which offer a glimpse into his philosophy, although, one should mention, these do not encompass everything he said or asked his followers to do: "1. Always speak the truth. 2. Look at women other than your wife as mothers. 3. Love everybody in the world. 4. Never practice casteism. 5. Respect your parents. 6. Beware of the temptations of the six senses. 7. Do not condemn other religions. 8. Give up outward monkhood and desire for ascetic life away from family. 9. Sing Hari's praise but toil with the hands. 10. Establish temples of Sri Hari. 11. Pray daily with heads bowed down. 12. Give yourself to Sri Hari" (quoted in Sarkar 2015, p. 188, translation mine).

When the theoretical and practical contributions of Harichand and of Guruchand (discussed in the next section) to the Dalits and minorities are considered, one cannot help describing them as agents leading to concrete social change and reawakening of the 'lower castes'. One critic has rightly described them in Bangla as *banglar ôbohelito lokayoto sômajer nôbojagôroner jôtharthoi dut* or the harbinger of the renaissance for the neglected masses (Tushar Chattopadhyay quoted in Baidya, 2015, p. 57). In fact, following Dilip Gayen, a Poundra thinker, one could state that if Ram Mohan Roy is the Father of Bengal Renaissance (which, according to Gayen was basically a Brahmin Renaissance) then Harichand was the Father of the Mulnivasi, Dalit and Bahujan Renaissance (Gayen, 2021, p. 28). Harichand's work would be carried forward by his son Guruchand Thakur and his great-grandson Pramatha Ranjan Thakur.

Guruchand Thakur (1846–1937)

Arguably it was Guruchand, Harichand's son, who extensively applied the philosophy of Matuaism to the cause of Dalit liberation. Guruchand valued the education of the Dalits as a topmost priority because education was a means of liberation and empowerment (Sarkar, 2016, p. 144 & Sarkar, 2015, pp. 191, 198). Following his father's instruction regarding the importance of education for the Dalits, he founded the first ever school for the Dalits in 1880 (approximately 30 years after the Phules did so in Maharashtra) in his own house in Orakandi, eastern Bengal. However, no teacher was available immediately because the Brahmins refused to teach the 'lower castes,' until a Dalit, Raghunath Sarkar of Dhaka, came over and volunteered to do so. To ensure that such schools run smoothly, Guruchand convened the first educational conference of the Matuas in 1881 in Dattadanga. Approximately, 5000 representatives attended the conference. In the same year, under Guruchand's guidance, the Namasudra Welfare Association was set up and representatives from twenty-two districts joined the Association. In 1908, the first school for English education was founded by Guruchand with assistance from the Australian missionary C.S. Mead. In 1932, the Hari-Guruchand Mission was established in Orakandi and the Mission assisted in the establishment of a school for girls. By one account, Guruchand established around 1882 schools in Bengal, out of which 1067 schools were founded in the Dhaka division alone (Sarkar, 2015, pp. 191, 195; Roy, 2019, p. 60). This pales the educational contribution of Ishwar Chandra Bandyopadhyay, the much-glorified face of the Bengal Renaissance, who established, by one account, around thirty-six schools (Sarkar, 2015, p. 195). And yet, it is Ishwar Chandra who is remembered as the archetypal educational reformer of Bengal and Guruchand's revolution in educational field remains undocumented in the official intellectual history of Bengal.

Apart from establishing schools, Guruchand was instrumental in the dissemination of anti-caste thought through magazines and newspapers. He was the founder of the monthly journal *Nômosudro suhrid* (Friend of the Namasudras, started in 1907) which was dedicated to excavating the history of the Namasudras and discussing their empowerment and advancement. Guruchand is described as the first Namasudra journalist (Roy, 2019, p. 55). He was the inspiration behind the setting up of at least three more magazines and journals during this time, namely, *Nômosudro potrika* (1908), *Nômosudro hitoishi* (1916), and *Pôtaka* (1916).

Guruchand mobilized the Dalit peasants, following his father's footsteps. The Chandals had a long history of resistance including their general strike of 1873 in which, as noted by W.W. Hunter, they resolved "not to serve anybody of the upper caste in whatever capacity, unless a better position among the Hindu caste than what they at present occupy was given to them" (Hunter quoted in Roy, 2019, p. 51). Positioned within such a context, as early as 1900, Guruchand advocated for *tebhaga* or the agenda that the peasants must be given two-third of the crops' share and the landlords must have only one third. He organized them against the exploitative system of Indigo plantation and destroyed the Indigo farm of a British sahib in 1909 (Das, 2015, pp. 216–218). He was the president in the peasant convention that took place in Barishal in June 1922 and a key speaker in the 1933 provincial peasant convention

held in Midnapore. Unlike the upper-caste Marxist historians and reformers, he was fully aware that the bulk of the poor peasants belonged to the 'lower castes' or outcaste communities; therefore, it was as much a struggle to overcome casteism as it was overcoming classism.

Perhaps, the most defining moment in Guruchand's movement was his refusal to participate in the nationalist movement launched by the Congress Party under the leadership of M.K. Gandhi and Chittaranjan Das. Gandhi wanted to rope in the Dalits in his anti-British struggle. However, Guruchand flatly told Chittaranjan who had written a letter to Guruchand for support on Gandhi's instruction, that their struggles were different. For Guruchand, a freedom struggle that was focused on gaining independence from a foreign enemy by those who kept intact their enmity and injustice towards the downtrodden in the native land was a form of hypocrisy. Dalits needed, first and foremost, an emancipation from casteism and poverty caused by the caste Hindus and they did not have the luxury to participate in the Swadeshi movement and Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement (Haldar, 2021, pp. 412–416). For Guruchand, the so-called freedom struggle was concerned with the freedom of the few while he was concerned with the freedom of all the oppressed communities. In fact, Guruchand developed close association with the British and fully utilized the provisions for the 'lower castes' prepared by the British government. His 1906-meeting with Sir Lancelot Hare, the then Lieutenant of East Bengal and Assam, was historic in the sense that he acquainted Lancelot with the plight of the Namasudras. Afterwards Lancelot ensured that thirty-one communities from Bengal were included in the list of the Scheduled Castes from Bengal and they could thereby avail various opportunities provided by the government (Roy, 2019, p. 59). Furthermore, under Guruchand's leadership, fourteen Dalits held deputation to the British government in 1907 and consequently, from 1907, Dalits earned the right to government jobs under the Proportional Representation of the Community in Public Employment Act passed the same year (Sarkar, 2015, p. 194).

Guruchand's was a *total* movement. Like his father, he was ready to embrace everybody within his fold—all Dalit and 'lower caste' groups from Kumbhokar, Kopali, Mahishya, to Das, Chamar, Poundra, Tnaati, Malakar, and even minority groups like Muslims. This was truly a resistance of the subaltern, and more specifically, the caste-subaltern (Haldar, 2021, p. 144). His contribution, though ignored by the caste Hindus who launched Bengal Renaissance, did not go unnoticed by the British. He was awarded the title of peasant leader, won the Gold Medal, and came to be known as *nômosudro-kulopoti* (an undisputed leader of the Namasudras).

Mahendranath Karan (1886–1928)

Many leaders, thinkers, and reformers emerged among the Poundras in colonial Bengal. Mention may be made of Srimanta Naskar, Hemchandra Naskar, Raicharan Sardar, and Benimadhav Haldar all of whom fought for the cultural recognition of the Poundras, derogatorily called "Pod," as Kshatriyas. They criticized the use of the word "Pod" in the early census report in the preparation of which many Brahmin and caste

Hindu officers were involved, and launched an organized resistance to change their name to "Poundra Kshatriya." This was another major identity movement in colonial Bengal since it involved hundreds of members of a single Dalit community. It was not simply an attempt to replace a derogatory word (Pod) with a sophisticated term (Poundra). But it was supplemented by research into the history of the community and revival of their past glory. In this sense, Poundra movements in colonial Bengal too contributed to Dalit Renaissance. Their intellectual output was huge, and in many cases, was published in several dailies and monthly magazines and journals. It is possible to enlist at least eight such magazines published by the Poundras at various points in colonial times: *Bratya Kshatriya Bandhov* (started in 1910) edited by Raicharan Sardar and Gopalchandra Dutta, *Protigna* (1918) edited by Mahendranath Karan and Bhavasindhu Laskar, *Kshatriya* (1920) edited by Jogendranath Roy and Prasannakumar Barma, *Poundra Kshatriya Sômachar* (1924) edited by Kshirodchandra Das and Mahendranath Karan, *Sotyojug* (1927) edited by Sureshchandra Koyal, *Dipti* (1927) edited by Digambar Sahityaratna, *Sôngho* (1935) edited by Rajendranath Sarkar, and *Poundra Kshatriya* (1938) edited by Rajendranath Sarkar, Patiram Roy, Kunjobihari Roy, and Digambar Sahityaratna.

It was Mahendranath Karan, a Poundra from Midnapore, who wrote the first ever English treatise on the history of the Poundras, titled *A History and Ethnology of the Cultivating Pods* (1919), arguably the earliest anti-Brahmanical text written in English by a Bengali Dalit. It was published by Raicharan Haldar on behalf of All Bengal Bratya Kshatriya Samiti. It may be mentioned that the term "Bratya Kshatriya" was rejected by Karan later and the arguments provided for the same are discussed at the end of this section. The title of the 1919 work is precise, particularly the expression "cultivating Pods" who are distinguished by him from "fishing Pods." The so-called Pods were of different kinds—the Aryan Pods and the non-Aryan Pods. The Pods described as Mlechhas, beef-eaters or fishing Pods were allegedly of non-Aryan origin from the Deccan areas. However, the cultivating Pods to whom Mahendranath himself belonged were, according to him, of Aryan origin. According to Karan, even though they were derogatorily called *chasha* ("an abusive and contemptible word" for farmers), agriculture as a profession had been synonymous with them and was not historically looked down upon (Karan, 1919, p. 14). The *Brohmoboibôrto Puran* mentions a few characteristics of an Aryan Poundra ("charitable, physically strong, benevolent, worshipping the Devas and living by cultivation") and according to Karan all these are present in the present-day cultivating Pods (Karan, 1919, p. 30). In the book which he wrote in English so that the British administrators and ethnologists could take a note of it, he argues why the cultivating Pods are to be called "Poundra Kshatriyas" and must not be confused with the mixed castes (*Varna sônkor*) nor be categorized as "Depressed Class" (Karan, 1919, pp. 17, i).

Karan offers a detailed history of the Poundras based on references to the scriptures. He associates the term to Sri Krishna himself who was known as "Pundôrikaksho" or the eye of Pundar or Poundra. As argued by Karan, in the *Hôribônsho Puran* (Chapter 35), it is mentioned that Basudeb, the father of Sri Krishna, had a son called Pundra, from the mother Sutanu, who eventually became a king (Karan, 1919, p. 36). Thus

Poundras were the descendants of King Pundra, and, therefore, were Kshatriyas. The term Pod was a corruption of Poundra, Poundarika, Padmaja, or Padma. The land where the Poundras lived or settled in came to be known as Poundradesh. That the Poundras were of high status, according to Karan, is proved by the fact that they were not prohibited from temple entry and that they enjoyed high social dignity in the sixteenth century. Karan refers to a list of twelve castes, grouped as Bratya Kshatriyas by Manu who mentions that three (Poundras, Udras, and Dravidas) of these twelve castes were exempted from being Mlechhaised, i.e. being "excluded from all religions" (Karan, 1919, p. 64). In other words, the Poundras in reference to Manu had had their religious rights intact. According to Karan, that the Poundras are not Mlechhas is indicated by the similarity of their language, manners, and customs to those of the Hindus or Brahmins (Karan, 1919, pp. 4, 6).

If Poundras enjoyed the status of the Kshatriyas how did they lose it and degenerate to the level of the Shudras? The reason given by Karan is similar to the one furnished by Ambedkar in *Who Were the Shudras?* Poundras were deprived of Upanayana. Indeed, as Karan observes, Poundras fell from their status due to living "unministered" by the Brahmins or being deprived of sacred rites (Karan, 1919, p. 18). This happened due to the wrath of Parashuram, as per the scriptures, who was on a mission to annihilate the Kshatriyas. Kshatriyas hence took "refuge in the hills and forests lying beyond the range of the Brahmin's formidable axe. Some Kshattriyas [*sic*] fled to other countries where they began to live in disguise of Sudras [*sic*], having given up sacred threads" (Karan, 1919, p. 39).

Perhaps, a major effect on the Poundras was that of Buddhism to which they converted and which distanced them further from Brahmanical rites. Bengal remained an area where Brahmanical civilization was yet to extend to for a long period of time and, according to Karan, it was considered "a prohibited area for the Hindus on account of its Buddhist connection" (Karan, 1919, p. 45). In fact, Bengal or Banga was held in low esteem and "mere trampling over its soil required re-sanctification" (Karan, 1919, p. 46). This is indicated, according to Karan, in a few possibly interpolated verses of *Anusasôn Pôrbo* of the *Mahabharata* where Brahmins are found cursing the Poundras to a Shudra state of life because they converted to Buddhism and refused to accept Brahmanical supremacy. However, from the eleventh century onwards, the Buddhist converts started embracing Brahmanism, the Kayastha group of Kshatriyas being the first (Karan, 1919, p. 48). Poundras were condemned as *jôl-ôbyaboharyo* (not as *ôsprishyo*/ untouchable) or that group of the Shudras "whose water is not accepted by Brahmins" (Karan, 1919, p. 55). In fact, those Brahmins who performed sacred ceremonies for the Poundras were excommunicated. Karan ends with the suggestion that the only way for the cultivating Pods to get back their glory is to perform ceremonies "in obedience to the directions prescribed by the Sastras [*sic*]" and thereby restore their "former prestige" and re-install their "original status" (Karan, 1919, p. 74).

Although Karan refuses to group the Poundras as Depressed Class (this will be challenged by other Poundras), his text contains common motifs of Dalit texts like pro-British, anti-independence (against immediate independence from the British

rule), and anti-Brahmanical stances. Even though he, like many others, ascribed a high social status and past glory to the Poundras, their maltreatment by caste Hindus was a fact and Karan knew it. Nor is his text silent about such maltreatment. One could argue that by desiring to reinstall an original Kshatriya status and by distinguishing themselves from the Mlechhas or those considered untouchables in some scriptural terms, Karan was not ready to annihilate caste but to simply reinstate an original Varna system. But one needs to be empathetic here. Karan's text was thoroughly anti-Brahmanical. In fact, the reclamation of Kshatriyahood in itself was subversive vis-à-vis Brahmanism. But the most important point was to reclaim human personality. It was a matter of self-respect of the community and to reawaken confidence in themselves, such historical and scriptural excavation was required. The need to do so arose also from the experience of being maltreated by Brahmin and upper caste officers in the Census department who used every opportunity to project the Poundras derogatorily as Pods (the word 'Pod' sounds similar to the Bengali word 'pnod' which is a slang for anus and is still used to abuse the Poundras). Karan's text, therefore, needs to be seen in the context of a series of self-respect movements launched by the Dalits in colonial Bengal. It might not have opposed casteism as scathingly as Periyar's Self-Respect Movement had proposed to do but the attack on Brahmanical hegemony, particularly the scriptural sanction of Brahmanical supremacy through corrupt interpolations, by non-Brahmins and Dalits must be taken note of.[2]

Apart from the English text, Karan wrote few others in Bengali and one of these needs to be mentioned here, namely, *Poundra Kshatriya bônam Bratya Kshatriya* (Poundra Kshatriya versus Bratya Kshatriya, 1927). Herein he strongly argues that the name "Bratya Kshatriya" should be dropped and "Poundra Kshatriya" should be used instead. Quoting the Manusmriti, he argues that twelve castes fell from Kshatriya status due to not being ministered by Brahmins, and Poundra is one of them (Karan, 2013, p. 126). Poundras, unlike Jhal, Malo and five other castes, were historically designated as actual Bratya Kshatriyas (this is discussed further later on). Even though they fell from their Kshatriya status, Poundras, for Karan, are not Bratya Kshatriyas. Although this logic seems problematic, and also inconsistent with his theorization in the English text, what Karan seems to be indicating is that Poundras did not lose their status altogether and that they were not designated as untouchables. This is a text written seven years after the English text and by this time the Poundra movement had undergone many upheavals. Therefore, it was considered confusing to categorize the Poundras as Bratya Kshatriyas and identify them with untouchables or even Jhal-Malo communities. Falling from grace but not being *bratya* (literally meaning "outsider")—this is a tricky logic. Karan's conviction, however, is infectious here, and he is completely in opposition to the likes of Raicharan and Benimadhav both of whom pushed for their community's designation as Bratya Kshatriyas. Karan reiterates that Pundra was one of five sons of King Boli and Bratya means one who is fallen from the rites, without being ministered by Brahmins. An additional argument is included: even if the Poundras fell from grace and were considered "Bratyas," to continue the term

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[2]Periyar, for instance, stated that "Amongst dogs you don't have a brahmin dog and pariah (untouchable) dog. Among donkeys and monkeys we do not find. But amongst men you have. Why?" (Periyar, 2016, n.p.).

to designate the community is antithetical to their movement for self-respect (Karan, 2013, p. 132). He, therefore, puts his foot down: one must not use this term! He quotes Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay in his support because Sharat Chandra opposed the use of the term "Bratya" (Karan, 2013, p. 134). Poundras were not fallen: they were descendants of Kshatriyas who were source of the name, Poundradesh (the land of the Poundras), unlike the Malos who derived their name from their place of residence, i.e. the Malabar part of the country. What is fascinating about these arguments is that they constitute an intra-community (within a specific Dalit community or across Dalit communities) debate, thereby developing an anti-caste intellectual tradition not controlled/ regulated/ overshadowed by a Brahmanical Big Other. This is where my reading of Dalit history of colonial Bengal differs from that of Sekhar Bandyopadhyay who argues, as mentioned already, that Dalits of colonial Bengal were subsumed by Brahmanical imagination.

Rajendranath Sarkar (1903–1979)

Important Poundra organizations were arguably concentrated at three key places in colonial Bengal: South 24 Parganas and Calcutta (important representatives included Raicharan Sardar, Benimadhav Haldar, Srimanta Naskar, and Hemchandra Naskar), Midnapore (Mahendranath Karan), and Khulna (Rajendranath Sarkar and Suniti Sarkar, among others). Whereas key spokespersons of Calcutta, South 24 Parganas, and Midnapore were focused on reviving their past glory through redefining themselves as Poundra Kshatriyas instead of Pod, those from Khulna, though they supported such movement, were more concerned about the then-prevailing poverty and backwardness of the larger Poundra community. When in the early twentieth century, the British government created the provision for reservation of jobs for a list of backward communities, and included the Poundras in it, Raicharan Sardar as the secretary of Poundra Kshatriya Samiti and others including Hemchandra Naskar violently protested the move. Allegedly, Hemchandra Naskar stated that he refused to be in the same list which included Dom, among other 'lower castes.' There was a strong split among the Poundras, and Raicharan Sardar, with support from colleagues from South 24 Parganas, wrote to the concerned authority to remove the Poundras from the list. This was resisted by Rajendranath Sarkar and others from Khulna who wrote a letter asking for inclusion. Following this tussle, all leaders and supporters of the Poundra movement agreed to meet in a conference on this subject held on 20 April 1935 in Ballygunj (Calcutta). In this conference, the Khulna representatives, fearing organizational split, momentarily gave in to the demands of Raicharan and Hemchandra who then wrote another letter confirming their collective stance to *not* include Poundra in the list. However, once Rajendranath and his team were back to Khulna they immediately wrote yet another letter confirming *their* position and demanding the *inclusion* of the Poundras in the list of scheduled castes (Sarkar, 2013, pp. 72–76).

What makes Rajendranath one of the uncompromising, radical, and prudent thinkers among the Poundras is his pragmatism to reflect on the present condition of the Poundras rather than dwelling on a once-upon-a-time glorious identity of the

past. He certainly had difficulty in opposing as towering a figure as Raicharan who had been a personal mentor to him and whom he, like scores of others, looked up to as their leader. However, he did not let his personal weakness or emotional vulnerability get in the way of a movement that was meant for the liberation and advancement of the collective. He was strongly convinced of the need to accept the opportunity of governmental protection for the Poundras because, without this, they would never be able to come at par with the caste Hindus, let alone compete with them. He believed that the governmental provisions would help the Poundras get electoral representation, educational advantages, and job opportunities. Unlike others, for him, the fight for recognition of the Kshatriya background of the Poundras was not in conflict with their inclusion in the list of protected castes. We should note that many backward caste communities, celebrating their past glory and high caste status, refused the government's proposal and were eventually excluded from the list. Their condition in postcolonial Bengal is pathetic and as Rajendranath as a practicing lawyer witnessed, many from these communities approached him later on to procure them false scheduled caste certificates for availing jobs, which he refused to grant (Sarkar, 2013, p. 76). The advancement of the Poundras today, whatever be the scale, owes much to the fight for reservation led by Rajendranath.

Such a radical move made by Rajendranath was deeply rooted, one could argue, in the dire poverty in the midst of which he, like many other Poundras, lived. His educational pursuit was repeatedly affected due to his inability to pay for school and college fees. He moved from Khulna to South 24 Parganas for schooling but eventually returned because the promise of fees being waived was not kept. Later on, he could study at a college only because the fees were reduced for him thanks to the intervention of Mahendranath Karan. In addition, he experienced caste-based discrimination and was maltreated as an untouchable on multiple occasions. In his autobiography *Jibankatha*—which is the second Poundra autobiography, the first one being Raicharan Sardar's *Deener atmakahini ba satya-pariksha*—he documents many such instances. First, when as a child he went to see a Durga idol and stood on the stairs of the temple, he and his companions were rebuked and were threatened to be beaten up had they stayed or returned there. While leaving, they saw that the stairs were being washed with cow urine (considered holy by the caste Hindus). Their touch was considered to have polluted the sacred Hindu space (Sarkar, 2013, p. 39). Second, in a school near Tala, Khulna, where he had been enrolled, the teacher told him in front of his classmates that he could not become anybody in life and that education was of no use to him due to his 'lower caste' peasant background (Sarkar, 2013, p. 38). Third, in his college days, he and his classmates participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement of Gandhi and all his classmates were admired by the principal of the college. However, when the principal came to know that Rajendranath was from a 'lower caste,' he immediately changed his behavior and an offended Rajendranath left the place and eventually distanced himself from the movement (Sarkar, 2013, p. 49). Many more instances of this kind, including how he was discriminated by his upper caste colleagues because he was a Dalit lawyer (Sarkar, 2013, pp. 65–66, 109–110) are grouped as *jater name bôjjati* (humiliating the 'lower castes' in the name of caste purity) in Rajendranath's autobiography.

The point here is that Rajendranath was one of the few Poundras who were not only very sensitive to casteism but also fully sensitized about how casteism functions and how it could be resisted. In the face of being maltreated as untouchables, it was not enough to make a counter-claim that Poundras were not untouchables or outcastes because historically they had been Kshatriyas. Such a claim for recognition of their glorious past would not, according to him, bring an end to discrimination. What was required was to empower the Poundras with financial capital and cultural capital— both of which were guaranteed by the protective measures of the British Raj—and thereby overcome their backwardness which was a socio-historical *reality*. In other words, Rajendranath's singular contribution to the Dalit resistance in Bengal was to ensure that the Poundras were on the receiving end of the redistribution of wealth, a possibility opened up by the new policies of the British Raj. For him, it is redistribution of wealth that was as important as the struggle for cultural recognition. Echoing critics Radha Sarkar and Amar Sarkar (2016, pp. 14–16) who, among others, developing on Nancy Fraser's theorization of recognition, argue that the question of material redistribution must necessarily be combined with that of cultural recognition in the context of Dalit politics, one could say that it is Rajendranath who, through demanding redistribution through reservation, completed the Poundra resistance and renaissance initiated through the politics of recognition by Mahendranath Karan, Raicharan Sardar, and others.

Rajendranath's contribution to anti-caste movement was much greater in scope than the above account. He contributed to the Poundra community in various capacities including as the founder of the Khulna Poundra Kshatriya Chhatrasangha (1922), President of Poundra Kshatriya Chhatra Parisad (1927), editor of the journals *Sangha* (1935) and *Poundra Kshatriya* (1938), first Poundra lawyer of the Khulna district, Poundra chairman of Khulna Local Board (1936), elected People's Representative (1931-1942 and 1946-1958) and Dalit candidate for the Congress Party (eventually becoming a minister in 1958). However, Rajendranath remained loyal to Congress for long and refused to join the Scheduled Castes Federation even after the insistence of Jogendranath Mandal who became a minister in the central cabinet of Pakistan after 1947 (Sarkar, 2013, p. 97).

Mahendranath Mallabarman (dates not available)

Mahendranath Mallabarman was a Malo thinker and not a Rajbanshi as has wrongly been claimed by Swaraj Basu (Barman & Sarkar, 2020, p. 33). Having the surname "Barman" does not necessarily mean one belongs to the Rajbanshi caste. Mahendranath was arguably the sharpest Malo thinker—a theorist even—of colonial Bengal and this is demonstrated in his masterpiece *Dwitiyo Varna Kshatriya O Jhal Mal Tôtvo* (1914). The term "tôtvo" here means "theory" and true to it, he theorizes the history and identity of the Malos as having Kshatriya roots. The challenge for him, of course, is to explain how an original Kshatriya group transformed into Malos, a fishing community. To accomplish this, he comes up with an extremely insightful critique of the Hindu scriptures.

His first critique is an interrogation of the Purusha-Sukta verse of the Rig Veda which mentions that four Varnas were born from four body parts of the Purusha or Brahma. Drawing on *Vishnupuran* which mentions that Brahma was born *after* the entire world was created, Mahendranath argues that Brahma, therefore, could not have been the creator of the world or of the Varnas (Mallabarman, 2020, p. 63). He questions the authenticity of the myth of Chaturvarna further by also mentioning, as in *Vishnupuran*, that Kshatriyas are said to have been born from the chest and not the arms of Brahma (Mallabarman, 2020, p. 61). As a matter of fact, he evokes the Vedic texts wherein even the peasant wives (Mallabarman, 2020, p. 49) are said to have composed hymns and wherein no birth-based caste division is mentioned except for Guna and Karma-based grouping (Mallabarman, 2020, p. 64). Thus, if the Vedas have to be considered as the most authentic texts or if *Manusanhita* has to be considered to be authoritative Sanhita then one has to also explain the inconsistencies and interpolations that might have corrupted these and other Hindu scriptures. He thereby concludes that the scriptures are to be taken with a pinch of salt and one needs to be careful while drawing any conclusion from them. Such interrogation of the scriptures reveals the potential *resistance* to the so-called "Sanskritization"—or emulating "the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahminic [sic] way of life by a low caste"—as formulated by the sociologist M.N. Srinivas (1952, p. 30). It is in this context that Mahendranath launched scathing criticism against *Brohmoboibôrto Puran*. A few verses in this text describe the Mal (Malo) community as a mixed caste (anuloma/ pratiloma) being born from a woman of fishing community. He argues that these verses are interpolations (Mallabarman, 2020, p. 82) and that this Puranic text comprises 3000 such interpolated verses which could never have been written by Vedvyasa (Mallabarman, 2020, p. 82). The truth is to be found in Manu, he argues, who mentions the Mals (Malos) as having Kshatriya roots. He further adds that the Malos were Aryans by blood. In fact, Mahendranath Mallabarman engages in a critical hermeneutic approach to the scriptures and reaches the conclusion that the Malos certainly belonged to the high social status and had been Kshatriyas in ancient times. He quotes passages from Manu to argue that Jhals/Mals were actually the children of Bratya Kshatriyas and Savarna women. Malos were not anuloma or pratiloma or mixed caste. Rather, they belonged to *dwitya* or second Varna, that is, the Kshatriyas. However, according to him, they were a special category of the Kshatriyas, i.e. Bratya Kshatriyas.

How are the Kshatriyas and Bratya Kshatriyas different from each other? For Mallabarman, Bratya Kshatriyas were those Kshatriyas who could not, for whatever reason, undergo Upanayana or the sacred thread ceremony at the right age. Different Varnas (except the Shudras) had different ages for Upanayana (Brahmins: 16 years, Kshatriyas: 22, Vaishyas: 24), and those who passed a particular age limit without Upanayana became Bratya Kshatriyas. Similarly, there were Bratya Brahmins and Bratya Vaishyas. Bratyas were not Shudras, Mallabarman emphasizes; they were potential *dwijas* (twice-born). It is just that they did not undergo the ceremony of being born a second time. Unlike the Shudras, he argues, Bratya Kshatriyas were entitled to religious rites. He even refers to the fifteenth Kanda of *Atharba Veda* which praises the Bratyas as those who are worshipped by the *dwijas*; as having rights to learn the

Vedic wisdom again; as possessing positive attributes like generosity; and as being a harbinger of divine blessing to their hosts (Mallabarman, 2020, p. 91). All these indicate that being a Bratya Kshatriya was not a matter of shame or disrespect but it was a matter of pride. Calling oneself Bratya Kshatriya also meant that one was much above the Shudras in the *Varna* ladder. Thus, the Malos were not Shudras but respectable Bratya Kshatriyas.

One is struck by how Mahendranath Mallabarman's interpretation of Bratya Kshatriya is opposed to that of Mahendranath Karan. For the former, the term Bratya is not an attribute of disrespect while for the latter it is. But Mallabarman gives a proper scriptural justification for his claim whereas Karan, somewhat under the influence of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, gives a literal reading of the term and dismisses it as derogatory. The history of being Bratya, for Mallabarman, is not a history of shame; for Karan, it is. One should mention that the Poundras had originally started calling themselves Bratya Kshatriyas before Karan opposed it. Karan had furthermore demonstrated that the Poundras, unlike the Malos, are not included in the list of Bratya Kshatriyas mentioned by Manu, which is true. Nevertheless, the rejection of the term Bratya, for Karan, is not just based on its absence vis-à-vis the Poundras in the scriptures but also, as mentioned, because it is a pejorative term. For Mallabarman, it is clearly not a pejorative term. It is these internal debates and disagreements surrounding naming in the process of identity-formation that make the Dalit intellectual tradition so critical and independent of the Brahmanical discourse which could not, unlike what Sekhar Bandhyopadhyay thinks, subsume the imagination of the Dalits.

The final argument provided by Mallabarman about Malos being Kshatriyas is very innovative. If Malos were Kshatriyas then how come their profession is fishing? His primary argument is that a change of profession is allowed in the scriptures and unlike *byabhichar* (sexual promiscuity or lack of chastity), *swôkôrmotyag* (leaving one's assigned profession) does not cause a fall from one's Varna status. If the karma or occupation fixed by the Shashtras is not enough for a living then a Brahmin, for instance, can engage in the karma of three other Varnas. Sri Krishna likewise engaged in *gochôron* (looking after cows) or worked as *sarothi* (charioteer). It is only when sexual and marital relation happens outside the specific Varna, or sexual immoralities are engaged in, that one loses the Varna status. Accordingly, fishing is a profession that anyone from any of the Varnas can undertake. Fishing is also nothing to be condemned because Vyasdev himself was the son of a *dhivor* (fisher) woman, according to Mallabarman, and still was worshipped by the entire Hindu society. Arjun, a Brahmin, is shown in the Mahabharata, as aiming his arrow at a golden fish which, according to Mallabarman, symbolically implies that fishing was permissible to the Brahmins as well. Given that fish is a common food, all Varnas have engaged in fishing. However, it is the logic of the Kshatriyas being predominantly in charge of fishing as developed by Mallabarman that adds to his intellectual innovation. Fishing involves killing or catching the fishes with weapons. Weapons are for the use by the Kshatriyas. Hence, fishing suits as a Kshatriya profession—it is their Swadharma (Mallabarman, 2020, pp. 99, 103–105). Therefore, there is no contradiction in being a Malo fisher and being a Kshatriya at the same time.

It is the innovativeness, logicality, and sharpness of his argument that makes Mahendranath Mallabarman an important Dalit thinker of colonial Bengal. However,

from his interpretation, it is not clear whether Bratya Kshatriyas became who they became, in course of time or due to some societal injustice. The exact difference between the Shudras and the Bratya Kshatriyas is also uncertain because, as Babasaheb Ambedkar argues, Shudras too were Kshatriyas, the descendants of King Sudas, who were deprived of Upanayana by the Brahmins (Ambedkar, 2014, pp. 118–130, 150–151, 206–209). Nevertheless, what one finds in this analysis for sure is the desire on the part of Malos, similar to the Poundras, to highlight that they are not Shudras, nor are they untouchables. Their resistance to being treated as untouchables took them in search of their history and revival of scriptural references and socio-cultural reformation. How much it helped them to deal with the material backwardness is a different question and had perhaps been addressed by only a few (like Rajendranath, Harichand and Guruchand). But the revivalism and reformation engaged in by them is indicative of a vibrant but forgotten anti-Brahmanical renaissance that took place at the same time as the Brahmanical Bengal Renaissance.

Conclusion

Multiple Bengali Dalit communities organized and mobilized themselves, convened scores of conferences and meetings, opened independent journals, magazines, and newspapers, and published innumerable texts in the colonial period under the British rule. Thanks to colonial modernity, capitalism, use of the printing press, and intervention of the British in social matters (albeit in their own interests), Dalit communities like the Poundras, Namasudras, Malos, Rajbanshis (a major community represented by the well-known figure Panchanan Barma, among others, whose contribution to anti-caste movement in colonial Bengal could not be discussed in this article due to the paucity of space) and others plunged into self-respect movements. From closely analyzing and criticizing the scriptures to launching independent socially transformative religious movement and then debating and eventually accepting the colonizers' provisions for protective measures including redistribution of wealth and proportional representation, the colonial period was a series of politically, socially, and culturally vibrant moments for the Dalits. The reformation measures undertaken by the Dalit groups were nothing short of revolutionary and the theoretical debates produced by them were unprecedented. Thus colonial Bengal witnessed a Dalit or caste-subaltern or rural renaissance-cum-resistance that the official history of Bengal, dominated by Marxist, Brahmin/ Brahmanical, nationalist, and urban historians, has failed to adequately and sufficiently take a note of. The history of Bengal Renaissance—which reserved no place for the emancipation of the 'lower castes', outcastes, and Dalits—is still celebrated from school textbooks to university discourses as the greatest moment of Indian freedom movement. But whose Renaissance was Bengal Renaissance? Whose interest did it serve? From 1858 to 1900 not a single Dalit student was admitted in the University of Calcutta (Haldar, 2015, p. 90). The Brahmin teachers of Sanskrit College resigned en masse when Kayastha students (not even the Shudras and Dalits) took admissions there. Vidyasagar resigned from a mainstream theatre committee of Calcutta when Girish Ghosh proposed that women actors from 'lower caste' and prostitute quarters will be recruited as actors (R. Bhattacharya, 1998, p. 9). Almost all

the reformers and revivalists were ultimately in favor for retaining the caste system and Brahmanical supremacy, and no effective resistance was built against the evils of casteism. Almost the entire landscape of Bengal Renaissance was populated, with a few exceptions, by Brahmin men (Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Bandyopadhyay, Keshub Chandra Sen, Debendranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and others) serving the interests of Brahmin patriarchy. Bengal Renaissance, therefore, was predominantly a Brahmanical Renaissance of, by, and for Brahmin men. An overemphasis on its glory would be tantamount to committing an epistemic violence to the Dalit renaissance and resistance that had taken place at the same time in the same province.

The above analysis has hopefully made it clear that, unlike what Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and others think, Dalit resistance and renaissance in colonial Bengal was not overshadowed by Brahmanical consciousness or controlled by Brahmanical imagination. The wide range and heterogeneity of Dalit thought and the long period of time across which the relevant debates evolved demand that we talk about an independent Dalit intellectual tradition and history that developed in colonial Bengal. In fact, the writings of Mahendranath Mallabarman and Mahendranath Karan, the latter being explicitly called a historian who wrote multiple treatises, go to the extent of developing anti-Brahmanical, sometimes even anti-scriptural methodology of history-writing and, therefore, an alternative Dalit historiography. But scholarship on colonial Bengal is largely silent about it. If caste Hindu historians from Bengal, who have been dominating academia for decades, are silent about the Dalit history and historiography of colonial Bengal, almost exclusively written in the vernacular language, then one cannot blame Kancha Ilaiah and others who have no access to the vernacular literature, for claiming that Bengalis have failed to diagnose the cancer of caste.

Acknowledgement

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Between the Global and Regional: Asia in the Tamil Buddhist Imagination

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Abstract

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Madras became home to a movement that anticipated Ambedkar's turn to Buddhism by nearly half a century. Founded in 1898, the Sakya Buddhist Society was led by Iyothee Thass (1845–1914) and became the first Dalit Buddhist revival of its kind in late colonial India. In this article, I explore the global dimensions of Sakya Buddhism through an intertextual reading of its journal, *Oru Paica Tamilan*, and the work of Asian Buddhists like Henry Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala who were associated with the movement. I argue that Sakya Buddhism's historical imaginaire of Dalits as indigenous Buddhists intersected with the political concerns that drove Asian Buddhist revivalist movements in important ways. I also show that the movement created a distinctly Tamil tradition of Buddhism for Dalits and attempted to reorient them towards the broader Buddhist world even as they had a notionally marginal presence within this landscape. In doing so, I propose the category of 'pararegional' as a way of thinking about seemingly uneven or unidirectional interactions between different spatial scales such as 'global' and 'regional.'

Keywords

Iyothee Thass, anticaste movements, Dalit Buddhism, colonial India, Asia, global history

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, British India and several parts of Asia witnessed calls for the revival of Buddhism in what was as much a religious endeavour as it was a political one. European imperialism had an important role to play in this development since cultural, intellectual, and political interactions within the Asian Buddhist world were

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not only shaped by established circuits of movement from premodern times but also by decidedly contemporaneous circumstances. Modern-day Buddhism is commonly understood to be a "cocreation of Asians, Europeans, and Americans" and several scholars such as David McMahan have argued that nineteenth century Asian Buddhist revival movements were premised on Asian engagements with modernity and anticolonial contestations of European imperialism (McMahan, 2009, p. 6). In Japan, for instance, the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate and the establishment of Meiji rule in the mid-nineteenth century precipitated "the most violent suppression of Buddhism in Japanese history," which compelled the Buddhist community to turn to America, Europe, and elsewhere in Asia and look for ways of reconstructing a Buddhism that would succeed under the new political regime (Jaffe, 2019, p. 20). In Ceylon, on the other hand, British imperialism and Christian missionisation were the main catalysts for a Buddhist revival. The absence of a Buddhist ruler in Ceylon since the removal of the last Kandyan king by the British in the early nineteenth century contributed to the sense that Buddhism had become weak on the island (Blackburn, 2010, p. 143). In addition, the influence of Christian missionaries and the persistence of caste-based divisions within Buddhist *nikayas* provided further impetus for a Sinhalese Buddhist revival (Amunugama, 2019, pp. 62–69; Prothero, 1996, p. 95).[1, 2]

Besides this, economic developments like the growth of new commercial networks and improvements in communication and transportation also influenced the nature of movement within the nineteenth century Asian Buddhist world. The contours of Buddhist pilgrimage, for instance, were shaped by the development of transportation networks in important ways. In the nineteenth century, Buddhist sites like Sravasti, Vaisali, and Lumbini remained somewhat overlooked while other sites like Bodh Gaya and Sarnath attracted large numbers of pilgrims from outside the subcontinent because of the easy access that railway lines provided to these places (D. F. Ober, 2016, pp. 165–166). In effect, the idea that the modern Buddhist world was shaped by "extensive interactions and interconnections across a variety of national, ethnic, cultural and colonial boundaries"has become historiographical common sense (Turner et al., 2013, p. 2).[3]

In contrast, much of the existing scholarship on the modern Buddhist revival in late colonial India has tended to overlook the broader global context that framed this revival. In social histories of anticaste politics, Babasaheb Ambedkar's formal initiation into Buddhism in 1956 is often taken to be the starting point of a flourishing Dalit 'neo-Buddhism' although this movement's relationship with the broader

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[1] In this context, the Sanskrit-Pali term *nikaya* refers to a monastic order within the Ceylonese or Sri Lankan Buddhist clergy rather than the foundational collection of Buddhist scripture known by the same name.

[2] Transliterations of all non-English words other than proper nouns are italicised. Transliterations of Tamil words, except commonly-used terms such as Dravida, follow the Madras Lexicon. Diacritics are completely omitted.

[3] Jaffe (2019, p. 67) theorises these interconnections as "complex global loops;" Blackburn (2010, p. 210) uses the term "locative pluralism" to describe the multiple affiliations that Asian Buddhists navigated in the nineteenth century; McMahan (2009, p. 6) argues that Buddhist modernism was "not the exclusive product of one geographic or cultural setting."

landscape of Asian Buddhism has, with some exceptions (Queen, 2002), scarcely received sustained scholarly attention. Nearly half a century earlier, Iyothee Thass's movement was similarly shaped by its interaction with Asian and western interlocutors in a foundational period of global Buddhist revival that laid the groundwork for Ambedkar's turn to Buddhism in the mid-twentieth century. Yet, Iyothee Thass's movement remains relatively understudied and its global dimensions even further neglected in the historiography of anticaste politics and Buddhism in modern India. This article adds to the small body of scholarship on Iyothee Thass and Sakya Buddhism by addressing two sets of historiography that have so far remained separate: first, the extensive body of literature on caste and anticaste thought in the Tamil south and second, studies of Asian and western Buddhist revival in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

One of the key problematics of studying the global dimensions of a socially- and culturally-rooted movement like Sakya Buddhism is that it occupied a marginal position in the landscape of Asian Buddhism within which it was located. This is because the Sakya Buddhist movement was resolutely Tamil in its intellectual and social character so that even as it spread to other parts of the subcontinent and beyond, its membership and influence were limited to the Tamil public sphere and the movement never acquired a 'global' or 'translocal' character in that sense. Through a close reading of historical imaginaires produced by Iyothee Thass and his Asian Buddhist interlocutors, this article proposes the category of 'pararegional' as a way of understanding the seemingly uneven or unidirectional interactions between global and regional sociocultural spheres. To that end, the article begins with an overview of Iyothee Thass's early life and his encounter with Olcott to locate Sakya Buddhism within the Asian Buddhist world. As we will see, Olcott's pan-Asian ambitions of Buddhist revival shaped Sakya Buddhism in important ways. This is followed by an intertextual reading of Iyothee Thass's work and his Asian Buddhist interlocutors whereby Sakya Buddhism's embeddedness in the Tamil print and public sphere is analysed in conjuncture with the movement's interest in the world beyond the Tamil south. The article concludes with a reflection on the category of 'pararegional' as a way of understanding the structure and extent of interactions between different spatial scales like 'global' and 'regional.'

Sakya Buddhism in Asia

By the late nineteenth century, the social world of the Tamil south was marked by the influence of colonial modernity. The East India Company's entrenchment in south India at the turn of the eighteenth century, visible not only in administrative and revenue arrangements but also in broader social and cultural changes, shaped the political sphere of this region in important ways. Dalit labour and Dalits themselves were at the heart of the colonial institutional edifice since the existence of a land surplus and the labour-intensive nature of crops cultivated in the Tamil south made control over labour central to agrarian production (Viswanath, 2014, p. 24). Most agrarian labourers were almost exclusively drawn from Untouchable castes so that

caste names like *Paraiyar* and *Pallar* were practically interchangeable with categories of agrarian labour such as *patiyal* and *pannaiyal* which indicated various kinds of wage classifications for landless peasants. In addition, their servitude was enforced through hereditary bondage agreements called *al-ataimanam* or man-mortgage, landlessness, violence, untouchability, and economic conditions like landlord monopoly over the means of production and an enforced lack of alternative work for Dalit labourers (Ibid., pp. 28–32). Although landowners or *mirasidars* were frequently at odds with colonial officials and their drive to increase revenue demand, both these groups were dependent on the agrarian labour on which the accumulation of surplus was predicated and by extension, both were implicated in the enforced servitude of Dalit labourers (Irschick, 1994, pp. 135–141).[4]

Iyothee Thass emerged as an advocate for Dalits within this social context in the 1870s, arguing that they were *Adi Dravidas* or original inhabitants of the land and ought to be counted as non-Hindus in the census. Not much is known about Iyothee Thass's early life except that he was born in Coimbatore as Kathavarayan and took the name of his teacher before moving to the Nilgiris region, where he practiced as a *Siddha* physician for several decades.[5] Thass became politically active through his encounter with Dalit communities during this time (Aloysius, 1998, p. 50) and several key motifs of his political life are visible in these initial years, which dovetailed broader social, cultural, and political developments of this period. The influence of missionaries in the Tamil south, for instance, provoked many well-known debates about untouchability and religious conversion in the Tamil public sphere since castes like the Paraiyars were among the first to embrace Christianity (Balachandran, 2008; Viswanath, 2014, pp. 40–70). Thass was evidently concerned with the question of Dalit religious identity early on and founded a religious organisation in 1870 to oppose Christian proselytisation and explore the emancipatory possibilities of Hinduism for caste subalterns. He was also involved in the emergent print culture of the Tamil south through the periodical *Dravida Pantiyan*, which he founded a few years before establishing the *Dravida Mahajana Sabha* in 1891 as a political platform for Paraiyars. Thass's early engagement with print culture and with questions of religious identity and political representation became central to the Buddhist revival that he later went on to lead. His initial turn to Buddhism, however, was occasioned by a chance encounter with Henry Olcott when he helped to organise the first Olcott Panchama Schools that had started to provide free education to Madras's Dalit children from the 1890s (Aloysius, 1998, pp. 54–55).

Popularly known as 'The White Buddhist,' Olcott was an American journalist and lawyer who briefly served in the US military during the American Civil War. His interest in Buddhism, Hinduism, and occult practices brought him from New York to Bombay in 1879 and to Madras the following year, where he established the headquarters of the Theosophical Society along with Helena Blavatsky. From

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[4] I use Dalit caste names like Paraiyar only for the sake of historical specificity and like Rupa Viswanath (2014, pp. xi–xii), prefer the term Dalit when writing in my own voice.

[5] The Sanskrit-Tamil term *siddha* here refers to a traditional system of medicine with origins in ancient south India. See Weiss, 2009.

the beginning, Olcott cast a wide net in his search for allies who would champion a Buddhist revival and his visits to Ceylon and Japan cemented his position as a leading interlocutor for Buddhism in Asia and the West. Stephen Prothero (1996, p. 97) notes that Olcott left as a "folk hero" after his first tour of Ceylon in 1880, a trip during which he formally became Buddhist, met leading Ceylonese monks, delivered lectures, and established the Buddhist Theosophical Society as well as numerous Buddhist schools. The following year, Olcott published a text called "The Buddhist Catechism" that brought him recognition as an authoritative interpreter of Buddhism, so much so that the Theosophical Society's journal reported a few months later that the book was not only cited by a lawyer in court but also accepted by the presiding judge in a dispute concerning the possession of a temple in Ceylon ('Buddhist Catechism - A Note', 1881, p. 24).[6]

A few years later, Olcott was invited to Japan by lay Buddhist notables who wanted him to "come and do for Buddhism in Japan the same thing which he has done for Buddhism in Ceylon" ('Off to Japan', 1889, p. 265). He was accompanied on this trip by the young Sinhalese monk Anagarika Dharmapala, who went on to become the father of anticolonialism and Buddhist revival in Ceylon. Olcott's tour of Japan was important for several reasons, not least because he announced his ambition to bring together Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism under his campaign for a "United Buddhist World." Even more significantly, he laid down a decisive vision for Buddhism's role on the world stage at a public meeting in Kyoto:

> We have these two things to do. In Buddhist countries, to revive our religion... And then, it is our duty - as taught us by Lord Buddha himself - to send teachers and preachers to distant lands, such as Europe and America, to tell the millions now disbelieving Christianity...[that they will] satisfy their heart in Buddhism. If I can persuade you to join your hands with your brothers in Ceylon and elsewhere, I shall think I am seeing the dawn of a more glorious day for Buddhism. ('The President's Japanese Tour', 1889, p. lxiv–lxv).

Olcott's call for pan-Asian Buddhist solidarity shaped Iyothee Thass's project of Buddhist revival from the very beginning. When Thass wrote to Olcott asking for his support to establish a Buddhist society in Madras, for instance, the latter responded by inviting Anagarika Dharmapala and the Japanese monk Kenzo Gunaratne to preside over a public meeting where the Dalits' claim to an ancient Buddhist past was presented in an open petition. As Olcott (1898) wrote in the Theosophical Society's journal, "They were convinced, from a study of Tamil literature, that their ancestors were of the Dravidian race and Buddhist...Their earnest wish now was to revert to it, and they looked to me, as a friend of the wretched, to tell them what to do and help them to make the start." Olcott then forwarded the petition to leaders of the Ceylonese Buddhist Sangha and arranged for Thass and P. Krishnaswamy, a teacher in the first Olcott Free School, to travel to Ceylon as representatives of Tamil Dalits. While there,

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[6] Prothero (1996, p. 101) also notes that The Buddhist Catechism went through forty editions and was translated into more than twenty languages and is still used in Sri Lankan schools.

both Thass and Krishnaswamy took the *pancasila* or Five Precepts in a ceremony that marked their formal initiation into Buddhism. They spent a few days meeting with senior monks in Colombo and Kandy before returning to Madras and establishing the Sakya Buddhist Society in 1898 (Aloysius, 1998, pp. 51–53). From its inception, therefore, Sakya Buddhism was in contact with a network of Buddhist figures, practices, and ideas from different parts of Asia and this shaped the movement's intellectual character in crucial ways.

Reading Sakya Buddhism

Much of what we know about Sakya Buddhism comes from the periodical *Oru Paica Tamilan* which was published by Thass from 1907 onwards. *Tamilan* is perhaps one of the few Tamil Dalit journals from the colonial period to have survived, mostly through personal collections that have not fully made their way into institutional or state archives. This is quite remarkable since as many as forty-two Tamil journals were published by Dalits between 1850 and 1947 (Balasubramaniam, 2020), which points to a history of material and historiographical erasure as well as the ability of anticaste radicals to appropriate print culture for their own political ends. For instance, the establishment of Fort St. George as the seat of British control in south India led to the development of the 'Madras School of Orientalism' which contributed to the "systematic recovery, publication, and public recognition" of classical Tamil literature as Tamil became a subject of study in emerging disciplines like philology, history, and archaeology (Ebeling, 2010, p. 22; Trautmann, 2009). Not only did this allow Thass to articulate a critique of the principles of caste embedded in classical religious texts but he was also able to reread the canon creatively and construct a distinctively Tamil Buddhist tradition for Dalits. In effect, Sakya Buddhism's appropriation of print culture to intervene in the Tamil public sphere meant that this sphere in turn shaped the movement's fundamentally Tamil character.

Anticaste engagements with print are immensely important for several reasons: first, they contest the dominance of caste Hindus and other elites in print culture and second, they not only offer vital critiques of caste but also unsettle other dominant constructs such as nation, class, and patriarchy in a colonial context where these were often central to anticolonial mobilisation. In keeping with the vast body of literature on Dalit vernacular and print cultures in colonial India, Iyothee Thass's engagement with the print medium and his marked preference for print journalism rather than the book have been studied extensively for its role in the creation of an anticaste readerly public (Aloysius, 2011; Jayanth, 2019; Kandasamy, 2008; Leonard, 2017, 2021). Yet much of the scholarship on Sakya Buddhism carries an overwhelming and narrow focus on its location within the Tamil print and public sphere. For instance, G. Aloysius's (1998, passim.) account of Sakya Buddhism takes note of the movement's interest in, and interaction with, the Asian Buddhist world but makes no attempts to theorise these connections in a systematic way. The rich body of scholarship and commentary on Sakya Buddhism published in Tamil over the last two decades has similarly neglected its interaction with the Asian Buddhist world, instead analysing the movement through

familiar themes of caste, colonial rule, and nationalism (Ponnovium, 1999) or engaging in a hermeneutic reading of Iyothee Thass's work through the frameworks of textual studies and political theory (Dharmaraj, 2019; Gauthaman, 1993, 2021; Rajangam, 2008). In somewhat of an exception to this trend, Gajendran Ayyathurai (2011, p. 216) does note that Thass's understanding of Buddhism was "transnational" and revealed "an openness to other 'nations' and cultures" but he does not delineate the nature, structure, or extent of this transnational aspect of Sakya Buddhism. This is also true of several other studies that detail the translocal and global engagements of movements like Sakya Buddhism but do not offer a theoretical account of how these engagements were structured and what we may learn about the nature of interactions between global and regional spheres through them (Ayyathurai, 2020; Balasubramaniam, 2016; Gauthaman, 2004). As we have seen, Sakya Buddhism was oriented towards a broader world beyond the Tamil south even as it remained grounded in the Tamil cultural context and this fine balance between its global engagements and regional embeddedness is especially evident in the movement's intellectual project, which we will now consider.

Much like the political circumstances of its formation, Sakya Buddhism's interpretation of the caste question was global in scope even in the initial period of its existence. Take, for instance, this essay titled "Mockery of the Poor" (*Elaikalin Ekkalattoni*) published in Tamilan in 1909:

> In the world's eyes, the poor in the populations of many continents (*parpala kantankalilulla makkalul elaikal*) are lazy, lacking in intelligence, and uninterested in learning, and so wander around in poverty. In this country where the dharma of Indra, that is Buddha, has flourished, the indigenous people (*purvakutikal*) who followed Indra's dharma have become impoverished despite being industrious and having skill, intelligence, and zeal…The intelligentsia and the elite pay no heed to the poor of this country, just as in other continents *(marrakantankalilulla elaikalaippol)*…[but] in this country, those who keep caste are honourable, and the casteless Buddhists who toil are poor, and they [the Buddhist Dalits] are oppressed under the deceitful garb of caste and the duplicitous clamour of religion each day. (Thass, 1999, pp. 592–594)

The idea that untouchability came to be institutionalised and Dalits were enslaved because of their affiliation with Buddhism in the context of the Buddha's contestation of Brahmanism in the early historical period is well-known in the anticaste tradition, most famously iterated by Ambedkar (1948, reproduced in Moon, 1979, vol. 7, pp. 311–355) four decades later. Departing from Ambedkar's emphasis on the role of beef consumption in the institutionalisation of untouchability, Thass contended that Dalits were an indigenous people of Buddhist faith who were deceitfully defeated by Aryan Brahmins in the course of their invasion of ancient south India and thereafter enslaved as Untouchables. The idea of Dalits as indigenous Dravidians (*purvakutikal*) clearly owed much to racial theories of difference between 'Aryans' and 'Dravidians' popularised by famous Madras Orientalists, as Ayyathurai (2011, p. 48) has noted. But more importantly, the Dalit claim to indigeneity served to underscore their alienation

from land in the predominantly agrarian context of Dalit servitude in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Tamil south, as we have seen. Further, the spatial coordinates of Thass's anticaste critique were evidently global in their very conception so that the peculiarly Indian institution of caste was not just a question of social and political salience within India but a crucial and shameful marker of difference between India and the rest of the world. Thass's historical imaginaire therefore weaves a narrative that speaks to the specific and regionally-rooted conditions of marginalisation experienced by Dalits in the Tamil south while also contextualising that marginalisation in a global frame.

In extending its conception of the Dalit Buddhist past to a global frame of reference, Sakya Buddhism converged with Asian Buddhist revival impulses in important ways. Take, for instance, the following excerpt from one of Thass's most prominent texts, "A History of Indra's Country" (*Intira Teca Carittiram*), a serialised account of India's past that appeared in the columns of *Tamilan* between 1910 and 1911:

> In the past, this country was also called the subcontinent of Bharat because in antiquity, the people of this country celebrated Prince Siddharta as the propitious one...the country that celebrated him [thus] was named north and south India…Throughout north India (*vatayinitiyamennum*), and from central Asia (*aciya mattiya kantamutal*) to the farthest end of south India (*tenintiya kataikoti varai*), Buddhist rulers endowed Buddhist Sanghas, disseminated the true dharma, instituted justice, ruled with kindness, saved other rulers from ruin as one of their own, and extended peace and goodwill to halt the growth of endless conflict…(*Ka. Ayottitasa Pantitar Cintanaikal,* 1999, pp. 15–23)

M.S.S. Pandian (2007, p. 109) has noted that Thass's readings of the past were marked by "ingenious and idiosyncratic interpretation of etymology, and remarkable flights of imagination," and nowhere is this more evident than in this text. Thass consistently uses chronological phrases like "in the past" (*purvam*) and "in antiquity" (*atiyil*) which, as Sumathi Ramaswamy (2000, p. 582) notes, mark "fantasy's resistance to a time-conscious disciplinary History." Thass then claims a Buddhist provenance for India by suggesting that the Buddha was known as Indra (*intirar*), from which the land of his birth (*intiya*) and its people (*intiyarkal*) derive their name, because he conquered the five senses (*aimporikalai venra tirattal*). Similarly, the play on the word *varatar* (divine or propitious one) to suggest a Buddhist genealogy for India (*paratam*) at once writes Dalits back into the origin myth of the country. Ancient India as *intira tecam* therefore appears here as a casteless Buddhist land to which Dalits can claim primeval ties of belonging and emerge as agentive historical subjects.

Much of this is a familiar line of reasoning in critiques of caste and Hinduism (Ramaswamy, 1997, pp. 24–34) but where this text breaks new ground is in its distinctly Tamil genealogy of Dalit Buddhism and its simultaneous conception of Buddhism as a world religion. This is especially notable in light of Ambedkar's foundational text, "The Buddha and His Dhamma," which does not mention the spread or presence of Buddhism outside the subcontinent and only makes one tangential reference to Ceylon and Burma while taking note of diverse interpretations of *ahimsa* within Buddhism

(Ambedkar, 1957, reproduced in Moon, 1979, vol. 11, p. 345). Sakya Buddhism, in contrast, evinces a keen sense of geography in its historical imaginaire so that it conceives of Buddhism as a world religion and delineates Buddhism's global presence by naming particular continents (*kantam*) and realms or countries (*tecam*, *natu)*. The use of these precise spatial markers is interesting, not because it speaks to a period in which it is natural to read nations and nationalisms back into the past but because it creates a world-historical role for ancient Buddhist India that explains the distinct nature of India's caste-induced impoverishment compared to the rest of the world. This implicit distinction between India and the rest of the world was important in the nineteenth century because it informed the Asian Buddhist world's interest in the revival of Indian Buddhism and formed the basis of Sakya Buddhism's continuous contact with Asian Buddhist figures. Sakya Buddhism's deliberate deployment of this distinction and by extension, its participation in the broader revivalist discourse of this period, is evident in the fact that it articulated Buddhism's appeal not only with reference to its casteless-ness but also with reference to its intellectual and cultural contributions to the world. Therefore, even in essays that were not part of texts like *Intira Teca Carittiram* which explicitly aimed to read Buddhism through the lens of caste, Thass conceptualised Buddhism as a notable world-historical phenomenon in its own right:

> Let us consider the development of medicine in India: so long as Buddhist viharas were present (*pautta viyarankal niraintirunta varaiyil*), enlightened men and Sramana monks were able to steer clear of laziness, deceit, falsehood, and jealousy and instead spend time honing their skills and knowledge for the benefit of humankind and all living things (*manumakkalukkum marrum civaracikalukkum*)…Historically, we see that the Arabians (*arepiya tecattor*) and several rulers such as Solomon (*calomon mutaliya aracarkalum*) heard of the intellectual accomplishments of India and came here to learn about the different branches of medicine…(Thass, 1999, p. 7)

Consider the intertextual resonances between this expansively global conception of Buddhism ("for the benefit of humankind and all living beings") and similar notions of Buddhism's world-historical significance in the work of prominent Asian Buddhists like Anagarika Dharmapala, whom we encountered briefly as Olcott's Ceylonese interlocuter. Dharmapala is known for his importance in the modern religious and political history of Ceylon but as Steven Kemper (2014) has noted, his legacy cannot be understood without considering his involvement in movements like Theosophy and Pan-Asianism which attempted to position Buddhism as a world religion of global appeal. That Dharmapala was influential in the Asian Buddhist world became evident early on when he was chosen to represent Theravada Buddhism at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, which was also the occasion of Vivekananda's famous speech as a representative of Hinduism. To that end, Dharmapala persistently foregrounded the question of reviving Buddhism in India as a way of soliciting support for a pan-Asian Buddhist revival and India consequently acquired a central role in the Asian Buddhist world. For instance, one of Dharmapala's cherished projects was the restoration of the

Bodh Gaya temple to Buddhist possession and he established an influential institution called the Maha Bodhi Society as well as a journal that circulated widely within the Asian Buddhist world.[7] In addition, Dharmapala travelled widely within Asia and the west to secure support for his project. When he approached the ruler of Siam, for instance, Dharmapala (1965, p. 332) argued that if Buddhists were to reclaim Bodh Gaya, it would "be a silent religious revolution and the twentieth century will see Buddhism in the land of its birth…and the historian would record this triumphant success which was accomplished in the illustrious reign of His Gracious Majesty Chulalongkorn, King of Siam."

In essay after essay and speech after speech published in the Maha Bodhi journal, including those of Thass and Ambedkar, India's ancient prominence and contemporary decline became the central plot of the Asian Buddhist revival in ways that echoed Sakya Buddhism's conception of the caste question. Consider, for instance, Dharmapala's public lecture at the Town Hall in New York which was sponsored by a local Sinhala restaurateur named K.Y. Kira. In his remarks, Dharmapala (1925, reproduced in Ahir, 1995, pp. 14–15) discussed Buddhism's decay in the modern world and noted by way of example that "the Indian Brahmans cling to caste and treat with contempt the two hundred millions of non-Brahmans." He then concluded by recounting Buddhism's glorious past and made a case for the need to revitalise its existence in contemporary times:

> The Buddhist missionaries of India civilised Asia 2000 years ago. They went to distant lands and taught them agriculture, weaving, painting, sculpture, horticulture, floriculture, architecture, hygiene, aesthetic arts, social etiquette, philosophy, psychology, music; and the civilisation that was purely Aryan spread in Tibet, China, Japan, Burma, Siam, Ceylon, etc…When the early Buddhist Bhikkus went forth to distant lands to preach the Good Law they went relying on the power of Righteousness...[and these] distant lands were brought under the Good Law of the Compassionate One not with the help of gunboats, but by the power of love of self-sacrificing Bhikkus who led virtuous lives…(ibid., pp. 8–15)

As we see here, the emphasis on Buddhism's global imprint in the world as well as India's central role in the emergence and spread of Buddhism was common to both Thass and Dharmapala and this remained true even after Dharmapala lost the lawsuit he filed to redirect the custodianship of the Bodh Gaya temple to Buddhists. As late as 1916, the Sinhalese politician Robert Gunawardena (1916, p. 112) who founded Ceylon's first political party, the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party, wrote in the Maha Bodhi journal, arguing: "It has been shown that China and Japan received the light from India and now it affords an opportunity for the Chinese and the Japanese to pay off their indebtedness by reviving Buddhism in the land of its birth and ameliorating it in the land of its adoption." Later that year, Dharmapala (1916, p. 261) concluded an essay he wrote by saying, "may we not hope that scholars from Burma,

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[7]The temple at Bodh Gaya had come into Saivite custody by the nineteenth century. See Trevithick, 2006.

China, Siam, Tibet, Ceylon, and Japan will come over to India and work hard to give the people of India their lost inheritance."

One important consequence of the focus on India as Buddhism's birthplace was that it created an implicit distinction between India and the rest of the world and foregrounded India's moral and material decline from its former glory as the locus of a vibrant Buddhist civilisation. This was also the central plot of Sakya Buddhism's historical imaginaire and allowed Thass to contextualise caste oppression through explicit global comparisons. Consider, for instance, this essay published in *Tamilan* on 3 January 1912 in which Thass attributes the decline of Indian agriculture to the debasement of labour produced by Brahmanism and contrasts this with the agrarian prosperity of the modern Buddhist world:

> Countries like Burma (*parma*), China (*caina*), Japan (*jappan*), and America (*amerikka*) have achieved agrarian prosperity with the help of their people and their cultivators, who have tilled the land and grown grain with their diligence, and thereby not only provided for their own people but also transported food to other countries and provided for people in those places, besides ushering in economic prosperity…[whereas in India] those Buddhist tillers (*pautta kutta velalatolilalar*) who resolutely resisted and refused to believe fabricated ideas about caste alone looked after the land and cultivated crops…while those who believed the Manudharma shastras, which established lower and upper castes, to be true were led to believe that the tiller's labour is debased and so left cultivation behind, to their own ruin. (Thass, 1999, p. 389)

This description is notable for two reasons: first, needless to say, it relies on the political value of a comparison between India, Asia, and America more than it does on a positivist reading of these economies and second, it mentions America alongside Asian countries with seemingly no distinction between both. This is because a wide variety of western actors were implicated in the emergence of modern Buddhism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as David McMahan and others have suggested. These included Orientalists like Max Weber and the Rhys Davidses, archaeologists like James Burgess and Alexander Cunningham, and Buddhist sympathisers like Olcott and Lord Curzon, both of whom supported Dharmapala's Bodh Gaya initiative in significant ways (Singh, 2004, Chapters 7, 8). Other figures like the British poet Edwin Arnold (whose book, "The Light of Asia," was the single most influential popular work on Buddhism) and the American writer Dwight Goddard also played an important role in the emergence of modern Buddhism (McMahan, 2009, p. 83; D. Ober, 2021, p. 3).[8] Entire intellectual movements like Romanticism and Transcendentalism were also influenced by Buddhism and became important purveyors of the religion in the west (McMahan, 2009, Chapter 3). While much of the west's interface with Buddhism was through Asian interlocutors like Dharmapala and their role in the emergence of

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[8] Ober notes that Edwin Arnold's book, by some accounts, outsold Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn and influenced everyone from Dharmapala and Gandhi to T. S. Eliot, Leo Tolstoy, and Herman Melville.

modern Buddhism was indelibly significant (D. F. Ober, 2016, pp. 11–14), the west nonetheless had an important presence in the Asian Buddhist world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. So much so, that Thass turned to Asia and the west not just as examples of prosperous modern countries but as examples of modern Buddhist countries that exemplified the ideal social and political order inspired by Buddhism:

> The eminence and distinction of the Europeans (*airoppiyar*), Americans (*amerikkar*), Chinese (*cinar*), and Japanese (*jappaniyar*) that is visible in their plentiful wealth and disease-free life, and in the happy and joyful lives they lead with one another is well-known in the world...their accomplishments exemplify the Buddhist teaching: "love wisdom" (*"vittaiyai virumpu" enum pauttarkal potanaiyin pati*). There is no doubt that their leadership and administration, their vision and principles, their advancements in education and cultivation are because of this. (Thass, 1999, p. 709)

The turn towards a broader world beyond the subcontinent, even with the rhetorical flourishes and embellishments that we see here, had important implications given that the Sakya Buddhist movement grew in influence and established its presence in many parts of India and the British empire through networks of labour migration in which Dalits were implicated. Within three decades of its establishment, for instance, the Society had branches near military bases in Nagpur, Secunderabad, and Bangalore, railway workshops in Hubli, mining camps in the Kolar Gold Fields, and labour camps in Ceylon, Burma, and South Africa. Further, Buddhist monks from Ceylon, Burma, and elsewhere in Asia and the west were a routine presence in the Sakya Buddhist Society's network of branches, offering religious instruction and presiding over ritual functions on important occasions (Aloysius, 1998, p. 69). For instance, in one of the most prominent branches of the Society at the Kolar Gold Fields, the Irish monk U Visuddha officiated the conversion of nearly "a thousand workers and their families" in 1907 (Cox, 2013, pp. 255–256). At the nearby Champion Reefs branch, the Burmese monk U Kantha established a "Young Men's Buddhist Association Library" in 1916, no doubt modelled on Young Men's Christian Associations, so that members would develop "the habit of reading Buddhist works and journals." To that end, the Society's headquarters in Madras served as a nodal point of transit to other places in Asia and this played a crucial role in connecting the Sakya Buddhist Society to Siamese, Burmese, Arakanese, and Sinhalese Buddhists (D. F. Ober, 2016, pp. 184–185). In effect, by turning to the Buddhist world of Asia and beyond, Sakya Buddhism not only created an emancipatory genealogy for Tamil Dalits but also reoriented them towards a global community of faith within which they could locate themselves.

Between the Global and Regional

To return to a theoretical concern with which we began in the introduction: how can we make sense of seemingly uneven or unidirectional interactions between global and regional sociocultural spheres? That Sakya Buddhism was part of a global network of Buddhist actors, ideas, and practices is evident but it is also clear that it never

acquired a global or translocal presence itself. As we have seen, this was because the movement's intellectual and social character remained resolutely Tamil in nature even as its network of contacts and influences as well as its geographical spread extended far beyond the Tamil south. Insofar as the trajectory of people, institutions, ideas, and practices across time and space remains a key line of enquiry within the subfields we know as intellectual and global history, intellectual itineraries that traverse varied spatial scales like the regional, national, and global present persistent problems for historians. As we know all too well, the historical experience of European imperialism and the epistemic influence of Enlightenment categories complicate any attempts to study the movement of people, institutions, ideas, and practices without replicating Eurocentric ideas of diffusion (i.e. the idea that foundational features of the modern world were birthed in Europe and then spread to other places) or Eurocentric assumptions about whether non-western historical phenomena can be favourably compared to their western counterparts and thereby considered authentically global in their significance (Chakrabarty, 2009; Chatterjee, 2004; Guha, 2003; Rao et al., 2001).

In the context of this article, constraints of space disallow an elaborate consideration of questions like how we may study global historical phenomena on terms other than those set by the west. In any case, these questions are somewhat extraneous here since we are not concerned with colonial encounters per se but with interactions across different parts of a non-western zone. To that end, we may benefit from Sanjay Subrahmanyam's (2015, pp. 131–132) suggestion that any historical study of the 'global' is "largely constructed around a reflection on space and geography" that requires us to "recognize that significant differences exist in geographically dispersed human societies, and to articulate those differences in some form of systematic understanding." In the historiography of modern Indian Buddhism, Douglas Ober's conception of "Banyan Tree Buddhism" is the only attempt to systematically understand the relationship between various strands of modern Indian Buddhism and the global Buddhist world. Ober (2016, p. 157) argues that much like the banyan tree "whose various branches have the appearance of being separate organisms yet stem from an often unknown single trunk," India's relationship with the broader Buddhist world took the form of a complex, interconnected web of branches with shifting centres and regional nodes. He also notes that "throughout the period that these societies were working to revive Buddhism among their respective locales, there was a current of communication, sharing and borrowing across cultural and geographical boundaries" (ibid., p. 192). This is qualitatively similar, if not identical, to other analytical formulations that propose to systematically understand the global landscape of Buddhism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as we saw in the introduction.[9] Nor does this formulation explain the nature or extent of "sharing and borrowing" that modern Indian Buddhist movements engaged in, as welcome as the emphasis on multidirectional circulation is. More importantly, the point that "international Buddhists may not have exercised much authority in the shaping of local traditions" even as they played an important role in creating the impression "imagined or real…of a larger, unseen Buddhist community worldwide" is well-taken (ibid.). Yet, it still does not tell us how and why movements like Sakya Buddhism chose to turn outward and look to Asia or the west in some instances while remaining firmly embedded in their regional sociocultural milieux in other instances. We therefore need

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[9] See footnote 3.

an analytic category to make sense of the balance between global orientations and regional embeddedness that we see in movements like Sakya Buddhism.

To that end, we may use the category of 'pararegional' in the sense of something that is more-than-regional to describe figures, institutions, ideas, or practices that are aware of, engage with, and participate in transregional or global developments while remaining regional in their intellectual and sociocultural character. The defining feature of this Janus-faced engagement is intended audience rather than influence so that pararegional formations like Sakya Buddhism are not failed attempts to acquire global influence but rather, historical formations oriented towards a transregional network of influences without aspiring to insert themselves into that network as global players since their intended audience is a regional one. In moving away from the presumption of global aspiration that often underpins our view of interactions between the 'global' and 'regional,' we may be able to better appreciate that many historical formations engaged with transregional or global developments even as they remained regional in character because regionally-grounded intellectual and sociocultural traditions proved more relevant, useful, and important for their political project. In this formulation, the 'region' that pararegional historical formations are embedded in may be defined on the basis of geography or as with Sakya Buddhism, language. Consequently, their intellectual and sociocultural character is regional by virtue of its appeal to people within a historically-cohesive geographical expanse (say, the region of south India as defined by a shared language family and common geographical features like coastlines) or people within a particular linguistic sphere (say, the Tamil or Malayalam sociocultural sphere).

More importantly, pararegional historical formations are not simply engaged in the derivative task of transmitting global developments originating in the west or elsewhere to regional spheres. As we have seen with Sakya Buddhism, pararegional formations engaged with regional intellectual and sociocultural traditions in exceptionally nuanced ways and synthesised their reading of these regional traditions with knowledge derived from their engagement with transregional or global networks. This is precisely why anticaste thinkers like Thass and Ambedkar chose to establish their own Buddhist traditions based on their reading of history (Thass relied on classical Tamil texts, as we have seen, while Ambedkar relied on Pali and Sanskrit texts) rather than simply joining established Buddhist schools like Mahayana, Theravada, or Vajrayana Buddhism that they were certainly aware of and in contact with. The deliberate way in which pararegional historical formations chose to define their regional sphere of operation is evident in the fact that while Sakya Buddhism was wholly Tamil in character, Ambedkar wrote his foundational text, "The Buddha and His Dhamma," in English and based his reading of history on Pali and Sanskrit rather than Marathi sources. This was clearly meant to create a Buddhist tradition for an Indian Dalit public outside the Marathi sphere and across linguistic boundaries. Further, consider the way in which Ambedkar describes the impulse behind the writing of "The Buddha and His Dhamma" in an unpublished preface to the text:

> I turned to the Buddha, with the help of the book given to me by Dada Keluskar. It was not with an empty mind that I went to the Buddha at that early age. I had a background, and in reading the Buddhist Lore I could always compare and contrast. This is the origin of my interest in the Buddha and His Dhamma. The urge to write this book has a different origin. In 1951, the Editor of the

> Mahabodhi Society's Journal of Calcutta asked me to write an article for the Vaishak Number. In that article I argued that the Buddha's Religion was the only religion which a society awakened by science could accept…I also pointed out that Buddhism makes slow advance is due to the fact that its literature is so vast that no one can read the whole of it. That it has no such thing as a bible, as the Christians have, is its greatest handicap. On the publication of this article, I received many calls, written and oral, to write such a book. It is in response to these calls that I have undertaken the task. (Ambedkar, 1957, reproduced in Zelliot et. al., n. d.)

I quote this passage in extenso because it shows the self-conscious way in which Ambedkar makes a distinction between the source of his interest in Buddhism and the immediate pretext for the writing of "The Buddha and His Dhamma." He first refers to Dada Keluskar, a well-known Marathi writer and social reformer who presided over a public event held in honour of Ambedkar's achievement in passing the high school certificate exam. Keluskar gifted him a biography of the Buddha that he had written for the Baroda Sayajirao Oriental Series, an imprint patronised by the Gaekwad of Baroda who later offered Ambedkar funding to pursue graduate study abroad (ibid.). He then refers to an essay he wrote in the Maha Bodhi journal published from the Society's Calcutta branch as providing the immediate reason for his interest in writing the text itself, thereby exemplifying the ways in which pararegional movements such as Navayana Buddhism engaged with global networks while also clearly delineating the regional nature of their audience and their political project. In effect, the category of 'pararegional' allows us to simultaneously consider the regional salience and global engagements of historical formations without viewing them as parochial and marginal actors within a global landscape.

Conclusion

The Sakya Buddhist movement was profoundly shaped by the broader context of Asian Buddhist revival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which involved a remarkable degree of intellectual exchanges, political convergences, and travel between East Asia, South Asia, and the west. As we have seen, Iyothee Thass's early encounter with figures like Olcott and Dharmapala oriented the movement towards a broader Buddhist world even as the intellectual and social character of Sakya Buddhism remained resolutely Tamil in nature. In other words, we have seen that Thass's intellectual project of constructing a Buddhist tradition for Dalits was firmly embedded in the Tamil print and public sphere even as it revealed an expansive conception of Buddhism as a world-historical phenomenon in its own right. Through an intertextual reading of historical imaginaires produced by Sakya Buddhism and its Asian Buddhist interlocuters, we saw that the expansively global conception of Buddhism was common to both traditions and this allowed Thass to contextualise caste in a global frame and thereby position caste as something more than a question of parochial salience within India. In effect, this historical imaginaire produced not just an emancipatory genealogy for Tamil Dalits but also a global community of faith within which they could locate themselves. We then dealt with the category of 'pararegional' as a way of describing interactions between global and regional sociocultural spheres that seriously considers the regional embeddedness of historical formations without

the assumption that these formations are merely smaller and localised iterations of the global developments that they engage with. In privileging the intended audience rather than the influence of (para)regional figures, institutions, ideas, and practices, we are better able to see their recourse to regional intellectual and sociocultural genealogies and their simultaneous engagement with global networks as a strategic choice rather than an inability to translate parochial political projects into global ones.

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The Dominant Post-constitutional Indian Feminist Discourse: A Critique of its Intersectional Reading of Caste and Gender

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Abstract

The dominant post-constitutional Indian feminist discourse is a product of diverse movements born from different histories. These diverse feminist movements continue to inadequately provide a comprehensive and inclusive theorisation of the relationship between caste and gender. Dalit feminist movements have successfully made 'Dalit women' a critical part of the dominant feminist discourse and have confronted it for including a caste framework as imperative to understanding the women's question. But the question of caste within the dominant feminist discourse has largely remained confined to reading and understanding the Dalit woman through the intersectional framework. Intersectionality is useful in providing a framework for categorising the Dalit woman and for highlighting the lacunae in understanding the intersections of caste and gender in existing discourses. Yet, when framed through the overarching lens of difference, it occludes the contingent co-construction of the Savarna woman and Dalit woman as categories, as well as the complicated relationality between these two categories. Treating intersectionality as difference, also ironically posits the Dalit women as a homogenous and essentialised category. This category is over-determined by vulnerability, exploitation, and, violence. Thus, the entire spectrum of experiences inhabited collectively by women placed under this category is erased. This article attempts to elucidate these arguments by focusing on West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. As two researchers from different locations, both disciplinary and socio-political, one a Savarna-feminist-ethnographer, the other a Dalit-feminist-legal-researcher, we then seek to understand what adopting a holistic anti-caste methodology rather than simply 'doing intersectionality', means while inhabiting both these locations.

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Keywords

Intersectionality, Post-constitutional feminism, Difference, Lived Experience, Essentialization, Homogenization, Anti-caste feminism

Introduction

In contemporary times, being 'intersectional' is in vogue, in academia and beyond. We can see a growing popularity of 'intersectionality' as a concept since 2014.[i] Increasingly used in popular discourses and conversations over the last decade or so, academics have recognized it as a buzzword (Davis, 2008). The idea of intersectionality, however, first took concrete shape in the discipline of law, particularly from Black feminist critiques of the legal process. Over the years it has become an important analytical framework in other disciplines and has moved beyond simply being an academic theory, to a 'way of being'. 'Being intersectional' is seen both as a political and theoretical position, as well as a methodological tool. The interaction of multiple identities and their experiences of discrimination and exclusion at multiple intersections have been avidly theorised in feminist studies through wide methodological variations. Feminist writings assert that intersectionality, broadly, cannot be defined. The core critique as well as the potential of intersectionality in feminist thinking lies in the lack of a clearly defined intersectional methodology (Nash, 2008; Davis, 2008).

The article seeks to develop a critical understanding of the concept of intersectionality, as deployed in the Indian context. While, the term intersectionality was not used by the mainstream Indian feminist movement in its early stages, the idea was invoked in terms of its assertion of difference—difference shaped by the post-colonial Indian context, as compared to Euro-American white feminisms. Post the 1990s, intersectionality entered the Indian feminist lexicon, following Dalit feminist assertions. These assertions drove home the point that the experiences of Dalit-Bahujan women were different from that of upper-caste women, whose experiences had formed the basis of the Indian feminist movement. Being inspired by Black feminist thought, these assertions subsequently emphasised the importance of understanding Dalit women's lives as being shaped by the intersection of caste and gender. It also became an important tool in legal battles for seeking justice in cases of violence against Dalit women.

However, we argue that in the present context it is important to uphold the importance of the concept of intersectionality in politico-legal praxis, while simultaneously critiquing the deployment of this concept by upper-caste feminist academia. By focusing on two case studies, we argue against reading the intersectional category of the Dalit woman as a self-standing homogenous category. The first case study emphasizes the importance of understanding how the category of Dalit women is co-constituted with the category of the upper-caste woman, making it imperative to read the two categories together. Through an ethnographic work on Dalit/Bahujan[ii] women of Partition-migrant families, in a non-metropolitan town in West Bengal, it tries to contest the myth that the Partition led to the shattering of traditional structures of caste and gender, in Bengal. It argues that upper-caste women's public presence, especially in paid labour, in the aftermath of the Partition did not lead to the dismantling

of the caste-gender system. Rather upper-caste women used their caste privilege to simultaneously distinguish themselves from Dalit women and devalue their labour for their own benefit. Upper-caste women's empowerment then was directly related to the continued oppression of Dalit women. The second case study argues against reading the category of Dalit women as a homogeneous category over-determined by violence and oppression. It highlights that in post-constitutional India, Dalit women have asserted their agency and self-hood in various ways despite facing marginalization. It compares two incidents of caste-based violence in Shabbirpur and Hathras, Uttar Pradesh respectively. The argument here is that differential degrees of political and economic mobility have led to differential possibilities of resistance. Dalit women in Shabbirpur put up a spirited resistance against upper-caste violence. This resistance was built upon Ambedkarite politics and its evolution into constitutional rights for Dalits. It is such socio-economic mobility and assertion of political agency by Dalits which has brought incidents such as Hathras, to national focus, rather than upper-caste benevolence.

The article begins by providing a short history of the evolution of intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological category in feminist thought. Concurrently, it also briefly focuses on its use as a legal concept. It then tries to map the history of how the intersection of caste and gender has been theorized in the Indian context. Such theorizations, subsequently coalesced in the evolution of a 'Dalit feminist standpoint'. It then tries to map some of the ways in which intersectionality and its (ab)uses have been called into question by anti-caste feminists. Taking this critique forward, the article tries to situate these debates through two ethnographic examples and provide some possible ways to critically rethink the concept of intersectionality for an anti-caste politics.

'Intersectionality'- the concept: Its evolution, critiques, and contemporary significance in India

For the purpose of this article, it would be essential to understand the historical trajectory of the concept of intersectionality. The critical legal studies and critical race theory movements, in the United States, during the 1970's, brought with it a radical questioning of the law and its interaction with race. Critical legal studies theorists claimed that the law was devised to maintain the status quo of society and therefore, the law continues to be biased and discriminatory against marginalized communities. Simultaneously, Black feminist writings such as that of critical race theorists bell hooks (1984), Audre Lorde (1984) and Patricia J. Williams (1991) asserted that decentring of the white, western, heterosexual, middle-class woman is critical for feminist discourse and feminist politics. Their work asserted the necessity to read the two categories of 'woman' and 'Black' to illustrate differences. In this process they complicated the understanding of discrimination and exclusion. Taking these critical interventions in legal philosophy and feminist movements further, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) devised "intersectionality" as a method to question and lay bare the bias of the legal system, through the metaphor of a road intersection. She argued racial discrimination and gender discrimination were two separate roads and at the intersection of these roads lie the experiences of Black women, therefore, the term 'intersectionality'.

Intersectionality and its deployment as a concept came to be severely critiqued in the recent decades. Bilge (2013) has argued that the potential of a concept cannot be divorced from its concrete uses. As in the case of other travelling theories, intersectionality fell prey to widespread misinterpretation, tokenization, and displacement as it travelled across disciplines and geographies. To Bilge (ibid.) an important marker of the success of intersectionality as a tool depends on whether its introduction leads to the empowerment of subordinated groups or is it instead used to further subjugate them. She argues that co-optation of intersectionality by 'disciplinary feminism' works to cover up disciplinary feminism's "own strategic situation... and its racial privilege- whiteness" (p. 415). Claiming a broadened history of the intellectual trajectory of intersectionality represents white feminist thought as intersectional thought, undermining the specific contribution of women of colour.

Another critique of intersectionality is that it essentializes categories, eliminating complexities and differences. This is what McCall (2005) explicates through the concept of *anticategorical* complexity and *intracategorical* complexity. Anticategorical complexity according to McCall (Ibid.) is linked to feminist poststructuralists who deconstruct and reject essentializing social categories. They interrogate the concept of boundary-making of categories itself in the face of irreducible social complexities. Secondly, the intra-categorical complexity is connected to Black feminism and focuses on specific social groups which are neglected points of intersections" (McCall, 2005). She endorses an intra-categorical approach as a possible way out which requires a strategic adoption of existing analytical categories, while maintaining a critical stance towards them.

Intersectionality has allowed overlapping identities of gender, caste, class, race, queer, and disabled, etc., to be incorporated into an analytical framework for judicial and legal praxis. It provides for a theoretical framework to deconstruct multiple forms of discrimination in a court of law, which then has the potential to embed an anti-discrimination ethos in society. Yet, comprehensive understanding of intersectionality as an analytical framework is non-existent in Indian legal praxis and jurisprudential thought till date. Indian legal praxis reads the category of the Dalit woman through a singular lens of violence, i.e. 'atrocity'[iii] and it fails to read the multiple forms of discrimination that form the experiences of Dalit women at the intersections of caste, gender, class, and region. Atrocity judgments fail to take into account the complex functioning of caste through land, power, and regional hierarchies and its impact on Dalit women's experiences. Until the Indian legal system does not utilise the intersectionality framework as a judicious tool for adjudicating cases of atrocity and discrimination, Dalit women's struggle for equality and basic human rights will continue to remain flawed (Rao, 2009; Kumar, 2020). Thus, the idea of intersectionality continues to be an important tool for anti-caste politics and legal activism.

Even though the battle to introduce an intersectional understanding to the recalcitrant and casteist Indian judiciary continues to be a long and frustrating one, intersectionality has become part of disciplinary, mainstream, feminist common sense. Yet, such common sense has reduced it to a simple assertion of Dalit difference from upper-caste women. The complex relationality between upper-caste/Dalit women and the former's complicity in the oppression of the latter is eschewed. Simultaneously,

the lens of difference has led to non-upper-caste, especially Dalit women, being seen as a homogenous category, over-determined by violence and oppression. Differences within the category of 'Dalit women' are papered over despite the multifarious paths to self-assertion taken by Dalit women in post-constitutional India. The consequence of such an understanding has been that any possibility of locating agency in the biographies of Dalit women leads to a questioning of their 'authentic' Dalitness and marginalisation. Thus, it becomes important to critique its current usages while upholding its importance. We now attempt to expand on these arguments through reading intersectionality and its trajectory in Indian feminist discourse.

Theorizations of the intersection of caste and gender in Indian feminism

The idea of intersectionality entered Indian feminism through Dalit feminist thought. It argued that caste and gender are interlocking systems that produce specific experiences for women situated at the intersections of these systems, i.e. Dalit women. Paik (2014) and Ghosh and Banerjee (2018) situate the beginning of an intersectional thinking, especially in relation to the categories of caste and gender, to Jyotirao Phule (1991) and Savitribai Phule (2011). They saw caste and gender as parallel but mutually reinforcing categories of marginalities that shaped one's socio-economic reality. This legacy was taken forward by Periyar (2009), who argued that the Brahmanical order created dual marginalities for the lower castes and women which could only be undone by renouncing caste privilege and religious faith. These ideas are in continuity with Ambedkar's theorization that "the superimposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste", making caste and gender intersecting systems (Ambedkar, 2002, p. 246).

Intersectionality over the years has become a pertinent method for Dalit feminists to theorize the experiences borne out of the intersection of caste, class, and gender. Patil (2017) argues that though the women's movement in India attempted a sophisticated analysis of the inter-relations between class and gender, it never "addressed the problem of Dalit women as fundamental caste-based Indian reality" (Ibid., p. 3). It was only in the 1990s, that the Dalit feminist critiques posed serious challenges to established feminist canons (Rege, 2006). [2] It questioned the "limited reading of the materialist determinants of brahmanic knowledge producers/systems that cut across the spectrum of political ideologies" (Patil, 2013, p. 38). Dalit feminist politics also pointed out to the patriarchal biases within and amongst Dalit politics, spurring Guru (1995) to argue that Dalit women need to 'talk differently'.

Dalit women's autobiographies in vernacular languages provide for the first source of reading Dalit women's experience and difference. Urmila Pawar's (1988) autobiography *Aaidan* (Weave of my Life) is an intimate and explicit account of her struggles while attempting to learn the skills of reading and writing. Her work popularly put forth the perplexing realities of Dalit women's lives. Bama's (1992) autobiography *Karukku*, which was translated from Tamil, is a quest of the self. It narrates her stigmatized life as a Dalit student and her rage when it struck her that she would not be rid of caste, whatever she studied, wherever she went. These writings are

an expression of pain, struggle, and suffering whilst clawing their way out of a life of discrimination and exclusion to a life of self-assertion and self-hood.

Furthermore, during this time, critical contributions by Dalit women activists and scholars articulated and conceptualized Dalit women's difference. Gail Omvedt[iv] (1979) as early as 1979 coined the, now popular, marker for Dalit women: "downtrodden amongst the downtrodden". In her trailblazing ethnographic interaction with a Dalit woman agricultural labourer, Omvedt delineated the notion of the Dalit woman's "double oppression." This interaction for Omvedt led us to reading 'dual vulnerability' in the lives of Dalit women—one that of violence and discrimination within the homes, and the other being outside the home. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon (1989), for the first time, provided for a history of Dalit women's experiences and participation in the Dalit movement. This crucial piece brought forth, through an ethnographic study, Dalit women's journey of self-assertion and self-representation rooted in Ambedkarite politics These writings by Dalit women brought to life their protests and rebellions rather than just violence and victim-hood that have come to mark the category of the Dalit woman. Ruth Manorama (1992) elaborated on the notion of "downtrodden amongst the downtrodden" Dalit woman through a historical reading of caste. She intricately laid out its implication on the Dalit woman's identity as "thrice burdened". Vasantha Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran (1991) wrote that the caste question is enmeshed with the woman's question. When understanding oppression, caste and gender are "twin mediators" from the onset. These writings laid out the "double oppression", "thrice burdened", and "downtrodden amongst the downtrodden" as markers of Dalit women's identity. Through this language Dalit feminist movement and scholarship asserted for the caste, class, and gender intersection as being critical to mainstream feminist discourse. It laid the path for the creation of autonomous Dalit women's organizations which then, strengthened and led the struggle for human rights advocacy and implementation of anti-discrimination policies, at the national and international level. It is the result of such activism and critique that then led the mainstream Indian feminist discourse to bring in a caste critique essential to its politics and praxis. It led to the development of Dalit feminist standpoint heavily utilizing the concept of intersectionality over the years. Subsequently, it came to be argued by upper-caste feminist academia that an intersectional Dalit feminist standpoint should be taken up by upper-caste theorists for holistic and robust feminist formulations (Rege, 2003, 2006; V.Geetha, 2016; Rao, 2003, 2010, 2018).

It can be argued that Dalit feminist standpoint, as established by Dalit women, was the result of reorganization and political theorization of their lived experiences. This was done through a sustained participation in anti-caste politics. Alosiyus, Mangubhai, and Lee's (2017, 2020) work deserve special mention in this regard. This seminal work, through a quantitative and qualitative study, explicitly used intersectionality as a theoretical framework to analyse Dalit women's experience. They argued that the patriarchal violence against Dalit women, especially sexual violence, is not an archaic remnant of the caste system. Such violence plays an important role in the agricultural economy, where it is used to keep Dalit women tied to the subsistence economy and continuously devalues their labour.

Within upper-caste academic feminism intersectionality subsequently came to be highly critiqued and defended as well. On the one hand, Menon (2020) argued that intersectionality, when applied as a universal category, becomes a tool in the hands of the neo-liberal regime. Shah and Lerche (2017), similarly privileged the political economy approach over the intersectionality approach, as a theoretical method. On the other hand, feminists like John and Gopal (2020) argued in favour of intersectionality, as a method, which challenge existing structures while offering an important corrective to the propensity of Indian feminism to think in a single-axis manner. Ghosh and Banerjee (2018) further argued that the essence of intersectionality is in "the acknowledgement of mutually constitutive nature of social categories and the consequent location of groups". An important way of doing so is by focusing on the lived experience of subjects placed in different categories. A focus on lived experience according to them is not divorced from an understanding of structures, rather it deepens such an understanding.

Theorizing lived experience, however, is a complex terrain. It is not a given fact, waiting out there, to be retrieved (Sen Chaudhuri, 2018; Mahadevan, 2020). Lived-experiences of the marginalized become critical standpoints through their involvement in political struggles, as seen in the case of Dalit women theorizing their own lived experiences (Harding, 2004; Jagger, 2004). The same does not hold good for all kinds of academic enterprises trying to understand/re-present the experiences of Dalit women, where the element of biographical experience as well as political struggle is not always present (Herbert, 2020). When non-Dalit women take up the study of Dalit women especially through the lens of difference and (in)visibility what happens is an essentialization of difference (Sen Chaudhuri, 2018). In this kind of an analysis the difference in lived experience is over ridden by the claim that despite differences, between Dalit and upper-caste, all women are similarly victimized by the kind of oppression they face. A concrete example of this kind of theorization is the concept of Dalit patriarchy—where it is argued that while upper-caste women face Brahmanical patriarchy in their homes, Dalit women face Dalit patriarchy- especially in contexts of social and political mobility (*sanskritization*). Herbert (2020) and Arya (2020) both vehemently argue the empirical adequacy of the concept of Dalit patriarchy. They also posit that it is theoretically misleading to assume Dalit patriarchy as a separate system which is equivalent to Brahmanical patriarchy. Upper-caste women as much as upper-caste men benefit from the imposition of caste-patriarchy on the lives of Dalit women, arguably more than Dalit men.

Conversely, difference can also lead to claims that Dalit women's experiences are completely different from that of the upper-caste woman. When experience is acknowledged as completely different, it either makes lived experiences of upper-caste women completely opposite to the Dalit woman, or the difference is fetishized so much that it becomes an isolated difference that is absolutely compartmentalized. Jenny Rowena (2012) argues that fetishization and celebration of the Dalit woman's sexual agency by upper-caste women, in contrast to that of themselves, is ultimately inimical to the cause of Dalit women. It seeks to preserve the traditional boundaries between these two categories, rather than dismantling them. Both Paik (2018) and Rowena (2012) argue that the simplistic idea of difference, often translates into the

argument that Dalit women, with socio-economic mobility, through the process of *sanskritization,* consent to increased patriarchal control. Upper-caste women on the other hand, are understood to exhibit increased feminist tendencies through experiences of socio-economic mobility. Paik (2018) goes on to argue that this conception is inadequate and the problem lies in the interlocking 'technologies' of caste, gender, sex which make Dalit women "especially vulnerable to accusations of immorality and vulgarity".

Paik (2014) also highlights the multifarious experiences and trajectories of Dalit women in post-constitutional India. The variations in educational access resulting in socio- economic mobility leads to a variegated experience of marginalization as well as resistance, thus impacting the theorization of Dalit women's lived experiences.

Our set of interventions draw upon such critiques to question Dalit feminist standpoint as emerging out of simply 're-presenting' Dalit women's lived experiences in academic enterprises and seeks to nuance the idea of re-presentation itself. Let us illustrate these two sets of concerns with examples from our respective case studies.

Intersectionality and relationality: The Partition and its telling in West Bengal

This section seeks to rethink the feminist theorization of the Partition and its aftermath in West Bengal by taking Dalit women, situated at the intersections of caste, class, gender, labour and region, as its protagonist. It argues that even though the upper-caste researcher cannot come to possess a Dalit feminist standpoint, it is possible to relationally listen to Dalit women's recounting of their experiences. This leads us to challenge existing feminist canons, as well as leads the researcher towards a self-reflexive questioning of her own privilege and categories of analysis informed by such privilege. Such relational listening brings to sharp focus the co-constitution of the privilege of upper-caste women and marginalization of Dalit women, obscured by a simple lens of difference. It then questions easy uptake of intersectional thinking by upper-caste feminists, urging them to arrive at a politics of allyship by unlearning, rather than assuming it as an a-priori axiom.

The Partition of British India (1947) is a watershed moment in South Asian history. It forced millions of people to lose their homes and become 'refugees'. While the state-sanctioned nationalist narrative in India attempted to depict this as a necessary cost of independence, the refugee counter-narrative resisted such an understanding of the Partition. In continuation with this trend in West Bengal, a state which received maximum refugees along the eastern border, the refugees emphasized the human cost of Partition. The statist strand blamed the refugees for their own dismal fate. Against this, the refugee narratives highlighted their heroic struggles while constantly focusing on their victim status. They tried to draw attention to the government's apathy towards their extreme socio-economic vulnerability and highlighted their resilience and self-reliance in rehabilitating themselves. They simultaneously sought to define their victimhood through middle-class upper-caste (*bhadralok)* norms, where women's public presence was seen as a source of trauma (Sen, 2011, 2014). Bengali feminists sought to contest this narrative of trauma in their theorizations.

In the aftermath of the Partition, having become refugees, women of the upper-caste refugee families had to take up the role of breadwinners 'giving up their own desires'. This was due to the financial exigencies of their situation. The *bhadrmahila* (upper-caste genteel women) construction of femininity based on a brahmanical patriarchal system had so far prevented upper-caste women from working publicly in paid labour. Even though participation in paid work by upper-caste women, came from a place of serving the feminine duties of providing for the family after the Partition, feminists celebrated this as empowerment. They argued that whatever be the cause of this large-scale participation of upper-caste women in paid work, it pushed women towards education and employment. These gendered gains were then continued in the future generations as well, especially in refugee families (Bagchi, 2007; Chakravarty, 2005; Chakravarty, 2016).

The historiography of gendered labour in colonial Bengal, as done by Sarkar (1989), Sen (1999), Chatterjee (1993), Banerjee (1990), however, points to the fact that women's engagement in public labour in the cities of Bengal was not a new phenomenon. Women who were traditionally engaged in public labour were largely Dalit/Bahujan women (*Hari, Muchi, Bagdi, Dom*). Upper-caste women who engaged in public labour, were mostly widows abandoned by their families. Historical contingencies pushed them to take up informal kinds of employment as domestic servants, washer women, etc. Ray and Quayum (2009) and Sen and Sengupta's (2016) work point out further feminization and gradual cheapening of domestic work in post-Partition Bengal, whereby it was largely Dalit/Bahujan women who took up such work.

Given this background, researcher one's[v] work sets out to ethnographically understand the SC/OBC's[vi] refugee women's experiences of post-Partition rehabilitation and in particular their experiences of paid labour. It takes Asansol, a non-metropolitan city of West Bengal as the context for a study. Refugees from government camps who were largely Dalit/Bahujan were sent to Asansol to support its industrial development. The case of Asansol, a primarily industrial context is interesting because it may be argued that the dissociation from the rural-agricultural economy might mean greater freedom from caste-based structures which have been associated with the rural-agricultural setting. Yet, it is interesting to note that post-Partition when women from SC/OBC backgrounds in Asansol had to seek paid-employment, they invariably found themselves in the most exploited professions in the informal sector. These professions largely, also had a historical trajectory of being associated with Dalit/Bahujan women, such as domestic work, the work of being *ayahs* ('unskilled' caregivers in the medical profession), selling wares in the market or doing piecemeal contractual labour from a home-based set up.

A detailed study of secondary literature on colliery labour which was the major industrial enterprise in Asansol's period of formation and growth as an urban centre, found that industrial labour in Asansol had always been extremely exploitative and caste-based. A significant proportion of the Dalit/Bahujan labour in the collieries were, however, women. After independence the proto-slavery like conditions of industrial labour engagement became difficult to sustain and even more difficult to replicate given the professed ideals of the new nation-state. Under these circumstances, Dalit/

Bahujan refugee-labour from camps became a suitable alternative to support the industrial expansion of Asansol. Refugee-industrial labour was predominantly male because colonial policies together with the gendered ideals of the *bhadraloks*, pushed out Dalit/Bahujan women from blue-collar formal employment.

The refugee families who came to Asansol previously owned small plots of land or were engaged in petty trade or less frequently formed the lowest rungs of the colonial professional class. A pervasive socio-political insecurity augmented by the flight of upper-caste Hindus in positions of power, in an Islamic state guided their decisions to migrate. Upon migration they had little to fall back upon having lost their means of subsistence and became dependent on government help, as camp refugees. The minimum socio-economic security they enjoyed in the camps was lost once they came to Asansol from the camps. Industrial expansion in Asansol was yet to begin in full swing and in the initial phases they took up piece-meal work, including that of building roads, laying down railway tracks, and so on. They were paid by the government on a contractual basis. Later the opportunities of employment became available in the industries but the remuneration was extremely low. Most families in this study could not afford to take up such employment and continued in informal employment such as that of masonry, carpentry, welding, and selling wares such as clothes, food, etc. The women of these families had to often, simultaneously take up paid employment in professions mentioned above because their husband's income was inadequate and erratic.

Those who could continue in formal employment however, improve their conditions, especially after nationalization of many industries. Many such families were able to educate their future generations—both sons and daughters, and their children were able to find formal employment. But very few were able to continue in formal employment because of wide-scale industrial closure that began to haunt Asansol in the 1980s and got expedited in the following three decades. Industrial closure also meant that for the subsequent generations of these refugee families who were not able to secure enough educational capital there were very few opportunities of formal employment, especially in the public sector. They were mostly forced to join the informal sector. In the informal sector jobs were gender segregated—with men taking up jobs such as masonry, carpentry, selling flowers, driving e-rickshaws. Women worked as domestic workers, ayahs, selling vegetables, snacks and sometimes flowers. These jobs barely provided for survival let alone the possibility of economic mobility or stability. Even if slim possibilities of financial mobility existed in the jobs performed by men, such was entirely absent for those performed by women.

Under these circumstances, entry into paid labour did not provide women with any sense of fulfilment or empowerment as work continued to be highly exploited and stigmatized. It was rather a survival need—both for herself and for her family. Experiences of paid work were therefore, invariably communicated through the trope of *kashta* (struggle). *Kashta* involved the physical exhaustion involved in doing menial work, the exploitation involved in terms of low wages and violation of work contracts and having to shoulder the burden of house work along with doing paid work. Being able to quit paid work remained one of the aspirations of these women. Most, however, were not fortunate enough to quit work and had to continue to work till very advanced

ages given their financial conditions, making it one of their biggest *kashta*. Daughters and daughters-in-law could escape paid work by marrying into families that would provide for them, but in case of crisis they were thrown back to precarious, low-paid informal work. To keep their daughters and daughters-in-law from taking up paid work of the kind they were involved in was one of their primary aspirations. These sentiments are succinctly captured in the excerpt of an interview below:

> Yes I will never be able to get over this *kashta*…as long as I live this will eat into me, yet, if my son is not able to manage, can I just watch him suffer being a mother…being a mother can I just sit at home and eat? …I am there, therefore I am selling vegetables, now if I am not there, will she (her daughter-in-law) go to sell vegetables? Will my son let her go? No… Have I not taught my son that?... He will not ask the women of his house to go and work… he will never do such a thing as her husband.

Thus, differential experience of rehabilitation and paid labour by women from SC/OBC families, as compared to upper-caste women becomes an important way to re-think the Partition narratives in West Bengal. Yet, this difference can only be understood relationally (Sen Chaudhuri, 2018). If upper-caste women's absence from paid labour is crucial for the functioning of caste as a system, the question which becomes important is on what terms did her entry into paid work happen in post-Partition West Bengal? How did such a change negotiate with the functioning of caste as a system? We argue that, following Tharu (1996) if we understand 'Brahmanism as…constantly updating its patriarchy' (p. 1315) by revising and renewing its extraditions, a provisional answer can be found in the observations made by Ray (2020), about the gendered dynamics in the care industry in West Bengal. She argues that upper-caste women, post the Partition, were forced to take up jobs in the medical care sector, a profession that was hitherto considered demeaning because of its en-casted association with bodily substances. Being largely a preserve of Dalit women, the profession was also stigmatized and sexualized. But when upper-caste women were forced to enter the profession, they did so as nurses and not as *ayahs*. Even though both these jobs were associated with caring, the profession of nursing carried with it an idea of skill, expertise that was unavailable to the *ayahs*.

Upper-caste women had the social, cultural, and educational capital to establish themselves as skilled, unavailable to Dalit women. Further, these women chose to negotiate with the pay and stigma associated with the profession of caring precisely by distinguishing them from the 'other women' in the profession. These distinctions that they sought to emphasize were that of their ability to be in their profession through selfless sacrifice, their educational and professional training and so on. The qualities emphasized closely resonated with the tropes through which *bhadramahila*[vii] femininity and respectability had been established in late colonial Bengal. Thus, upper-caste women entered the nursing profession not by transgressing caste norms but by reinforcing them albeit in an 'updated' way.

These arguments can be extended to understand upper-caste women's entry into paid work in post-Partition Bengal in general, i.e. it can be argued that when upper-caste

women sought employment in post-Partition Bengal, they chose to enter white-collar employment as they had the requisite social and cultural capital for the same. They then negotiated the transgression caused in Brahmanical patriarchal order by their engagement in public labour by reasserting their caste status and respectability, by claiming a chaste, sacrificial, skilled, educated professional self. They distinguished themselves from Dalit women who were already engaged in public employment and were understood as unchaste, vulgar, uneducated, and unprofessional in the public discourse. These distinctions were also key to maintaining the differential remuneration that upper-caste women and Dalit women received for their public labour. This is why an act that was once transgressive, i.e, upper-caste women's entry into paid work, in a few decades could become a mark of *bhadralok* progressiveness and could be absorbed within the caste order. As pointed out by Ray and Qayum (2009) when women went out to work, it did not necessarily bring any change in the gendered division of household labour. It was the domestic help and the care worker whose labour came to substitute the domestic labour of upper-caste women as they went out to work. Having access to cheap domestic labour which has come to be increasingly feminized and lower-casteized was then crucial to the empowerment of upper-caste women.

We argue that it is only within such a history that Dalit women's refusal to work, whenever they can afford to, should be understood. Otherwise, even though the idea of refusal comes from "lived experiences" of Dalit women there is no readily available way of reading such refusal as emerging from their struggles. Reading from an upper-caste feminist standpoint of sanskritization, even when engaging with experiences of Dalit women, it is possible to read such refusal as strengthening of Brahmanical patriarchy with caste mobility.

When Dalit women write about their lived experience there is already a specific political project within which they are writing about their lived experience. But how do we think about upper-caste women trying to understand the lived experience of Dalit women? Following Mills (2007) it can be argued that if one's lived experience is shaped by privilege it is only understandable that this privilege simultaneously works to obscure the workings of such privilege in one's own life. In other words, if caste entitles upper-caste women with privilege, the precise function for upper-caste feminists re-presenting Dalit feminist standpoint would be to also obscure this privilege and the idea of the 'self' as a product of that privilege. Now, if one begins to study Dalit women without consciously engaging with this privilege it is possible that this will lead to a representation that reproduces and reinforces their marginalization rather than questioning it. At this point it must be mentioned that such engagement with one's privilege is not a guarantee of undoing it. It is likely that questioning of such privilege and consequent frames of understanding produced by it through self-reflexivity will be partial and will require sustained political engagement. Thus, we argue that a Dalit feminist standpoint arising from biographical experiences and political struggles is unavailable to the upper-caste feminist because of her privilege. It might be possible for her to develop an anti-caste standpoint provided it leads to a questioning of her own privilege, her privileged frames of understanding, and her own complicity in the oppression of Dalit women. But what kind of political praxis can lead to a self-

reflexive questioning of privilege? Is it one of feminist allyship as suggested by Ghosh and Banerjee (2018)?

The answer is both yes and no. We argue that when approached through an already formed position of allyship the deployment of intersectionality serves to obscure the relationship between the oppression of Dalit women and that of the upper-caste woman's privilege. This creates a false equivalence between the experience of upper-caste women and Dalit women. This is simultaneously a political question and an epistemic question. It is not possible to read lived experiences without categories and it is obvious that when non-Dalit women try to interpret and understand Dalit women's lives they bring already loaded feminist categories with them such as labour, respectability, honour and so on. But building bridges between Dalit feminism and upper-caste feminism in this context cannot work on a pre-existing idea of what it is to have feminist subjectivity. Rather it requires us to understand how different feminist subjectivities and categories such as 'choice', 'empowerment' and so on are produced through different relations of privilege. Thus, the assumption of allyship between upper-caste women and Dalit women cannot be a starting point of anti-caste political praxis but has to be arrived at, through a process of the former un-learning and questioning of inherited categories, including feminist ones.

Intersectionality and the notion of the Homogenous Dalit Woman

Researcher two's [viii] work attempts to read two distinct moments of violence against Dalit women in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The first incident took place in 2017 in the village of Shabbirpur in western Uttar Pradesh. The second incident is that of the Hathras rape-case which took place in 2020 also in western Uttar Pradesh. By contrasting how Dalit women chose to understand and narrate their experience of violence in the two instances we seek to destabilise a homogenous understanding of the category of the Dalit woman.

In the initial phase of researcher two's fieldwork, through conversations with the *pradhans* (village headman) in villages surrounding Saharanpur, she learnt that *Chamars* (Dalits) were the numerically preponderant and politically significant caste in the region. Many of them owned sixty to ninety acres of land and they were mostly farmers. Economic and social mobility among the Dalits in this region can be read simultaneously with Dalits owning land, for about three generations, in this agriculturally rich part of western Uttar Pradesh. The researcher interposes that this economic and social mobility amongst Dalits, is essentially linked to the functioning of land, power, and hierarchy in a specific regional and temporal context. Such functioning then impacts, disrupts, and complicates the intersection of caste, class, and gender. First, land acquisition by Dalits through land reforms, in a thriving agricultural region, has provided them with a sense of power previously non-existent (Srinivas, 1959). Second, the rise of Dalit Bahujan politics has allowed Dalits to move away from untouchability and violence as an everyday reality. This identity formation of Dalits in this region is a result of post-constitutional Ambedkarite politics and movements, this pushes us towards reading the identity of Dalits through regional and temporal specificities and through a lens of non-homogeneity.

Whereas Hathras—a town three hundred kilometres south of Saharanpur, provided for a contrasting reality of caste. In the village where the rape took place the *Thakur* (upper-castes) community was the dominant caste in the village. The *Thakurs*[ix] comprised more than half of the families in the village and the Dalits were just about fifteen families (Roychowdhary, 2020). Though agriculture is not the caste-based occupation of the *Thakurs*, in western Uttar Pradesh they traditionally owned large areas of cultivated land. For the cultivation of this land they hired labourers who have worked for them for generations (Dasgupta, 1975). Social mobility for Dalits (*valmiki)* in this region varied from that of Dalits (*Chamar*) in Saharanpur.[x] Socio-political mobility of Dalits directly impacted the extent to which Dalit communities experienced caste-based violence and their experiences of resisting it. Taking social mobility as important to Dalits and their experiences, we now look into the two instances of Saharanpur and Hathras.

The Chamars in Shabbirpur, Saharanpur[xi] on the occasion of Ambedkar Diwas (14 April 2017) wanted to put up a statue of Ambedkar in their local Ravi Dass temple.[xii] But the Thakurs in the village protested and complained to the village administration. The administration in turn forbade the Chamar community from putting up the statue. Following this, on May 5 in the neighbouring village, Thakurs had planned a procession on the *Jayanti* (birth anniversary) of Maharana Pratap. Thousands of Thakurs carrying swords and metal rods, and even carrying petrol in bottles, passed through the Chamar village playing loud music and shouting slogans. The Chamar community protested against this, claiming the Thakurs had not taken prior permission from the administration for the procession. The Chamars said that subsequently the Thakurs took a few rounds of the area on their bikes, shouting provocative slogans like, "*Rajputana zindabad* (long live Rajputana), *Ambedkar murdabad* (death to Ambedkar)" and "*Maharana Pratap zindabad*" (long live Maharana Pratap), before they moved towards the Ravi Dass mandir" (Naskar, 2017). Following this an upper-caste Thakur entered the Ravi Dass mandir, broke the idol and allegedly urinated on it. The Dalit community started pelting stones at the Thakurs and violence ensued with many houses in the Chamar village being set on fire.

Researcher two in her attempt to ethnographically locate this experience of violence and its narration by Dalit women in Shabbirpur tried to understand their lives and routine before the violence broke out. She argues that her ethnographic conversations with these women made it evident that all of them claimed to be aware of their rights, their caste, and their identities. In a conversation with a young girl in the village the researcher asked whether she knew about her own caste and how she felt about it. The girl responded; *"haanji, meri ek friend apne school bag mein sticker laga ke aayi thi "The great Chamar" usko Thakur ladke ne bol dia isko hataa, toh humne uss ladke se ladai kari."* ("Yes, once a friend of mine came to school with a sticker on her bag which said "The Great Chamar", a Thakur boy told her to remove it so we fought with him"). They all stated that they did not fear violence, abuse, or harassment by upper-castes around them. They asserted if such a situation arose in the future, they were ready to fight back and put them—the Thakur men, "back in their place". They spoke about a long history of retaliation by the Chamar community in their village, *"Hum toh darrte nahi hai, koi kuch bolta hai toh usko wapas jawab dete hain."* ("We are not scared, if someone (upper-caste) says something to us, we retaliate").

Discussing the day the violence broke out, it was stated that men from the village had sent most of the women away and only a few girls stayed back. During an earlier conversation with the village Pradhan, researcher two was specifically asked to talk to the girls, marking their recognition of the courageous resistance they had put up. He said, *"Inn ladkiyon ne bahut himmat dikhai aur wapas ladai kari hai, aap inse zaroor baat karna."* ("These girls have shown great courage and have fought back, you should certainly speak to them"). Continuing this conversation with the women in the village, asking them whether they were scared for themselves during the provocation by the Thakurs, they stated that they are the warriors of Babasaheb and know their rights. "*Babasaheb[xiii] ne humein samvidhan diya hai jisse humein saare adhikar diye gaye hain, hum dabenge nahi inn logon se*" (Baba Saheb has given us the constitution in which we have rights, we are not going to bow down to them). These conversations push us towards claiming a new Dalit feminist subjectivity. This subjectivity asserts itself through a language of constitutional rights and caste-based activism, even when marked by violence.

Now we move a little further south from Saharanpur to Hathras. On September 14, 2020, a nineteen-year-old Dalit girl was raped and severely injured in a field two hundred meters away from her home, in an upper-caste dominated village. She was gangraped by four upper-caste men from the same village. Incidents such as Hathras are normalized instances in the lives of a large number of Dalit woman throughout India. Hathras is by no means a sporadic incident of sexual violence against women, or exclusively against Dalit women. The case gathered, for the first time, national attention and outrage. Violence against Dalit women finally was in the news headlines. What distinctively caught the attention of the nation (after about seventy years of legal mechanisms being in place for atrocities against Dalits) was the blatant erasure of sexual violence against the victim by the state and its prosecution arm, i.e. police administration and judiciary. The victim's brother stated that "Nobody listened to us… the police said "just take her from here. She is being dramatic and just lying here. Do you want to trap us?" (Kumar and Suresh, 2020). It was only when Dalit politicians and activists intervened that the case was filed. A local journalist who witnessed the rushed cremation of the body, before the investigation took place, stated that the police kept her family and the media away from the funeral pyre (Ibid.). Such actions by police and bureaucratic officials are ordinary and occur brazenly in atrocity cases.

This form of conduct by police and government officials is not, and never was, an isolated incident. This is the narrative behind the majority of rape cases and incidents of sexual violence against Dalit women. Despite an exhaustive and protective legal framework in place, which guarantees equality and basic human rights, the Dalit woman's experiences with the law in post-constitutional India provides little relief or justice. This is due to the way violence against Dalit women is directly correlated with the way power and hierarchy function, however, it is integral to take into account specific regional and temporal contexts as essential elements to this correlation. In most upper-caste dominated villages where rape and sexual violence occur brazenly, similar to that of the incident in Hathras, cases are not reported because the upper-caste control the police officials in the village (Irudayam, Mangubhai, & Lee, 2014). It was the political and academic outrage that pressured government officials and legal

authorities to take up due process for this case, otherwise, the Hathras incident could have easily been another lost case of atrocity.

The difference in the experiences of Dalit women in Hathras and Saharanpur push us towards questioning the relationship between caste, power, land, and hierarchy when reading the lived experience of Dalit women. These case studies from Uttar Pradesh lead us to argue for non-homogeneity in the lived experiences of Dalit women. It pushes us towards complicating caste and it's functioning through socio-political mobility in post-constitutional India. The complex equations of land, power, and hierarchy impact the intersection of caste and gender in different ways. The incident in Shabbirpur alert us to the reality that a section of rural Dalit women in northern India are aware of their rights and caste-based oppression, as well as claim their Dalit identity. This identity is not just defined by exceptional forms of violence. The narration of their experiences thus, push us to complicate what it means to identify and be identified as a Dalit woman in post-constitutional India.

Hathras in contrast is the routinised form of exceptional violence faced by Dalit women. This moment finally put the intersection of caste and gender outside of Dalit feminist movements, politics and scholarship and into mainstream debates and discourse. It put forth the injustice perpetrated on and ignorance of the Dalit woman's body in the Indian legal system. This case provided for a critique of the Indian legal system lacking the critical reading of intersectionality as crucial to legal framework. It marked out why deployment of intersectionality as a legal tool is crucial for the implementation of rights guaranteed to Dalits in post-constitutional India.

Yet, Shabbirpur is a reminder that in post-Constitutional India access to social and economic mobility has provided Dalits access to economic, bureaucratic, and academic institutions. This assertive struggle of claiming political rights has led to an aggressive Dalit rights movement and Dalit feminist movement, in not only academic scholarship but in social and political spaces as well. These movements have in turn forced the dominant upper-caste sociological, legal, historical, and feminist scholarship to include the caste question and particularly the Dalit woman's question as critical to disciplines and discourses.

It is because of such trajectories of self-assertion experienced by Dalit women and their consequent activism enabled by the same, that instances such as that of Hathras have been able to come to national focus. To ignore such trajectories is to fall prey to the casteist reading of the category of the Dalit woman, which is over-determined by violence and vulnerability. This ignores the multiplicity of the lived experience of Dalit women enabled by the post-constitutional access to rights. Dalit women's difference when reduced to experiences of exceptional violence and vulnerability limits the possibility of recognising subtler forms of structural violence. It retains the binary understanding of the 'saviour' upper-caste women and 'victim' Dalit women, rather breaking down such boundaries. Furthermore, it inhibits the possibilities of a feminist anti-caste politics that can learn valuable political lessons from the resistances of Dalit women in the face of structural oppression.

Conclusion

In conclusion we argue that a simplistic reading of the intersectional category of the Dalit woman through the lens of difference is inadequate and depoliticizing. To bring out the real possibilities of the intersectional method, it is not enough to just simply make visible the difference between Dalit women and upper-caste women. Such a focus on difference has two implications—it neutralizes the critical import of theorising from the perspective of Dalit women and essentializes the category of the Dalit woman. Our critical reflections on post-Partition experiences of rehabilitation in West Bengal through a gendered lens makes it evident that Dalit woman and upper-caste women need to be read as relational categories. Intersectionality done in this way, does not rule out the possibility of allyship. Rather it raises important questions for the upper-caste feminists before they become allies of Dalit women in the project of 'fe-inventing' themselves as anti-caste.

The instances of Shabbirpur and Hathras provide us with case studies to complicate the possibilities of intersectionality and widen its possibilities as a political project. This complicating of intersectionality through the discipline of sociology becomes beneficial for the judicial process. This merging of disciplinary frameworks in feminist discourse and practice holds the possibility of building bridges in inter-disciplinary feminist knowledge production.

We further argue, that unravelling the possibilities of an anti-caste feminism, through a focus on lived experiences of Dalit women, is only possible when feminism can learn from Dalit women, rather than trying to situate them within its existing theoretical and political frameworks. Analysing Dalit women's lived experience through the lens of non-homogeneity has the potential to help feminism re-think its own history, its complicity in deepening discrimination and oppression. Simultaneously, it also has the potential to help feminism (un)learn what it means to be a feminist.

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Endnotes

i.   Due to its growing popularity, intersectionality as a term, made its way into the Oxford English Dictionary in 2015. It calls it a sociological term meaning "The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; a theoretical approach based on such a premise."

ii. This case study is part of a larger doctoral project. Even though this article focuses largely on the experiences of Dalit women, the thesis focuses on experiences of both Dalit and Bahujan women, hence the usage here.

iii We use the term 'atrocity' as used within the Indian legislations to define caste-based violence against Dalits. Here, we also argue that when caste-based violence is viewed through the legal lens of 'atrocity' it fails to take recognize the complex forms of violence and subtler forms of discrimination that also make up for the lived experiences of Dalits.

iv   Even though this section largely seeks to situate the political theorizations by Dalit scholars and activists, we find that Gail Omvedt's contributions to analysing the intersections of caste and gender, at a time when Dalit feminist thought and politics was in its nascent stages, is crucial to the evolution of Dalit feminist theory.

v   Researcher one writes from the location of an upper-caste, critical feminist ethnographer.

vi   Dalit/bahujan women in the context of the research identified themselves through constitutional categories of Scheduled castes and Other Backward Castes, here after when specifically mentioning the respondents of the research will be referred to as SC/OBC women in the following sections.

vii Upper-caste, genteel women from traditionally land-owning castes.

viii Researcher two writes from the location of Dalit feminist legal researcher.

ix   Thakurs, though identify as a warrior (Kshatriya) caste, they are landowners in most of northern India, including Bihar, Rajasthan and U.P.

x   See for details *After Silent Revolution: Marginalised Dalits and Local Democracy in Uttar Pradesh, North India,* Satendra Kumar (2017).

xi   Shabbirpur is a village twenty-five kilometres outside of Saharanpur

xii Ravi Dass was a popular Dalit saint. Many Dalits from the chamar in northern India, specifically Uttar Pradesh are devout devotees.

xiii Ambedkar called lovingly by his followers.

Conceptions of Community, Nation and Politics: The Ezhavas of South Malabar, India and their Quest for Equality

Anish KK[1]

Abstract

This article discusses caste reforms, anti-caste ideas, and thoughts on nationalism amongst Ezhavas of South Malabar in the Madras Presidency. The discourses of equality, the right to the public, the process of community formation, ideology, and the mode of struggle for emancipation are examined. The question of caste, by what means the aspirations of the lower castes were addressed in the uniting project of reformed Hinduism and nationalism is addressed. By capturing disagreements, conflicts, consensus, and the politics of 'sub-nationalities' within the 'national,' the generic view of national movement as a single, homogeneous consensus project is contested. Towards the end, the article contends that Ezhavas' assertions imply the presence of an "autonomous anti-caste movement" in the South Malabar region. This article also proposes that the dichotomy of colonialism versus nationalism, and the portrayal of South Indian politics as a sectarian competition for British patronage, limits the opportunity to comprehend localised movements and their vernacular expressions.

Keywords

South Malabar, caste reforms, Ezhavas, nationalism, anti-caste struggle, religious conversion, autonomous anti-caste movement

Introduction

Colonialism played a role in reshaping India's pre-modern institutions. The impact of colonialism on institutions was indeed uneven and varied across regions. Competing

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notions of community, nation, and nationalism also emerged during this time (Aloysius, 1998a). The social standing of colonial subjects and engagement with modernity shaped their reactions. Then responses of lower caste communities in South Malabar, India's "blackest spot" on the untouchability map, the land of inequality, are considered for the study (Kumar, 1992; Nayar, 1996). South Malabar witnessed uprisings against the state, social injustice, and oppression, but the region and the issues received little scholarly attention. Aloysius (1998) observes, if the majority of the egalitarian, pragmatic, rationalist discourses and dispositions originating from power as resistance are hidden under the multiplicity of local and vernacular idiom, it is an issue of historiography. So, taking the cue from biographical accounts, archival sources, ethnographic fieldwork, I try to examine the discourses of equality, publicness, community formation, ideology, and modes of struggle for emancipation. This article progresses through the social history of Ezhavas of Kerala. Finally, through this study of late nineteenth and early twentieth century South Malabar, I attempt to address the issue of caste, specifically how the aspirations of the lower castes were addressed in the unifying project of reformed Hinduism, Nation and Nationalism.

Caste was firmly founded as a dominant force in the public realms of law, politics, and education. By the middle of the nineteenth century, caste associations were already evident, they had risen, and their numbers and influence were parallel to the increase in political literacy (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1960). Caste associations grew in size, and for recognition of their identity, they looked to the imperial state as well as their own histories. For instance, in west and south India, non-Brahmans questioned assumptions that they could easily be incorporated into Congress brand of nationalism and early Dalit leaders, like Ambedkar (O'Hanlon, 2002). The lower castes of west India, by ideologically challenging their lower status, recognized that ritual hierarchy coupled with the impacts of British colonialism had led to social injustices in a number of areas, including politics, religious practice, and education (O'Hanlon, 2002; Omvedt, 1976).

In south India, Nadars and Ezhavas are the two lower castes that have moved from low status in caste society to communities possessing power and control (Hardgrave, 2006; Templeman, 1996). The Ezhavas forms a numerically large middle caste in Kerala, and their caste organisation, Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), was founded in 1903. The middle class among the Ezhavas, imbued with ideals of individualism, humanism, democracy, and reason, wanted to change the conservative, obscurantist, caste-ridden society (Chandramohan, 1987). The SNDP evolved from the uniqueness of local society and derived strength from the oppressive nature of government (Jeffrey, 1974). The SNDP attempted to bring Ezhavas together by publications, local societies, branches, networks, labour unions, conferences, educational institutions, literary gatherings, litigation, trade fairs, and inter-dining. Primarily addressing the Ezhavas, the Narayana movement urged to abandon caste markers and internally reform into 'samudayam' or community (Jones, 1989; Kumar, 1997). Then the idea of community is completely contradictory to the overarching concept of nation as it 'de-imagining nation' (Reghu, 2010)

Interestingly, the formation of consciousness is viewed as a result of colonial modernity and Western influence, as are the lower castes' assertions. The arrival of Westerners was said to have sparked several social reform movements, including the

Ezhavas (Pullapilly, 1976). While the Ezhava movement is known as a socio-religious reform movement it also contains multiple streams, one of which is an evolving socio-religious stream, and another which is more elitist, secular, and political (Heimsath, 1978; Jones, 1989). Colonialism contributes to societal restructuring and creation of ethnic groups; inevitably, each group emerges as an autonomous ethnic identity, and the Ezhavas forged a new identity by the end of the colonial period (Kurien, 1994). In terms of typology, one strand of the lower caste movement is based on Hinduism, while the other is grounded on ethnic or Western ideologies with an egalitarian component. The Ezhava movement falls into the first type (Jaffrelot, 2003).

Despite many of these well-received works, the dichotomy of colonialism versus nationalism, and the depiction of South Indian politics as a sectarian fight for British patronage, limits the potential for understanding localised movements and their vernacular expressions. Also, the dominant theories like ethnicization and Sanskritization narrow the extent of exploring diverse claims of lower castes in various regions. While recognising the merits of these approaches, this article suggests that caste oppression, the desire for new opportunities brought about by colonial modernity, and the aspiration for a fair share of social resources and power drove the Ezhavas to get organised.

Kerala renaissance or social reforms were spearheaded by individuals who embody different religious traditions, and by several caste associations. These caste associations serve as agents of modernity, welfare and improvement organisations, transforming traditional Hindu India's social institutions into democratic pressure groups (Bailey, 1963; Rudolph and Rudolph, 1960). The role of social reformers was to guide social transformation, i.e., to push modernity with a progressive effect on individuals and groups (Heimsath, 1978). Social reform is seen as the first step in the national movement, and supporters of Narayana Guru are regarded as the forebears of the Kerala national movement (Namboodiripad, 1968). If this claim is accepted, the national movement must be viewed as a single, homogenous consensus making project. When this happens, we lose sight of disagreements, conflicts, compromise, and the politics of many 'sub-nationalities' within the 'national.'

The beginnings of caste associations can be traced back to Indian responses to the state's caste identification and classification, and these modalities influenced the birth of caste organisations, or 'sabhas,' that protect the dignity of the people it represents (Cohn and Guha, 1987; Molony, 2018; Srinivas, 1968). The dyarchy constitution also encouraged the rise of associations claiming to represent specific communities (Arnold, Jeffrey, and Manor, 1976). Even so, the influence of the SNDP in South Malabar, specifically in Palakkad remained limited until the mid-1940s. Here, the Ezhava movement had a different structure and agenda, and it was closer to Madras politically. This defies popular view that the Narayana movement, which originated in Travancore, fostered and shaped lower caste movements in other regions. Instead of being united under a single caste association, the South Malabar Ezhavas experimented with the Sanskritization model of emulation, abandoned religion, underwent religious conversion, and became politically active. Therefore, this study does not fit into lower-caste movement typologies or lend itself to a broad view of caste associations.

South Malabar Ezhavas as a Caste

The Ezhavas form a backward Hindu caste in the Kerala state. If we go by the conventional classification of castes, the Ezhavas come under 'untouchable' or 'polluting' varna castes (Innes, 1997). The Ezhavas are said to be outside the four varnas of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra, but they are the highest among the 'excluded castes' and hold a middle position in the caste hierarchy (Aiyyappan, 1965). As per one interpretation, they are foreigners who emigrated from Ceylon (Alexander, 1949; Baden-Powell, 1892; Logan, 1951, 1951; Thurston, 1909). The name Chova, another name of Ezhava is believed to be the altered form of Sevaka, servant (Day, 1863). There are claims that the Ezhavas were a martial sect (Aiyyappan 1965; Menon, 1962; Thurston, 1909). Their primary activities included planting palm trees and producing toddy, coconut fibre, and jaggery. Among them were woodcutters, boatmen, fishermen, merchants, schoolteachers, and ayurvedic practitioners (Buchanan, 1988).

Colonialists kept much of the existing socio-economic systems in place without making significant changes, and they approved customary laws that favoured Brahmins and caste Hindus (Baden-Powell, 1892). Resulting, Ezhavas in South Malabar had a lower social status, with limited opportunities for education, employment, political representation, and visibility in the public sphere. In reality, Malabar had to wait till the end of British colonialism for an educational upsurge because virtually little had been done to educate backward communities (Innes, 1997). Also, property relations, political and economic conditions, and educational policy had historically been less conducive to educational growth (Shea, 1959). That said, because of their improved economic status and closer social proximity to Hindu castes, Ezhavas were the best-educated among the untouchables, providing them with better educational prospects (Chandramohan, 1987). Western education was the 'passport' to government jobs, therefore getting a good education was absolutely critical (Suntharalingam, 1974). There were just a few university graduates among Ezhavas in the early 1900s, but they were unable to find meaningful employment (Chami, 1936).

Almost all of Malabar's land, both cultivated and uncultivated, was private property owned by Brahmins as their "janmam" birthright, which grants them full absolute ownership of the soil. The majority of Ezhavas were tenant farmers with different types of rights or workers, with little potential for advancement. Ever since its inception, SNDP gave thrust to promote industry among community members (Sanoo, 2018). Though the influence of the SNDP was limited in Palakkad, a few individuals ventured into lucrative businesses and professions, resulting in the creation of a small middle class. Because of British-led social and economic changes such as excise regulations, they benefited from the manufacturing and distribution of liquor and toddy (Bailey, 1957). Notwithstanding modest gains in socioeconomic and educational attainment, caste oppression persisted, which contradicted their achievements. Beside that, Ezhavas were underrepresented in public services and elected bodies including Taluk board, District Board, Municipality, and Legislative Council. The lack of representation in government had aroused considerable discontent, so the Ezhava leaders made it a high political priority.

Early Efforts for Reforms and to Reconfigure the Social

The first instance of organised reforms among Ezhavas in Palakkad was the construction of the Yakkara temple, founded in December 1907 under the patronage of Vijananodhayam Yogam. The people that started the movements, as said by Chami (1936), were those who "entered the public service with the ideas of civility." Reforming religious customs, life-cycle rituals, promoting occupations, progress in education and agriculture, bringing prosperity, and providing scholarships to poor students were all priorities of Yogam. Narayana Guru used to send his disciples to the Yakkara temple to talk about religion, ethics, education, and commerce (Sanoo, 2018).

Following the erection of Hindu deity images in the temple, the practise of doing pooja in Ezhava homes gradually grew. Such practices drew Ezhavas closer to the Brahminical system of worship, 'sanskritising' people who were kept outside of Hinduism in the name of purity and pollution (Aiyyappan, 1965). The Ezhavas' sense of oppression, however, was unaffected by Sanskritization (Nieuwenhuys, 2004). The Ananda Samajam was another influential movement among the Ezhavas. Brahmananda Sivayogi of Alathur Sidha Ashramam, built a branch at Kannadi, and campaigned among the locals. Samajam persuaded people about religious superstitions by citing examples of priestly Brahmins' rejection of customs and embracing modern education and professions. After all, this persuasion was only possible by comparing Brahmins who had made progress in pursuit of modernity. These early methods for internal caste reform were necessary in gradually reconfiguring the social.

Colonial encounter of Ezhavas

British colonial rule established a well-organized governance system by codifying ruling procedures, legislation, defining private and public, enumerative programme, standardisation of language and script, English education, and so on. The colonial project is often seen as 'civilizing mission', 'control and command', 'modernizing', 'knowledge gathering' (Bayly and Bayly, 1999; Chatterjee, 1986; Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2001; Edney, 2009; Irschick, 1994; Mitchell, 1991). Yet, as Pandian suggests, colonialism also provided the ground for articulating new forms of identities (Pandian, 2007). While many subjects viewed colonial rule as oppressive and subjugating, Ezhavas had a wider perception. For instance Chami writes (1936):

> *The coming of westerners is the primary reason for modern civilisation and growth of Ezhavas. The sense of equality and liberty began to rise among Ezhava with the removal of ignorance within the community by the general education systems. They began to form organisations and nourished institutions under their community. As a result, even educated people have begun to rise among the poor Ezhavas, who received western education, began to understand the taste of liberty. They understood that acquiring knowledge, education, organisations and freedom is necessary for the goodness of the community.*

While colonialism remained violent, the alliance of colonisers and caste Hindus continued to deny lower caste their rights; nonetheless, colonialism also provided paths to emancipation for some oppressed groups. Colonial dominance appears to be fluid,

complex, and contextual in this case of Ezhavas, instead of rigid and hegemonic. The condition of colonialism cannot be described as monolithic with regard to the lower castes. Depending on their social hierarchy, it was experienced differently by various castes. Certainly, the Ezhavas were victims of colonialism, but their exclusion was due to Madras' peculiar socioeconomic and political condition, in which education and employment were denied.

The colonial bureaucracy required English-educated natives with scribal skills and educational credentials to fill various administrative positions. Brahmins were ahead of other caste groups in terms of English proficiency, which was essential for government jobs, teaching, and politics (Irschick, 1969; Washbrook, 2010). Brahmins made up about three percent of the population, and yet their presence in the colonial bureaucracy, modern professions like law, and the leadership of the Indian National Congress was greater and more apparent (Fuller and Narasimhan, 2010; Pandian, 2007; Suntharalingam, 1974). This Brahmin dominance in public life hampered the prospects of many non-Brahmin castes and depressed classes, culminating in the 1916 "non-Brahmin Manifesto."

As earlier stated, Ezhava marginalisation was primarily conditioned by under-representation in government, inadequate educational opportunities, limited occupational mobility, and denial of access to the public. The question of employment for the educated and representation had already became one of the central issues in the political scenario of Madras (Suntharalingam, 1974). Rather than engaging in conflict, Ezhavas attempted to resolve issues through petitions and memorials. Petition serves as testimony of self-formed collectives that provided the basis for modern associative life (Balachandran, 2019; Raman, 2019). Despite the use of a variety of rhetorical tropes and discourses, petition writing allowed people to express their grievances, opposition, and claims to the government in a discursive way (Jaffe, 2019). This evolution of petitioning occurred within new forms of the public sphere, where individuals or collective petitions play an important role (O'Hanlon, 2019).

Representatives of the Thiyya-Ezhavas of Malabar presented Governor Pentland with a memorandum when he visited Calicut in 1917. The technique of considering 'non-brahmin' as a homogeneous category in elections prevented Ezhavas from sending their caste members to the council, so special representation in local bodies was sought. They claimed that the existing system only serves the interests of dominant castes, as the majority of Hindus are never represented. The response of Ezhavas evinced that the non-brahmin category was not an inclusive political community of equals, but rather existed to protect the exclusivity of dominant castes (Basu, 2011; Jeffrey, 1977; Manikumar, 2020). While these communities were critical of government policies and the unholy alliance between Brahmins and the government, they regularly sought to resolve grievances within the framework of state power.

Conferences as Venues of Political Pronouncement

Many communities formed 'sabha' or caste associations, to work for social progress. These sabhas appeared to be increasingly forming alliances and gaining political

significance. In 1919, the Yakkara temple hosted a significant yogam of Ezhava aristocrats. Depressed Classes Mission leader Shanmugam Mudaliyar was an invitee to this meeting. He reportedly said (Chami, 1936):

> *"Brahmin and other upper castes have begun to harass the lower castes before long; it continues even in the present day. One of such harassment is not allowing people to walk in the public roads. They speak about the home rule to accomplish their purposes. If they get home rule, we have to be worried that they would be able to keep the lower castes away from the road where you are now free to walk. To accomplish objectives, they strategically came inside our people and made them Home Rule member with their influence and force. There were a few instances of riots because of speaking against the Home rule. We lower caste should not believe in what they say, if you do believe without thinking, our efforts will become futile".*

In Madras' evolving politics, even middle castes like Ezhava were frequently engaging with depressed classes to make political declarations. Non-Brahmin leaders, in their attempt to establish a greater political alliance, strongly supported Adi Dravida's claim to social equality just before the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms. Prominent non-Brahmin leaders have conducted many conferences to get lower castes close to their doctrine (Basu, 2011). Delegates at the Yakkara gathering were unified in their conviction that seeking progress under the British was preferable to falling at the feet of high-ranking castes who mistreat lower castes. The meeting agreed not to support the Home Rule League in any form due to their dislike of non-brahmin leadership in the national movement. 'Nation' was thought to be the only legitimate thing worth fighting for, and any deviation from this drew the ire of Nationalists. After the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, dyarchy system of governance was introduced. The size of the provincial legislative assemblies has increased. The Madras government designated some members of the depressed classes to the newly formed Legislative Council. M.C. Rajah, R. Veerian and Rettamalai Srinivasan vehemently voiced numerous issues of the depressed classes in the council (Viswanath, 2014). Communities like Ezhavas always sought the cooperation of these representatives in raising grievances before the government.

Local Ezhava organisations with varying agendas and structures also proliferated. Ezhava Samajam Taluk Yogam was founded in August 1922. Dravida Samajam was founded in 1923, with participation from a few Brahmins, Nairs, and other castes, and it was the first time upper castes participated in an Ezhava gathering. This Samajam envisions the common ethnic identity of 'dravida', transcending the exclusive caste identity of Ezhava. But, it was closed as Ezhava members objected to Congress supporters' anti-government stance. In April 1923, around one thousand delegates attended the Ezhava Mahayogam Conference in Kannadi. Education, industry, agriculture, employment, rituals, publishing, scholarships, self-help groups for wage workers, government recognition, tenancy reforms, the removal of untouchability, and voting rights were among the topics on the conference's agenda. After being denied access to caste-Hindu temples, the conference resolved to boycott temples and allow lower castes to enter Ezhava worship places.

Another Ezhava Mahayogam meeting in Kannanur in March 1923 discussed economic prosperity, religious conversion, and community solidarity. An Adi-Dravida session was arranged at the same venue after the Ezhava discussions. Clearly, the Ezhavas sought alliances with other oppressed castes. As the Depressed Class, comprising the Pulayas, had five members nominated to the Legislative Council and the Ezhavas had none, the decision to unite with the depressed classes was a necessary outcome of such a political situation. These small organisations proved effective in emphasising upper caste violence, under-representation, backwardness, irrational rituals and customs, and the desire for progress, in addition to opposing numerous widespread caste practises.

Political Crusades

The distinction between 'community' and 'political' has blurred as the two have become increasingly interdependent. The new political aggregation based on caste and religious identity further shaped Indian politics. The elites, posing as spokespersons for the Hindu Mahasabha, the Muslim League, the Christians, or the South Indian Liberation Federation, claimed to represent broad, homogeneous constituencies (Omvedt, 1976). New types of political subjectivity emerged as the Madras presidency underwent significant radical political reforms. With the arrival of the non-Brahmin movement and the awakening of Adi-Dravida sections of society, there was a critical political mobilisation (Washbrook, 1975). Depressed classes realised that participation in political power was the universal cure for their ills. Despite its local intent, the Ezhava movement went further, successfully establishing links with the growing provincial politics.

The wealthy upper castes dominated the leadership of the Congress and the Home Rule League. Obviously, this has generated a repulsive attitude among the *avarnas* towards the nationalist movement. Somewhat uncomfortable relations between Ezhavas and Home Rule League exposes the undercurrents in nationalist politics. As, in September 1917, Ezhavas of Palakkad wrote to Theosophist, Home Rule leader Subrahmanya Iyer when there were no favourable steps even after a year since Annie Besant's ruling in 1916 to allow lower castes in the public roads (Chami, 1936; Menon, 2011). Throughout, the League leadership showed great antipathy towards the untouchables (Ambedkar 1946), because caste was seen as a matter to be resolved only at the level of 'social'. It was the view that the caste issue could never be fixed at the 'political'. The Home Rule movement spoke a language of autonomy by refusing to recognize caste (Pandian, 2007). Thus, the intensified ideological struggle between Home Rule, Nationalists and Ezhavas lasted for long as a lacuna that cannot be overcome. Caste actually prevented Brahmins and lower castes from forming alliances to fight the British.

Up for the State, up against the Congress

Under the leadership of Congress, the national movement gained ground in the early 1920s. Gandhi had evolved as the undisputed leader of the movement and then became an indispensable figure in politics. Congress launched the non-cooperation movement in 1920 in response to the 'wrongs' of Punjab and Khilafat (Sarkar, 1989). Despite its

national character, non-cooperation campaigns were 'mostly scattered and sporadic, and they grew out of stresses and strains in local society' (Baker & Washbrook, 1975). The South Malabar Ezhavas, like many religious leaders, moderates, and non-brahmin parties, opposed Gandhi's move. The fundamental root of their schism was Congress's incitement of public hatred against the government through speeches and meetings.

Meanwhile, Khilafat got ground in South Malabar and gained backing from the leadership of non-cooperation (Armitage, 1921). The British completely lost control over Ernad and Valluvanad taluk of South Malabar for several months as Khilafat and non-cooperation spread throughout the district (Sarkar, 1989). The first priority of the government was to maintain law and order and create legitimacy among the people to continue British rule in India. Therefore, the government unhesitantly collaborated with the dissenting groups. In November 1920, the Government called on sober-minded men to take comprehensive measures to assist law and order (Reeves, 1966).

Notably, the interests of nationalists and the lower castes were diametrically opposed rather than mutually beneficial. While the national movement strived to unite people in support of the expulsion of imperial forces, the lower castes were more concerned with plans for their upliftment, with group solidarity being seen as the essential condition for progress. This position was definitely at odds with the concept of "nation" and the nationalist movement. Also, the national movement was thought to be a ploy used by caste Hindus to further their own interests. So, the Ezhavas voiced their strong opposition to Gandhi's call for a boycott of schools, courts, and government institutions.

Unwilling to face repercussions for supporting organisations that cause problems for the government, Ezhavas resolved to participate in and support all steps taken by the government to maintain order. The government launched counter-programme conferences, circulated leaflets, and issued prohibitory orders where necessary. Years of upper-caste and non-Brahmin oppression had compelled the 'untouchables' to side with the British (Basu, 2011). In June 1921, Palakkad saw the first wave of anti-non-cooperation protest rallies. Following that, a series of meetings were held to persuade people of the opportunities to natives in administration, non-discriminatory policies, and impartiality that ensure people's welfare. All such rallies intended to generate public support for the government while openly condemning nationalists. Exhortatory speeches by officials and local notables were the main tactic used, another being the act of pledging "loyalty' to the State (Reeves, 1966). From 1921 July to March 1922, Ezhava workers instituted about fourteeen such yogams in Palakkad. The dissenting Ezhavas have effectively used anti-non-cooperation stand to turn their community into an acquiescent, political community, active recipient of imperial government policies. The national movement's pursuit for a single 'national' agenda was clearly complicated by regional power dynamics, mobility aspirations, and lower caste assertions.

Right to the public-Ezhavas and Kalpathy entry

Several claims-making articulations of community, and its redefinition through collective activities in public space, have received scholarly attention (Freitag, 1989; Price, 1991). Since 1919, depressed-class representatives continued to exert pressure on the government to establish their right of access to public spaces (Viswanath,

2014). The government could no longer ignore the efforts of various social groups seeking permission to enter public spaces, forcing officials to issue an order in their favour. The Madras Government issued G.O. No. 2660 AL&M on September 25, 1924 (No. 1009/1924 of August 25th) concerning depressed classes' access to public roads, wells, and the freedom to travel freely along any public road or street in town or village throughout the presidency. The government's decision and order were widely circulated, with most newspapers in the presidency publishing them.

Following the order, the depressed classes worked tirelessly to invoke the law that guaranteed the right to 'public.' The law provided an opportunity for the government to demonstrate its commitment to its citizens while also allowing lower castes to make collective public claims. The order was printed and distributed, along with a statement encouraging Ezhavas to make use of their right to enter public streets during the Kalpathy cart festival, which was to take place from November 13 to 15, 1924. In Malabar, streets or villages known as Agraharam are exclusively reserved for using Brahmins, and Kalpathy is one such place. After all, the road is being built with public funds, and Tiyya and Ezhava were never permitted to enter these streets.

M.P. Raghavan, an Ezhava lawyer, informed officials of their intention, reminding them that the Brahmin street is public as it is maintained with municipal funds (Viswanath, 2014). The Palakkad division officer assured Raghavan that there would be no opposition to attending the festival, and that there would be no conflict. Officers ensured that Ezhavas would be assigned a spot and that they would be sent in smaller groups so that they could see the festival and return. The municipal chairman was in charge of finding sites for the group to gather.

As per government order and the collector's guidance, eighty Ezhavas arrived at the festival venue around 3 p.m. on November 13, 1924. They gathered in three groups to watch the festival. As the Ezhava returned, they were blocked by the Brahmins and assaulted with sticks and stones. Some fled to save their life, and injured persons were taken to the hospital. Surprisingly, the entire event occurred in front of police and other government officials. The Ezhavas had sought prior permission from officials and had given written notice; however, the government failed to protect them from the ferocity of Brahmins. Furthermore, the entry was based on the legislature's decision that there would be no opposition to entering public roads.

Those who entered Kalpathy streets included prominent Ezhavas like lawyers, magistrates, district board members, and wealthy individuals, but their socioeconomic status did not shield them from being victims of caste violence. Brahmins made correspondence with municipal authorities to prevent Ezhavas from entering Kalpathy. Similarly, in Madras, Tamil Brahmins have protested most vehemently against the opening of public space—roads and highways—to the free passage of paraiyans (Washbrook, 2010). The government banned the Ezhavas under section 144 of the Indian Penal Code, and Brahmins were allowed to hold the festival. These incidents show the differential treatment meted out by the state on its citizens and perpetual violation of 'rights' of depressed classes.

The Kalapathy incident also prompted questions in Madras' legislative council. Krishnan Nair's motion for an adjournment to discuss the government's policy in issuing an order prohibiting Ezhavas and others from entering Kalpathy during the car festival was denied by the president (Anon 1925). The depressed classes representative

R. Veerain raised the issue in the legislative council, care of which the Kalpathy disturbance gained political dimensions. C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the member in charge responding to the questions said:

> 'the order was to have effect only during the car festival; that it was not intended to question the right of any community to enter the public highways and was only to preserve law and order. The Government left the matter to the discretion of local official, The Government were satisfied that there were possibilities of disturbances at that time at Kalpathy necessitating the promulgation of such an order. The government policy was always to maintain the principle that every one of His majesty's subjects had the rights to pass through the public highways, but they held that where the rights pertained to a particular road, it had to be established by regular judicial proceedings'.

The issue is that if the government truly wanted to ensure that everyone has equal access to public spaces, why would it advocate for rights to be established through litigation? The government's refusal to interfere gave savarna violence legitimacy. The Ezhavas' unwavering belief that they could only be liberated under colonial rule is now being called into question. Such an unconcerned government response exemplified 'Brahman Raj,' or Brahmin-British collaboration (Price, 1989). The colonial government always acted in the interests of the upper castes, ensuring the upper castes' dominance (Hardgrave, 2006).

The Kalpathy incident sparked a mixed reaction in many parts of the country. T.K. Madhavan, SNDP Secretary and Swami Sathyavruthan visited Palakkad to initiate reconciliation steps, consulted local leaders, condemned the incident and sought resolutions. Since the fight against untouchability has become a concern for the Congress, five hundred caste Hindus gathered in Akathethara, the seat of the Palakkad Rajas, to condemn the incident. Sadasiva Iyer, a liberal brahmin, of Hindu Samajam, Dharmika Brahmana Sangha, summoned a meeting in Madras at YMCA Hall on November 1924. Consultations were also held in the last week of December 1924 at Kozhikode and at Calicut Bank on 20 November 1924.

Around this time, several presidency districts reported depressed classes revolting against social disabilities (Armitage, 1921). The lower castes adopted litigation to establish their rights on numerous occasions. The lower castes continued to fight for civil rights, but importantly none of these struggles gained significant support from Gandhi or the Congress. As Ambedkar contends, untouchables had initiated satyagraha movement to establish their right to draw water from public well and enter public temples (Ambedkar, 1946). Between 1924 and 1930, Gandhi and the Congress do not appear to have taken any significant measures toward the abolition of untouchability, nor do they appear to have undertaken any projects that would benefit untouchables.

Kalpathy incident triggered intense debate among Ezhavas on religious conversion. The Moplah Revolt and the struggle in Kalpathi have created the fear of 'religious conversion' all over India. As a result, South Malabar attracted the attention of Hindu reform leaders, religious organisations, particularly Shuddhi and Sangathan movements (Congress, 1924; Gupta, 1998; Natarajan, 1925c). The Hindu organisations realised the 'vast field for the work of social uplift in Malabar for those interested in the elevation of the depressed classes' which will avoid conversion of avarnas to other beliefs (Natarajan, 1925b).

The Hindu Mahasabha stressed the need of self-defence training since the Moplah revolt. The Hindus were militarised by forming a 'citizen army' of a thousand people in Palakkad to defend the town from possible rebel Moplah attacks (Vaze, 1921). The Arya Samaj began organising reconversion to bring back those who had converted to Islam shortly after the revolt. These events in South Malabar demonstrate the depths of Hindu anxiety, and how that anxiety was channelled into a military-style spectacle. The positioning of certain gender symbols, pictures, and themes helped to establish and discuss the identity of Hindus (Gupta, 1998). The various expressions of the extremist Hindu community, have historical roots, particularly during the colonial era.

The Arya Samaj took advantage of the situation in Kalpathi, hurriedly their activists begin to work. Gradually Ezhavas started joining Arya Samaj as a last resort to escape from untouchability, formed sabhas and opened a branch in Palakkad. Twelve Ezhava Arya Samajis walked through Kalpathy Agraharam on October 31, 1925, along with Arya Samajam worker Brahmachari Vedhabandhu. Upon seeing them, around two hundred Brahmins came, pelted stones and sticks on them, an Ezhava received a lathi cut on the head and a Brahmin youth was stabbed (Natarajan, 1925d). The Madras Non-Brahmin Confederation conference held at Madras on 19 December 1925 passed resolutions 'condemning the action of the authorities in prohibiting the entry of untouchables and Arya Samaj converts into the streets of Kalpathy'(Mitra 1925). Upper caste outrage, aggression and disdain are not limited to Malabar. Frykenberg portrays Tamil Brahmins' indignation at the proselytizing practices of Christian missionaries in Madras (Frykenberg, 1981).

At a time of significant threat, in November 1925, the police informed Arya Samajis that they did not have any opposition against them entering Kalpathy street and sent two police officers to guard the street. Officials cautioned the Brahmins that no one could prevent Arya Samajis from entering Kalpathy. The Brahmin street continued to be a stage for the restoration of self-respect of Ezhavas even one year after the main struggle. The Ezhavas wearing the holy thread entered Kalpathy as they desired, through this method (Anon 2002). In the meantime, Arya Samaj organiser, president of Bharatiya Hindu Shuddhi Sabha, Shraddhanand went Sivagiri to meet Narayana Guru (Sanoo, 2018).

Arya Samaj joined Kerala crusades mainly to encourage low castes to maintain their Hindu identity (Heimsath, 1978). Shraddhanand is someone who, after the Malabar Rebellion, turned to shuddhi and the reclamation of the untouchables. Throughout 1922, he negotiated with Congress to provide financial help for his schemes. Only after Congress had refused to engage in the movement did he renounce his affiliation with Congress and turn to the Mahasabha (Gordon, 1975).The crux of the Hindu Sangathan expression was that Hinduism and its ideal representations should be given priority in the nation building agenda of Congress (Ghosh, 1994). Lala Lajpat Rai contributed to Shradhanand a portion of funds collected for anti-untouchability work (Natarajan, 1925a).

The activities of Arya Samaj in Kerala had created a furore, and they faced opposition from orthodox Hindus. Sradhanandh's quick visit underlines the fact that Arya Samajis had succeeded in getting Narayana Guru's silent approval for their work (Sanoo, 2018). When Guru was asked to send out a statement in favor of Arya Samaj, Guru said he had no opposition. Caste Hindus, however, could not accept Arya Samaj's interference and approached the court. P.C. Sankaran, an Ezhava convert to Arya Samaj was charged for defiling worship place and insulting the Brahmins by

entering within the polluting distance of Laxminarayan temple. This case ended in his acquittal, ultimately. The quashing of this case, clearly proves that the Ezhavas on becoming converts to Arya Samaj drop their 'theendal' and therefore cease to be polluting castes. This solved the problem of Ezhava converts to Arya Samaj, but not that of unapproachability.

This entire performative, involving orthodox Brahmins, Arya Samaj, and the converted Ezhavas, shows just how religious symbols and narratives have become a critical platform for the reinforcement of upper-caste dominance and group identities (Gupta, 2011). Finally, Arya Samaj had obtained a ruling from the High Court of Madras that all members of the public have equal rights in public streets and that one segment of society cannot exclude another section from using public roads. Though the old notion of communal space and hereditary privilege fades, and more refined ideas of "human" and "public" emerging, Shuddhi did 'protect' Hindus (Frykenberg, 1981; Hardiman, 2007).

The Aftermath of Kalpathy Struggles

Given the influence it has had on the social and political sphere, we should cautiously consider the implications of the Kalpathy struggle. Around a hundred Ezhavas converted to Christianity, Arya Samajam, and Islam, infringing on Hindu social order and Brahmin hegemony. Twenty of them converted to Christianity, while the other sixty joined the Arya Samajam. At the end of the two-year-long struggle, the robust stance of the Brahmins miserably failed, along with Christians and Arya Samajis, Hindu Mahasbha, many Ezhavas gained right, freedom to enter Kalpathy agraharam street (Natarajan, 1925e). The Ezhavas who had been converted to Christianity for entry into Kalpathy returned to the community. Just a few of them remained with Christianity and Arya Samajam.

The Arya missionaries warned Ezhavas about the dangers of adopting foreign religions and pushed them to struggle for their rights within Hinduism (Natarajan, 1926). The Hindu leadership was concerned by the deliberations and initiation of the proselytization activity, and devised several methods to prevent more conversions. Social reform movements sought solutions within Hinduism rather than turning to other religions; even minor deviations were not tolerated. Thus, most converts faced strong opposition from society and family members, and were frequently shunned by the community. After all, they were afraid to fight for equality as their lands were controlled by the upper castes, making resistance and confrontation hard. Resources are vital as it gave oppressed and marginalized people with new institutions and political agency, enabling new discourses for social transformation (Mohan 2006).

The Quest for Liberation-Religious Conversion

In theory, Ezhavas' attempt was not to discover a new type of piety, of worldview, to live according to a distinct religion, or to embrace a new religion. The main aim of religious conversion was to achieve liberation from caste harassment, and this was the primary purpose of the entire debate on conversion. They argued that it would be better to convert to another religion than expecting the Madras government to implement orders for right to travel, and conversion should be the non-violent policy towards caste Hindus (Chami, 1936).

Sahodaran Ayyappan, while reacting to Kalpathy rejected the Gandhian position of 'saving caste even for the removal of untouchability' (Gandhi 1927, 1934, 1998). Though stressing Buddhism as the most effective way to annihilate caste, he advised Ezhavas to follow Narayana Guru's 'one caste one religion' priciples. Rao Saheb Ayathan Gopalan, Brahma Samajist, reminded Ezhava Samajam secretary that those who want to convert to Christianity should not be doing self-deception. Hindu Maha Sabha Secretary Aandha Priyan cautioned that the number of other religions is increasing through conversion.

In Kannanur, the Ezhavas hosted a conversion sabha, in which religious leaders spoke on each religion and Ezhavas were invited to their faith. K.T. Madhavan had the opinion that religious conversion is inevitable. A five-member committee was formed for campaigning in favour of religious conversion. In April 1925 four persons converted to Christianity and changed their names. Thirty people converted to Christianity and entered Kalpathy agraharam street shortly after.

Although, the Madras Presidency had the largest number and variety of Christians in British India, Basel Evangelical Mission (BEM), St Sebastian Church, Melarcode Syrian Catholic were the only Christians in Palakkad. From 1902 onwards it came under the Bishop of Coimbatore, a mostly Tamil-speaking congregation and BEM was under the control of the whites. Finally, the priests of the Marthoma Church from Travancore came to Palakkad and baptized Ezhavas (John, 1998). Staying at Thenkurissi Pandiyottu Kalam, priests of Marthoma Syrian Church began their work from 1926. They spread the gospel through house visits, individual or open meetings, distributing pamphlets and bible copies in many places. With the relentless coaxing by the priests, nine men and two women took baptism and entered the Marthoma Church in October 1926. Women volunteer groups were formed to work with women, taking into account the cultural traditions of Palakkad. In between October 1926 to 1932, about fifty-two individuals, including men and women, took baptism, became Christians under the Marthoma Church. All these baptized individuals were publicly known personalities and affluent landlords, and maintained a high economic status.

In addition, people have also been converted to Islam on numerous occasions since 1926. Kesavan, brother of E.K. Chami, changed to Abdul Razak. However, in Palakkad Taluk, only four Ezhavas had converted to Islam. There existed a strong belief among the Ezhavas that they were originally Sinhalese from Ceylon. C. Krishnan of Mithavadi, Ayyakutty Judge of Thrissur, K. Ayyappan of Kochi, C.V. Kunjiraman Travancore had already embraced Buddhism (Sanoo, 2018). Six Buddhist groups visited Malabar in between 1918 and 1935. The Buddhist mission was operational in a few amsams of Palakkad Taluk. Kannannur Buddha Samajam had organised a huge meeting in 1924. About fifty individuals took Pancha Sheelam at Thachangad Buddha religious meeting. Later, Palakkad Buddhist mission formed by joining small units (Chami, 1936). By this means, the oppressed discovered a new religion in opposition to mainstream religious discourses. The features of a new religion of oppressed take shape according to the life situation, as a new interpretation, deliberate appropriation, modification, or outright rejection of old beliefs (Aloysius, 1998b).

In Gandhi, seeking refuge

Spiritual and political questions of the Ezhavas remained unsolved even after their conversions and long struggles. Gandhi, for example, received two delegations

during his Ezhuvas, led by Sukumaran, T.M. Chamiappan, and P.C. Gopalan. When the Ezhavas inquired about accepting other religions as a solution to their problems, Gandhi told them to stay in the Hindu fold, fight, and find solutions through the Hindu Mahasabha. Gandhi had no opposition to the joining of Ezhavas to Arya Samaj or Brahma Samaj. While Gopalan argued that the redemption of his group lies either in conversion to other faiths or in non-participation in the fight for swaraj, however, the Ezhavas wanted to know whether a purified Hinduism would be possible. Gandhi's response was 'yes', and he said that he wasn't going to be a Hindu and he couldn't survive (Gandhi, 2000b).

Gandhi's conviction was that untouchability was foreign to Hinduism, and as reformers were seeking to eradicate the 'blot' of untouchability, that conversion was no solution (Gandhi, 2000a). The program of swadeshi, in addition to boycotting foreign goods, stood for the safeguarding of traditional institutions and "Hinduism" from Christian missionary work (Gandhi, 1967; Mallampalli, 2004). Gandhi believed that 'India stands in no need of conversion from one faith to another,' warned against 'denationalisation,' and argued that 'the great faiths of India' are sufficient for nation-building (Gandhi 1959, 1969). Though Gandhi recognised untouchability as a crime against God, he assumed that it would end if upper caste attitudes changed (Gandhi 1921, 1933, 1939). This Gandhian stance on caste had far-reaching implications for the anti-caste struggle in India. The quest for the potential of spiritual salvation, moral upliftment, non-Hindu self by conversion was effectively trampled on by Shuddhi, Sangathan, and Gandhian social reform. Reformed Hinduism, and the overarching force of nationalism, conquered dissenting nationalities, crushing all lower caste resistance.

Towards a Theory of Anti-Caste

Communities seeking upward mobility often have rejected their subjugated position and created a new history. Instead of placing Brahmin authority at the centre, they questioned the very foundation upon which Brahmin power was built. For instance, Jyotirao Phule recreated Maratha history by narrating a story about Aryan invaders seizing power from the native Kshatriyas, and targeted the divine authority of Brahmin (O'Hanlon, 2002) (Phule and Deshpande, 2002). Iyothee Thass argued about Tamil Buddhist history in relation to the Parayas' caste status (Ayyathurai, 2011; Rajadurai and Geetha, 1998). Dr.Palppu, co-founder of the SNDP, had made an attempt to write Ezhava history. Despite the fact that many people attempted to write, he found it unworthy of publication (Kumar, 2014). Influential Ezhava thinkers, including Palpu, held that Ezhava had originated from the Buddhists of Ceylon.

In Ezhava Charithram (1936), Elamandham Chami articulates that Ezhavas are Buddhists. To support this claim, he compared Ezhavas of Malabar and Sinhalas of Ceylon based on socio-cultural similarities, physical appearances, and religious faith (Buddhism). He goes on to say that by disobeying the Brahmins, the Ezhavas were forced to accept a low social status, gave up their ancient religion, and began worshipping Hindu religious sacraments, causing their ancient religion to fade away. He rationally rejects Hinduism and caste hierarchy by invoking a Buddhist past. Chami also wrote a treatise on Buddhist religious practises called 'Buddha Dharma Pradeepam' (1931), which aimed to popularise Buddhism. In 1931, Odannur Chathu,

an Ezhava sanskrit scholar wrote Jathidaithyaari. Chathu expertly deconstructs the cunning within texts like Manusmrithi, proving that knowledge is a universal right, using a dialogical method. He rejects sacred books because it contradict humanity's core values of equality and fraternity (Chathu, 1931). By narrativizing and invoking the past, these writings advanced an anti-caste worldview centred on fraternity and equality, which also transformed into new practises and discourses (Mohan, 2006). Both rejecting Indian lineage and invoking foreignness are attempts to distance oneself from the Hindu social order. These utterances effectively dissected upper caste dominance and its ideology, despite its limited scope.

Conclusion

There is a large body of literature about Ezhava movement. Filippo and Caroline Osella have argued that 'modernity together with a generalised commitment to progress, appears as integral to Ezhavas' self-defined identities, embedded in community identity' that was forged through the long process of reforms and mobilisation (Osella and Osella, 2000). This article also depicts the long process of mobilisation and reforms aimed at fostering a sense of 'samudhayam,' or community, rather than creating ethnic identity. Dominant paradigms like ethnicization and sanskritization narrow the extent of exploring diverse claims of lower castes in various regions. Caste oppression, the desire for new opportunities brought about by colonial modernity, and the aspiration for a fair share of social wealth and power drove the Ezhavas to get organised. The Ezhava movement kept its developmental agenda while becoming largely a political movement. Though conversion was once a hot topic in the mid-1930s, the religious question faded as the Izhavas achieved several of their objectives. Members of the movement were drawn to new secular ideals of socialism and Marxism as part of their continual battle for equality (Jones, 1989; Menon, 1994). The Congress was slow in adopting the lower castes. Caste, region, class, and religion, along with their issues, were not incorporated into the abstract and homogeneous nationalism (Mannathukkaren, 2022).

Lower castes tried to restructure and broaden the public sphere by articulating the fundamentals of anti-caste ideology, the imaginations of nation, community, and sociality. The existing framework of knowledge, ideology, performative aspects linked to caste has been challenged. The alleged dominance of brahmins has been questioned by prudently constructed counter-narratives. They aimed at the construction of an 'alternative public' and public opinion through publishing and history writing. While the Hindu reform movements sought to create a unified Hindu identity, the Ezhava campaign was adamantly opposed to the creation of a homogeneous Hindu community. It is argued that lower caste politics in Kerala differs significantly in ideology and political orientation and had not followed a single trajectory. Lower caste assertions appears to be inherently linked with existential conditions and specific location of castes in the hierarchy. Thus, these instances are uneven and many-sided. I contend that Ezhavas' assertions imply the presence of an "autonomous anti-caste movement" in the South Malabar region. The anti-caste movement necessitates critical analysis because the politics it articulated is as important as the anti-caste ideology.

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Periyar's Spatial Thought: Region as Non-Brahmin Discursive Space

Ganeshwar[1]

'To change life,' 'to change society,' these phrases mean nothing if there is no production of an appropriated space.

— Henri Lefebvre[1]

Abstract

Even as historical studies of the conceptualisation of the region in Tamil Nadu invariably trace it back to the early Dravidian movement, 'region' is seen as peripheral to Periyar's radical anti-caste thought in existing scholarship. This flows from both a limited focus on the spatial aspects of Periyar's thought and a narrow conceptualisation of space itself. Diverging from the dominant physicalist view of space, this article views Periyar's politics of space as a radical attempt to subvert the cultural logic of hegemonic nationalism that sustained caste and its privileges through modernity. Outlining Periyar's criticism of the nation as a 'dominated space', it explores Periyar's conception of Dravida Nadu as an 'appropriated space' that attempted to further the pursuit of self-respect as a rationally conceived regional utopia. By doing so, the article tries to contextualise Periyar's spatial thought not as secondary to his anti-caste politics but as its fullest expression.

Keywords

Periyar, Space, Region, Caste, Indian Nationalism, Tamil Nationalism, Dravida Nadu

Introduction

Much of the existing scholarship on the Dravidian Movement traditionally theorises the self-respect years of the Dravidian movement, led by E.V. Ramasamy Periyar,

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[1](Lefebvre, 2009, p. 186).

as a primarily anti-caste movement and the latter part of the Dravidian movement led by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (D.M.K.) as more spatially oriented and regionalist. It is argued that Periyar's anti-caste thought is deterritorial, concerned with universal themes of equality and justice and by spatialising the early Dravidian thought, D.M.K deradicalises the anti-caste zeal of the self-respect movement.[2] Even as historical studies of the conceptualisation of the region in Tamil Nadu invariably trace it back to the early Dravidian movement,[3] region is seen as peripheral to Periyar's radical anti-caste thought. This flows from both a limited focus on the spatial aspects of Periyar's thought as well as a limited conceptualisation of space itself. As political geographer and urban theorist Edward Soja explains, the 'physicalist view of space has deeply influenced all forms of spatial analysis, whether philosophical and theoretical or practical and empirical', imbuing all things spatial with a 'lingering sense of primordiality and physical composition, objectivity, and inevitability' (Soja, 1980, p. 209). If there is anything we have learnt from the pioneering work of Henri Lefebvre, it is that space is inherently political and that organised social space, as opposed to contextual space, is never explained solely by nature, history or culture. Lefebvre argued that, in modernity, there is a passage from production in space to production of space where it is interposed by mediations and mediators with reasons derived from knowledge, ideology and meaning systems.[4] Lefebvre argued that all social systems produce space within the framework of the society they exist in and they enact a logic of homogeneity and repetition making the social relations reproducible. This makes the spaces we inherit 'dominated spaces'. A society transforming itself cannot accept space as produced by the existing system because while doing so it inherits the mechanisms of reproduction of existing structures (Lefebvre, 2009, pp. 186–194). A transformational politics of space becomes crucial for Lefebvre not because it is autonomous from or superior to politics of social relations but precisely because it is intertwined with it. Lefebvre argues that while dominated space is oriented towards the reproducible, it is inevitably surrounded by the non-reproducible elements, sometimes proposing a 'counter-space'. Transformational politics has to mobilise the contradictions of space to threaten its reproducibility and thereby, 'appropriate' the space. This article argues that Periyar's spatial politics was motivated by such a critical understanding of space—that spatial relations were inseparable from social relations. This article argues that it was only because Periyar was convinced that the annihilation of caste was non-negotiable for the pursuit of self-respect, that the articulation of an alternative spatial politics became critical for him. Periyar was convinced that Indian nationalism as the 'purest manifestation of political brahmanism' conceived the nation as a dominated space that would ensure the reproduction of caste and, therefore, to subvert the cultural logic of Indian nationalism became inevitable for the pursuit of self-respect. This article puts forward that it was towards this end that he mobilised his vision of rationally conceived regional utopia, as an appropriated space, as Lefebvre

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[2]For a clear exposition of this position: Pandian (1993).

[3]Such a genealogy is traced in: Barnett (2015) and Geetha & Rajadurai (1998).

[4]Contextual space corresponds to the passive space where production takes place while social space is the space that is produced by and produces social relations. Production in space does not disappear in social space but is oriented differently.

would call it. In this article, through a close reading of Periyar's critique of Indian nationalism and careful construction of his regional utopia, I intend to contextualise Periyar's spatial thought not as secondary to his anti-caste politics but as the fullest expression of it.[5]

A Structural Turn in Periyar's Anti-Caste Thought

Early in his political life, Periyar prioritised the politics of social change above the pursuit of power. This was how Periyar reasoned his joining the Madras Presidency Association, the non-brahmin branch of the Indian National Congress, over the Justice Party. Periyar's discomfort with the Justice Party brand of politics was that it prioritised the pursuit of power by non-brahmins to the harder work of reform of society, and by doing so, it reduced the issue of caste to that of Brahmin domination. This deep suspicion of power politics made the Gandhian constructive programme attractive to Periyar in the early days of his political life. He championed Gandhian constructive work and the Non-Cooperation movement in Tamil Nadu. He remarked that as Gandhi had already been appropriated by the Congress Brahmins, the non-brahmins should, at least, try and appropriate Gandhian Constructive work. He considered that the Justice Party pursuing the 'politics of vote and council' did not seem disturbed by the practice of untouchability or the broader Adi Dravida cause (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998, pp. 212–213). For these reasons, he still considered the Gandhian Social programme to be valuable because he believed it could address the issue of untouchability, build a popular base and ideological credibility for the non-brahmin movement.

Even after exiting the Congress, V. Geetha and Rajadurai write, he continued to find Gandhi's insistence on spinning, abolition of Untouchability and Prohibition 'worthwhile and useful principles of action and conduct' (Ibid). While he repeatedly condemned the Congress Brahmins for working against wider Tamil interests and wondered why Gandhi remained silent in the face of it, he remained convinced that khadi, non-cooperation and national unity were imperative in the fight for human dignity. This changed gradually with the indifference and unyieldingness of Congress leaders in their refusal to address the issue of social inequality, and was accelerated by a series of declarations made by Gandhi defending Varnashrama Dharma himself during his successive visits to Tamil Nadu. Despite efforts to persuade Gandhi to modify this position, Gandhi remained adamant in his public support for Varnashrama dharma. During his visit to Madras in 1927, he applauded the Brahmins as 'finest flowers of the country' for preserving Varnashrama Dharma and warned the non-brahmins for trying to rob it of its fragrance (Pandian, 2007, p. 191). These continued statements angered the non-brahmin leaders of the Tamil country who felt that whatever Gandhi's intentions were, he was adding strength to the brahmin conservatives of the Madras

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[5]The difficulty in theorising Periyar comes from the fact that Periyar did not write in an academic fashion. The major sources of his thought are his speeches and writings, where he wrote as he spoke. Here even though Periyar does not resort to an alliterative or poetic language, he employs a great deal of rhetoric and appealing argumentative devices which sometimes lend themselves to crude oversimplified analysis. But when one avoids such a literal interpretation, we find in Periyar a powerful critique of dominant ideologies and discursive practices which is what the article aims to lay out.

presidency who were strongly against any measure for reform or representation. Even for Periyar, who continued to support Gandhi despite his complete fallout with Congress, these statements proved to be the final straw. He declared,

"If we are to follow the Mahatma's creed, we will slip into the very abyss of that untouchability we are attempting to abolish. We have been patient, very patient and tight-lipped but today in the interests of abolition and self-respect we are, sadly enough, forced to confront and oppose the Mahatma." (as cited in Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998, p. 287)

Periyar later revealed that he met Gandhi in Mysore to discuss his ideas regarding the necessity to abolish Brahmin hegemony and that Gandhi not only refused to consider the arguments valid, but also made it clear that he indeed believed in varnadharma, in principle and form (Ibid). This led to a complete fallout, and Periyar decided not to meet Gandhi again. Periyar became convinced that Gandhi wasn't an exception in the Congress but a crucial player in the construction and deployment of Congress-brahmin hegemony. Within a few years, he would become severely critical not only of Gandhi but of khadi, Gandhian constructive programme and the nationalist movement itself. These disagreements represented not personal resentment, but a structural turn in Periyar's thought concerning caste and brahmanical ideology. Periyar became convinced that the nationalist movement not only lacked commitment towards the annihilation of caste but considered such a project detrimental to their cause. The question that began to pre-occupy Periyar was this: why was it that the anti-colonial nationalist movement that polemised extensively about poverty and degradation of masses was unable to address social inequality as manifested in caste, which for Periyar was the single greatest threat to national unity. The answer for Periyar could only be that the national movement simply did not see caste as a *threat* to Indian unity but as its very *basis*.

Unity without Fraternity: Interrogating Indian Unity

As Periyar became disillusioned with the political practice of Gandhian nationalism, he subjected its philosophy, discourse and practice to serious ideological interrogation. Periyar criticised the Indian national movement for seeking to create a unity that wasn't based on egalitarianism and therefore was bereft of any real sense of fraternity. The sole purpose of this unity was to enable action against colonialism to further the nationalist cause of Swaraj. For Periyar, achieving swaraj always remained secondary to achieving social equality. Periyar had embraced Gandhi's vision of Swaraj because he thought it held a promise for egalitarianism and was amply clear that without this promise, Swaraj meant nothing to the vast majority of the poor and oppressed. For him, the sidestepping of this question of egalitarianism was the biggest betrayal of the Nationalist movement for Swarajya. Even as Gandhi largely widened the support for the national movement by recasting Indian nationalism in ethical and moral terms, he retained an inegalitarian and explicitly hierarchical view of society that is varna dharma in his vision of the Indian nation. Benedict Anderson famously wrote, "The nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship". "Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of

people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings", he added (Anderson, 1983, p. 7). But how did a profoundly inegalitarian Indian nationalism under Gandhi popularise itself? What does it reveal about the space that it envisioned? Gandhi's nationalism might not have sustained itself simply through communal passions. But Periyar argued that Indian nationalism was unable to embrace fraternity, which was inconsistent with brahmanism and therefore embraced an egoistic passion consistent with it. While Gandhi elevated himself as a Mahatma through the practice of his philosophy, he also elevated swaraj from a mere political ideal to a moral ideal. The emerging nation was now a moral imperative. The urgency of a united national consciousness given that the morality of the cause of swarajya thrust the cause of unity and self-rule into the status of the 'political' and confined the cause of human dignity and self-respect to merely the 'social'. Periyar challenged this through the self-respect movement. Bringing to the forefront of politics the idea of self-respect, he pitted self-respect against self-rule and questioned the morality of the latter without the former (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998, pp. 284–285).

Periyar consistently refuted moralising the political end of the nation because he considered that it made the nationalists oblivious to the barbarity and dehumanisation that was ingrained in the national self. He insisted that anyone who pretended that a nation free from British rule but still plagued by the dehumanisation called caste was somehow a moral ideal was being deeply immoral. Contrary to the nationalistic attribution of purity and divinity to the motherland, Periyar labelled the country that sheltered the barbarity of untouchability and discrimination as 'wretched'.

"Men should not touch each other, see each other; men cannot enter temples, fetch water from the village pond: in a land where such inhuman practices are rife, it is a wonder that earthquakes have not destroyed us, volcanoes not burnt us; it is a wonder that the earth has not split at its heart and plunged this land into an abyss, that a typhoon has not shattered us." (Ibid., pp. 272–273)

Periyar argued that the nationalists who were convinced of the urgency of the moral project of national self-rule were bound to be incapable of recognising the horrors that plagued this country that were indigenous to this land. Not only were they indifferent to the horrors, more often than not, they also ventured to defend it. In an article titled "The madness of nationalism", Periyar wrote that one can remain a nationalist in India only when he agrees with the most regressive ideas and practises of its most reactionary masses. He held that the word nationalism had become a tool through which leaders can ignore the cause of upliftment of their people and keep them forever as backward classes and asked those who believe in an egalitarian project to stay away from it (Periyar, 2008, pp. 111–117). As early as 1927, Periyar declared that his position is that the concepts of 'Nation' and 'nationalism' are fraudulent from their very foundation as they are constructed to obscure our reality. He considered that the national movement fundamentally set up the social space of the nation in a way that ensured the social reproduction of caste relations for perpetuity in the emerging nation. I identify three important ways in which Periyar argued Indian nationalism ensured the reproducibility of caste: (i) Universalisation of the sectarian-communal (ii) Nationalisation of Brahmanism (iii) Conversion of Caste relations into Capital relations.

Universalisation of the Sectarian-Communal

Periyar believed that the facade of nationalist unity was but a cloak for its partisan interests. In his words, "Nationalism is communalism that doesn't announce itself gleefully" (Periyar, 2008b, p. 84). He added that he was ready to bear the label of a communalist for advancing the politics of oppressed classes but insisted that nationalists do not become non-communal because of their universalist rhetoric. The universal rhetoric of Congress leaders, he argued, preserved the collective interests of those benefiting from the traditional social order by precluding any critique of it. The Karachi resolution of 1931, which vowed to protect the beliefs and practices of people of faith from regulation, was clearly communal and sectarian because while it argued for drastic changes in the formal domain of politics, it only prescribed status quo in the social domain, thus preserving narrow sectarian interest.[6]

"When he argues that every Varna has a right to profess their beliefs, Gandhi is being communal. When it is arguing that all religious beliefs have to be safeguarded from government interference, the Congress is being communal. When he asks us to act in a way that no beliefs of individuals from any caste or class are hurt, the 'bolshevik hero' Nehru is being communal. When it doesn't allow those without the knowledge of Hindi to its working committee, the Congress election committee is communal. When he asks for separate schools, temples, and ponds to be constructed for the use of untouchables, Mr Malviya is being communal". (Ibid., p. 164)

And this sectarian-communalism, for Periyar, was not nationalism corrupted, but its very core. He elaborated that as the Western world is organised as classes, in Western countries, nationalism represents bourgeois class interest, and as Indian society is organised as castes, Indian nationalism represents brahmanical class interest (Ibid., p. 85). If nationalism's primary message is that the power should be Indianised but impedes any debate over the principle on which this power should be wielded, Periyar asks what else can this be called but sectarianism. Even as Periyar always opposed the moralisation of empty nationalism, he would soon identify and dub it as the moralisation of Brahmanism. He argued that resolutions passed by Brahmins in Varnashrama dharma conferences and resolutions passed by nationalists in Congress conferences were essentially the same, only phrased differently. Indeed the latter is more dangerous than the former because the former only ask the state to not interfere in their discriminatory sectarian practices, but the latter pledges to safeguard them through the state. But just like how a cult denounces every other cult, nationalism is quick to denounce any attempt at power-sharing as 'sectarianism'. When the oppressed, tyrannised, and dehumanised masses begin to express their difficulties and their interests without any empathy, the nationalists decry it as sectarianism. For

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[6]The Karachi resolution, for the first time, listed out a list of socio-economic principles that a future Indian state would adhere to. But Periyar and the self respecters found the promises of the Congress hollow, especially as they followed the execution of Bhagat Singh and his comrades, whom they strongly believed Gandhi and the Congress betrayed. They also insisted that the philosophy that the resolution adopted to end poverty without ending class distinctions was akin to ending untouchability without ending caste distinctions. But it was the Section 14 and the Section 17 of the charter of rights discussed at Karachi which assured 'the state will not interfere in religious matters' and not 'wound the susceptibilities of any of its citizens who profess opinions or a creed different from their own' that Periyar repeatedly criticised as shielding the caste society against any reform. For more on self respecters critique of Karachi resolution: (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998, 443-447)

nationalists who want to build a nation that is nothing but an exhibition of different and unequal castes, classes and religions, Periyar asks what damage is caused by these classes having their own representatives.

Periyar's criticism of the sectarian nature of Gandhi and Congress was expressed most strongly during the second roundtable conference and the Poona Pact. Periyar and the self-respect movement resolutely took the side of Dr. Ambedkar and Mr. Rettaimalai Srinivasan, who insisted on separate electorates for the Adi Dravidas and condemned the 'political cunningness' of Mr. Gandhi.[7] Gandhi's proclamation of himself as the sole representative of Adi Dravidas and his ridicule of Ambedkar's right to represent his people generated much anger and resentment among the Adi Dravidas of Tamil Nadu, and the self-respect movement took upon itself the role of channelising and directing this rage. Articles, editorials, protests and demonstrations by prominent self-respecters condemning Gandhi and Congress were organised throughout the Tamil Country. Between 1932 and 1944, *Kudi Arasu* published 37 articles in support of various political positions of Dr. Ambedkar (Manoharan, 2020, p. 139). When the Poona Pact was signed, Periyar condemned it as Gandhi's cunningness prevailing over Adi Dravida welfare. A *Kudi Arasu* editorial argued that Gandhi would put his life at risk to prevent a separate electorate for Adi Dravidas was proof of the fact that 'Gandhi and Congress were intent on wrestling political control from the British only to enthrone the authority of varna dharma'. It was clear that Congress wanted power from the British but were afraid of the power slipping to the Adi Dravidas as it would 'undermine the basis for the desired Brahminical dominance in a future, free polity'. Prominent self-respecter Guruswami wrote in *Kudi Arasu* that the Gandhi who argued that he doesn't want swaraj without the abolition of untouchability was long gone, and this Gandhi was no different from those Hindus in Devakottai who demonstrated the 'worth of their Hindu faith' by setting fire to Adi Dravida homes[8] (Periyar, 2008, pp. 19–24) (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998, pp. 346–347).

Nationalisation of Brahmanism

The persistent theme in Periyar's critique of Indian nationalism was its attempt at the nationalisation of Hinduism. The early nationalist movement majorly derived its passions from the perceived glory of the country's Hindu past, and this has remained a reinforcement for nationalist passion for many ever since. However, Gandhi's nationalism was anchored not simply on the perceived glory of the past but on a new, and in many ways original, ethic. This wielded itself as acceptable and appealing to a larger public. But this supposedly new ethic, Periyar argued, preserved in itself the core of an older tyrannical ideology, that of Brahmanism. This nationalism not only sheltered the traditional oppressive ideology but also manifested it in the modern language of pure politics. This inflexion of politics and religion rendered

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[7]For more on the 'intellectual comradeship' between Ambedkar and Periyar: (Geetha, 2017) and Manoharan, 2020)

[8]Though the incident refered to here is unclear, a *Kudi Arasu* editorial written two months ago on July 24, 1932 refers to frequent attacks on and plunder of Dalit households at Devakottai, a small village in the Sivagangai district of Tamil Nadu. The editorial alleges that the Zilla collector, sub-collector and Judge, all being Brahmins, turned a blind eye towards the atrocities. It is significant that a Hindu report records that Mr. Gandhi visited Devakottai two years later in 1934 to broker peace between the Nattars (Kallars) and Dalits.

religion more immune to criticism and made politics less conducive to reform. This way, Gandhi had truly nationalised Brahmanism. This was Periyar's central critique of Indian nationalism. This inflexion of old in the new was what Periyar sought to expose, for he was convinced that it is imperative for progressive politics to challenge and dislodge the old tyrannical social ideology. A new that retained the old was both inherently amoral and politically counterproductive. Thus Periyar took upon himself the task not only of critiquing the old, Brahmanism, but exposing the old in the new nationalism which was but 'the most complete expression of political brahmanism' (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998, p. 306). A satirical fictional conversation between a 'puranic propagandist' and a self-respecter published in *Kudi Arasu* sheds light on this (Periyar, 2008b, pp. 187–191). Lamenting that the divinely ordained authority of the Puranas has been completely destroyed by the rationalist propaganda of the self-respect movement, the 'puranic propagandist' says it is only because of Congress he still gets to do puranic sermons, and without it, he would simply have to torch his puranas. When the self-respecter asks how he can do puranic sermons on the stages of Congress, which is a nationalist organisation for self-rule, the puranic propagandist replies that there isn't much of a difference between the two types of sermons and if he simply adds 'Long Live Mahatma Gandhi' and 'Vande Mataram' no one would find the difference. He only has to call Mahatma Gandhi not a regular human being, but a divine incarnation as hinted by the *Mahabharata* for the purposes of a holy battle, after which he can go on talking about the greatness of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad Gita* and no one in the audience would realise it is a puranic sermon. Periyar, through satire, tries to make transparent what is obscured—the nationalist movement sustained itself by infusing religious, brahmanical values in a new political vocabulary and therefore breathed new life into it. If the language and discursive power of religion served to justify exploitation and oppression in the past, Periyar argued it is precisely what nationalists achieved, albeit through a shrewdly modified vocabulary. This 'brahmanised' nationalism cannot tackle the hierarchisation of society and the subsequent dehumanisation of the non-brahmins because they have been moralised in the same scriptures that were being touted to define the national character. The legitimacy of the scriptures and faith that sustain the hierarchy has to be challenged, and therefore, nationalism that breathes life into it also has to be challenged. The transcript that *Kudi Arasu* published of the conversation between Gandhi and Periyar in 1927 reveals Periyar's conviction (Manoharan & Ramani, 2021). He tells Gandhi that Hinduism is different from the other religions because the spiritual core of Hinduism is so vacuous that those who have attained power through it will keep refashioning it to sustain the convenient hierarchy of the caste system. The brahmins are cheering on Gandhi because he has not been able to produce a fundamental change in the Hindu society, and they believe they can use him for their ends. Even if Gandhi does manage to produce a fundamental change somehow, Periyar argued, Hinduism is very capable of producing another Mahatma who will reverse the change. Thus, for Periyar, the task of social change is impossible without challenging the legitimacy of Hinduism, which only serves brahmanical interests and a nationalism that wouldn't venture to do it is ultimately useless for the cause of self-respect.

This was the key to his opposition to Hindi as well, which is often misread as 'linguistic chauvinism'. The attempt by the nationalist movement to impose Hindi on the entire country as essential for national unity, Periyar thought, was but a repurposed attempt following the failure to revive Sanskrit for sustaining the relevance of Aryan

sanskritic civilisational and religious values which are fundamentally inegalitarian. By imposing Hindi in schools in the veneer of nationalisation, Periyar thought it was Tulsidas' *Ramayana* that was being nationalised. For the self-respect movement, Hindi represented everything they resisted for the last two decades—caste power, brahmanic dominance, scriptural authority and the fictions of nationalism (Geetha, 1999, p. 2).

Conversion of Caste relations into Capital Relations

Periyar believed that behind the façade of the Gandhian spiritual economy through rural reconstruction, larger systemic change in the realm of production was setting up a powerful Baniya class that carried a disproportionate indirect influence over national politics. After his Soviet trip in 1932, Periyar became convinced that the struggle for self-respect should necessarily include, along with the struggle against the old social order, a struggle against the emerging capitalist order that only strengthens the former. Historian A.R. Venkatachalapathy infers from a secret police report that the colonial government, paranoid about the 'red spectre', suspected that Periyar showed an urgency in propagating the communist doctrine by organising more than 40 meetings within three months, expressing 'unbound admiration for the Russian regime', and harbouring the 'intention to end the present administration and establish a Socialist form of government' (Venkatachalapathy, 2017)! Even though paranoid, police report's observation about Periyar's 'unbound admiration' for Soviet Russia was not far-fetched. In the months following his Soviet visit, Periyar leaped praise on the efforts of the Soviet government towards destabilising religious authority, poverty alleviation and city planning. Periyar often drew inspiration from the Russian Revolution and adapted Marxist concepts innovatively for the Indian context. The victory of the Russian revolution, Periyar suggested, was in their realisation that 'to overthrow god is to overthrow the authority of rich men' and 'to abolish religion is to abolish forces sustaining the social inequality' (Periyar, 2008, pp. 191–194). Periyar refashioned his earlier critique of Hinduism in Marxist terms. He dubbed the Brahmin as a 'birth capitalist' as he converted his birth into economic and social capital and god as the 'stone capitalist' to explain the material exploitation that Brahmanism facilitates (Omvedt, 2011, p. 243). While addressing conferences of Dalits who have embraced Christianity, Periyar suggested that they should not be swayed by the promises of salvation offered by Christian priests but should follow the example of the Christians of Russia to demolish the authority of the Church and its priests and establish a society of equals (Subagunarajan, 2018, pp. 38–39). He argued that the future to be constructed had to be a socialist world in which authority built on private wealth and power would have no rightful place (Periyar, 1981, pp. 374–376). State paranoia translated into police action against Periyar, his family, and his party, forcing Periyar to declare that he was withdrawing his socialist programme for the sake of his larger self-respect movement.

Though Periyar gave up overt advocacy of the socialist programme, the criticism of, what he dubbed as, 'the Brahmin-Baniya nexus' remained central to his politics. Indeed, S.V. Rajadurai argues that this critique hardened after 1936 when the cooperation between the Indian big business class and the Congress reached new heights. Rajadurai argues that the provincial governments formed by Congress in 1937 reflected this in many ways. First, the newly elected provincial governments implemented severe anti-labour laws gaining the confidence of the business class, but to the dismay of

labour unions. The Bombay Industrial Disputes Act of 1938, for example, sought to to illegalize strikes occurring without exhausting the arbitration machinery. It also made recognition of the unions conditional on the acceptance of the arbitration machinery, and provided more stringent punitive measures for participation in illegal strikes (Sharma, 2004, p. 792). The Madras government insisted that they supported conciliation and not arbitration but regularly used police forces inside and outside factory premises to 'regulate' workers and branded union activists as extremists and sought to curb their activities (Krishna, 1992, p. 1504). Second, the Congress won over the trust of the business class by ensuring the complete independence of the colonial bureaucratic apparatus during their provincial governments between 1937–1939, the disintegration of which the industrialists did not like. And third, native industrialists like G.D. Birla and Purushotham Thakurdas openly expressed their happiness that Nehru's occasional socialist tendencies did not translate into Congress policy resolutions and appreciated Gandhi's role in making sure that the Congress remained committed to supporting Indian industrialists (Rajadurai, 2003, pp. 154–156).

Rajadurai argues that it was these major changes that made the north Indian Baniya class a continuous target of Periyar who saw Congress' nationalism as a facade for Brahmin-Baniya interests. He began to argue that the nationalist movement was more interested in ensuring a seamless transfer of the economic advantage for the Baniya classes in the pre-modern economy to the modern national economy than it was interested in the freedom of ordinary people. He even argued, this was the actual purpose behind the spinning of khadi. The reason for making the entire country spin khadi, Periyar believed, was not to help the ordinary masses but the mill owners of Gujarat and Mumbai. Periyar quipped Gandhi only had two friends, the north Indian businessman and the south Indian Brahmin. These were the only people he respected and listened to. For others, he had nothing to offer but the task of spinning and a verbal assurance that he was against the practice of untouchability. But even this was dependent on what the mill owner and the brahmin might have to say at the moment (Periyar, 2008b, pp. 87–88).

Periyar considered that Hindi imposition, Hindu communalism and the Gandhian constructive programme were all aimed at maximising the profit of North Indian Baniya businessmen and minimising external competition from other groups. Periyar argued the motive behind pushing Hindi education beyond all odds was not just to establish a unity but specifically unity desirable for the Baniya classes, a seamless homogenous market that spoke in a single language in independent India (See: Rajadurai, 1998, pp. 387–398). Hindu communalism was consciously propagated by Hindu capitalists who sought to preserve existing tensions among castes and conflict with Muslims to ensure that others do not enter the arena of Industrial capitalism where they exercised dominance (Rajadurai, 1993, p. 164).

Periyar considered the Gandhian constructive programme not just to be inadequate, but consciously counter-revolutionary. The Gandhian programme of village reconstruction, Periyar argued in 1936, anticipated the problems of the new capitalist order and attended to it. For example, it asked how labourers thrown out of work by the expansion of machines can sustain themselves. But Periyar argued that the question that begs to be asked was why should there be a distinct group called the labourers and another called the capitalists. Periyar considered that by romanticising

villages instead of extending to them the comforts of the city, Gandhi gave a spiritual justification to the labourer-capitalist hierarchy, similar to the justification *varnashrama dharma* provided to the caste hierarchy. Just as the Brahmin leeched off the manual physical labour of the non-brahmin castes by adjudging it as their dharma, Periyar argued, the city leeched off the village's physical labour by attributing moral value to it. In other words, he argued that ascriptive hierarchies of the caste order were only strengthened by the occupational hierarchies of the capitalist order and the spatial hierarchy of village and town strengthened these hierarchies instead of challenging them. Periyar argued that while Gandhi presents the public a moral choice between nature and technology, the choice Gandhi obscures is between using technology to perpetuate existing as well as new hierarchies and using technology to abolish such hierarchies for an egalitarian socialist future (Periyar, 2013).

Periyar's fierce critique of the North Indian business class neither brought him closer to the Dravidian business class, nor brought the Dravidian business class close to Periyar. When the Communist Party daily *Jana Sakthi* accused Periyar of using the 'Birla' name to scare the working class and divide them into Aryans and Dravidians and ensuring the prosperity of the Dravidian capitalists, Periyar published a harsh response through his daily *Viduthalai*. He argued that the self-respect movement's commitment to socialism has been consistent and that it was the movement that popularised communist doctrines in Tamil Nadu and translated communist works into Tamil long before the Communist Party ventured to do so. He argued that all major capitalists of the Tamil country have already surrendered to the Congress Party and no more small scale business people support Dravidar Kazhagam than they support the Communist Party. He argued that while he repeatedly insisted that his movement's goals and the Communist Party's goals were one and the same, the Communist Party continued to attack Periyar for not accepting the nationalist consensus. He argued that while he is committed to a socialist future, he (unlike the Communist Party members) could not ignore the contradictions of carrying the Tricolour in the left hand, red flag in the right hand, the sacred thread on the shoulders and the books of Karl Marx under their arms. While propaganda of communist doctrines were a regular feature of self-respect meetings, he asked why the Communist party refused to question the exploitative practices of North Indian Business class, Aryan brahmanical domination, and frauds committed in the name of Hinduism in communist party meetings. To ensure self-respect for the Dravidian masses, Periyar argued the above questions should accompany the critique of capitalism, without which it will be ineffective and unsuccessful (*Viduthalai,* 31.07.1947). Periyar argued that the nationalist consensus heralded by the Congress not only safeguarded Brahmin-Baniya interest but was inextricable from it. Thus, for Periyar, the national question and the question of labour were interconnected and the latter could not be resolved without resolving the former.

As Periyar thus systematically critiqued Gandhi and the nationalist movement for preserving the Hindu social order, the unilateral imposition of Hindi in the schools of the Madras presidency, became the immediate cause for the explosion of the demand for Tamil sovereignty. Periyar revolted against it as an attempt to infuse brahmanical values to school children, and this gave rise to the moment where he would most

acutely direct his antipathy of the Indian nationalist project into a demand for Tamil sovereignty.

'Tamil Nadu for Tamils': Periyar and the Tamil Region

Organising a huge gathering with about 50,000–70,000 people along the beach of Madras, Periyar raised the slogan of "Tamil Nadu for Tamils" in an impassioned speech starkly different from his general tone of rationalist inquiry (Kalimuthu, 2011, p. 72).

> "We Tamils have lost 50 years due to this wretched nationalism. We have labelled anyone who wanted to usher progress to this country and its people as anti-national, disloyal, selfish and heretic and failed to utilise them.
> We kiss and worship the very legs that kick us. We wholeheartedly revel in their shit. We've lost our dignity. We've lost our senses. We've become slaves to others. Is this why a Tamil should live?"
> "At least now, "Tamil Nadu for the Tamils" should become an article of faith with the Tamils. Tattoo your hands with the slogan 'Tamil Nadu for Tamils'. Write on the walls of each of your houses that 'Tamil Nadu is for the Tamils'. Imagine an outsider sitting in your home and declaring that he is the master of your house. Think if there can be a greater shame and degradation for us. Get ready. Destroy the chains that have been imposed on Tamilnadu.
> Tamil Nadu is for the Tamils! Tamil Nadu is for the Tamils!! Tamil Nadu is for the Tamils!!!" (Periyar, 2008c, pp. 222-223, translation mine)

However, this was only the immediate cause for the explosion of the demand for regional sovereignty. A longer historical view of what propelled Periyar to undertake this demand is necessary to understand Periyar's spatial thought. A quick summary of the series of events from the 1930s that propelled Periyar and the self-respect movement to take up the demand for Tamil sovereignty would shed light on Periyar's rationale for his complete rejection of the national space.

1. Periyar strongly believed that the Poona Pact, by foreclosing the possibility of separate electorates for Dalits in India, limited the radicalism of anti-caste politics, effectively sacrificing Dalit interests for national unity.
2. The resolutions of the Karachi conference prescribed a policy of non-intervention in religious affairs that assured that no attempts would be made to regulate people in matters of belief and practice. This for Periyar indicated that independent India would constitutionally prohibit attempts to challenge the poisonous core of Brahmanical ideology in the name of the right to faith.
3. Periyar grew highly sceptical of the increasing influence of Brahmin-Baniya nexus in determining Indian politics. Periyar considered the North Indian Baniya Businessman and South Indian Brahmin had gained a disproportionate say in national politics which 'nationalised' their self-interests.
4. A socialist alternative still held a promise for cultivating a meaningful national unity towards egalitarianism. The lack of a credible anti-fascist socialist alternative to challenge Gandhian nationalism meant that this also was not an available option (See: Rajadurai, 1998, pp. 64–82).

5. The rule of Congress in provinces, best exemplified by Rajagopalachari's rule in Madras Presidency and their readiness to use the same colonial laws of repression to suppress dissent against brahmanical consensus, signalled for Periyar that radical activism would be severely restricted in independent India.
6. The imposition of Hindi in the garb of national unity was a formal attempt to cement Brahmanical cultural hegemony throughout India and also create a national market readily available for Baniya business classes in independent India at the cost of linguistic and cultural diversity. This became the final immediate cause of Periyar's call for a separate Tamil nation.

We see in Periyar's pointed critique of Indian nationalism that it had in all functional realms of organisation of space instilled the logic of Brahmanism to serve brahmin-Baniya interests. What made him gradually but resolutely adopt a sovereign Tamil state as his political ideal was his firm conviction that the project of self-respect through annihilation of caste was impossible within the constraints of Indian nationalism and the Indian nation-state. Non-brahmin sovereignty was inconceivable within a nation whose fragile unity was preserved through anxious conformity with its brahmanical core. But this project, he believed, was workable through a rationally conceived Tamil state. For such a 'rational' conception, received and 'natural' commitment to the Tamil region must be subjected to critical scrutiny and a Tamil region has to be re-conceptualised in a way that furthers the pursuit of self-respect. This is what Periyar does through his conceptualisation of *Dravida Nadu*. In other words, Periyar did not pit the northern region against the southern region but pitted the nation that is anxious about social reform against a region that anticipates it. His Tamil Utopia was a space of possibilities.

De-fetishising the Region

Periyar's uncompromising rationalism meant that he was highly critical of narratives that prescribed the recreation of a hoary Tamil past as a solution to the degradation of Tamil lives. He consistently challenged the uncritical celebration of Tamil literature as being embedded with the values along which Tamil society had to be reorganised. He challenged the great virtuosity of Tamil literature on two grounds. First, they lacked the rationalist scientific outlook that was needed to rethink our society and were too obsessed with religiosity. Second, there was nothing liberatory in Tamil literature for the Tamil woman to whom it only prescribed chastity and devotion. For Periyar, who made rationalism, annihilation of caste, and gender equality the cornerstones of his propaganda, Tamil scholars' indifference to these ideals was unacceptable. He held that in over a thousand years, Tamil had not produced any scientific literature worthy of learning and had been completely immersed in religiosity. While he appreciated the Tamil Saivites' critique of the obscenity and irrationality of Aryan epics, he criticised them for not applying a similar lens of rationality to the long list of Tamil devotional literature, be it *Periyarpuranam* or *Kandapuranam*. Periyar's radical views on gender show how untethered he was from tradition, Indian or Tamil. Periyar viewed the family structure as fundamentally flawed, the purpose of which was to protect private property and restrict the capabilities of women. Periyar advocated for the complete destruction of the family system as we know it. In his words,

"To discipline love and desire and direct it along particular channels and orient them towards particular persons does not seem to have any justification. To desire is human. To control it is to practise a kind of slavery" (Geetha, 2015).

Observing that no country in the world has ever committed as many atrocities to women in the name of marriage as we have, he held that the rituals and holy sanctions functioned as a cover-up obscuring this abject enslavement (Periyar, 1942, p. 32). He consistently insisted that patriarchy and caste reinforced each other and refused to prioritise one over the other. Thus naturally, the gender vision of Tamil literature greatly bothered Periyar. When Tamil scholars found in *Kambaramayanam* and *Silapathikaram*, two great Tamil epics, mesmerising visions of a Tamil utopia, Periyar found these epics as embodying superstition and patriarchy. The glorification of Kannagi's chastity and devotion to her husband, who abandoned her, as a role model for Tamil women was unacceptable for Periyar. He expressed his distaste for Tamil literature which had elaborate sensual descriptions of a woman's body but attributed her with no qualities of intelligent thinking beings. While he received a lot of criticism from respected non-brahmin Tamil scholars, he maintained his critique and even ventured to set these books on fire along with *Manusmriti* and *Ramayana*. While he generally celebrated *Thirukkural*, the Sangam era moral literature, for its insistence on equality, fairness and dignity of labour, he did not spare it of criticism for its insistence on chastity as a virtue particular to women. As a rationalist, a Tamil nationalism stemming from the perceived glory of a hoary past and its virtues or simple antagonism to an 'other' never appealed to Periyar and he never failed to contradict such visions. As Karthick Ram Manoharan (2020, p. 166) rightly argues, Periyar's Dravidian identity was 'resistance identity' which sought to provide space to voices silenced by nationalist discourse as against the 'legitimising identity' of Indian nationalism.

Conceiving the Region – Actualising Self-Respect

While Periyar conceived the Tamil region in modernity as a rationalist utopia towards the ideal of self-respect, he deployed the narratives of difference between 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian' that had been previously fashioned by precursors of the Dravidian movement to cut the ties of Tamils to brahmanical religion and practises. The narrative borrows from the earlier expositions of the Saivites but goes far beyond them. Periyar explains this narrative in his address to the 'Thiruvalluvar Nanneri Kazhagam' (an organisation dedicated to advising the Tamil public on virtuous moral life) in 1942 (Periyar, 1996, pp. 3–13).[9] India as a whole was the homeland of the Dravidians. Aryans came later. Through various means, they pushed the Dravidians to the south. From *Ramayana*, where Ram wins over the demon king of Lanka; to *Kandapuranam*, where Shiva's son is sent to the south to win over the demon king of the south, the Aryan epics celebrated Aryan victory and domination over Dravidians as the victory of a new morality. The fact that these gods of the Brahmanical religion, that mark

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[9]It has to be insisted here that the factual accuracy of such narratives and their acceptance among contemporary scholars did not bother Periyar. For him, like Pandit Iyothee Thassar who considered "the future of the pariah could not be resolved or even imagined without constructing a past that would explain and condemn Hinduism" (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1993, 2095), to explain and condemn the Hindu past was an ethical imperative for Periyar and a necessity for mobilising people against their past.

the supremacy of Aryans over Dravidians, are worshipped by Dravidians themselves is a reflection of hegemony achieved by Brahmanism and the loss of self-respect of Dravidians as a result. The Aryan gods are served in the Dravidian land by tales about the virtue of figures of complete devotion to the Aryan gods, the Nayanmars and the Alwars. The entire corpus of Bhakti literature is a celebration of this servitude. An attachment to the religion, its gods and myths, therefore meant for Periyar, a passive acceptance of the shudra-hood and loss of self-respect. For reclaiming self-respect, one has to completely cut their ties with the religion, its gods, myths and ultimately the nation that is founded on them. Here we see that Periyar has deployed the creative hermeneutic exercises of Tamil Buddhist and Saivite revivalists but while doing so, prioritised the loss of self-respect over the loss of culture or tradition. For him, the former was more fundamental and thus explained the latter.

The quest for Tamil sovereignty for Periyar was thus, in essence, a quest for non-brahmin sovereignty that required a complete disavowal of brahmanical values. As Geetha argues, "Periyar's agent of history was neither the shudra, nor an adi-dravida; nor was it a Tamil or a dravida. Instead, it was the non-brahmin historic bloc, in its entirety that was to undertake the tasks of creating a new social, economic and ethical order" (Geetha, 2001, p. 163). To construct such a non-brahmin ethical order, he considered it necessary to sever the ties of Tamils with Sanskritic texts and practises and emerging national consciousness that sought to legitimise them. As a counter, Periyar emphasised the civilisational ethos of the Dravidian past by a liberal reading of Tamil texts. Periyar praised the classical Tamil treatise of Thirukkural for exposing the differences between the Aryan and the Tamil culture and civilisation and for prescribing the virtue of equality as a remedy for the Aryan ills. He even went on to say that if a Tamil is asked what religion he belongs to, he should say that he belongs to the "Valluvar religion" (Periyar, 1981, pp. 505–508).[10] The Dravidar Kazhagam adopted the Thirukkural and organised Thirukkural conferences across Tamil Nadu to spread its values. He proclaimed that for the Dravidians the Kural was the only moral text of any value. (Manoharan & Ramani, 2021)

He referred to the ancient Tamil book of *Tholkappiam* and interpreted its verses as an acknowledgement of the view that Tamil values were corrupted after Aryan influence and that they were corrupted in order to benefit them at the cost of others (Periyar, 2007, pp. 134–135). He often reiterated that concepts like *Atma* (soul) and *Jati* (caste) were alien to Tamils as there is not even an equivalent to such terms in Tamil. Periyar also referenced ancient Sangam literature to argue that the concept of marriages and their rituals were never present among ancient Tamils and that Sangam literature only referred to romantic relationships between men and women and never to an irrevocable bond of marriage as in the present. Periyar also played a huge role in popularising the usage of the name 'Tamilnadu', meaning Tamil Country, to refer to the Tamil speaking areas. Even as the name is found in *Silapathikaram* and is scattered sparsely through medieval literature, the name had not been in public parlance for centuries. For at least the last three centuries before Periyar, the Tamil country was referred to as the Madras presidency. Periyar popularised the name in the Tamil public sphere. Prof. Kalimuthu notes that starting from 1927, Periyar continuously used the

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[10]It has to be insisted here that Periyar's position was not that Tamils should adopt a 'native' religion. He has even, in other instances, advocated conversions to Islam and accepting the creed of the Buddha to combat untouchability.

name 'Tamilnadu' to denote the Tamil-speaking areas in his speeches and writings in Kudi Arasu (Kalimuthu, 2011, p. 67). The usage of his term was not accidental or mechanical but an attempt to insist upon the primacy of 'Tamilness' as a marker of cultural identity to people immersed in nationalist passions. But unlike the Saivites or language purists, Periyar remained clear that recreating the hoary Tamil past was not the way out of the degradation of Tamils. Thus even as the distinctiveness of the Dravidian past was wielded by Periyar to delegitimise the virtue assumed of the Brahmanical religion and Indian nationalism that guards it, the legitimacy of the Dravidian counter imagination rested not in the glory of its hoary past but in what he characterised as the Dravidian ethic of self-respect and rationalism. In his own words, his receptiveness to and appreciation of Tamil was a rational choice.

"If I consider that my country will not help my ideals, will not help to foster them, I shall forthwith quit it. Similarly if my language is not conducive to my ideals or the advancement of my people to or to their living with self-respect, I will promptly discard it and follow what is useful. If I love Tamil, it is because I am aware of the advantages I expect through it and the measure of loss that will occur by the absence of it" (Periyar, 1981, p. 549)

He explained the rationale for his claim that Tamil sovereignty was necessary for self-respect in simple terms. For any society to gain liberty from an oppressive class, society or country, it is important that people of the society are made to realise the denigration they have attained due to their submission to the oppressive class. The work to bring this consciousness is the project of self-respect propaganda. But, Indian nationalism derives its unity by obscuring this history of oppression and preventing the emergence of this consciousness through a web of discursive restraints. When such attempts are made, it derides these attempts branding it as divisive and anti-national and doesn't hesitate to directly suppress it when it wields power. Therefore, the consciousness of the loss of dignity cannot arise until Tamils accept the discursive boundaries of Indian nationalism. Tamil sovereignty facilitates the non-brahmin to free himself from the hegemonic grip of Brahmanism by stripping it of its political form (Periyar, 1996, pp. 8–10).

Distilling Brahmanism as the ideological essence of Indian nationalism, as Manoharan has argued elsewhere (Manoharan, 2019), he argued that the discursive space of the nation formed the vital frontier between the rarity and materiality of non-brahmin politics. The region, for Periyar, was the counter discursive space that would enable the ascendency of non-brahmin politics from rarity to materiality. "Like the societies that preceded it, socialist society must produce its space", Lefebvre argued, "but in full consciousness of its concepts and potential problems"(Lefebvre, 2009, p.191).

In Periyar's conceptualisation of the region, we see such a careful exercise. The self-respect movement contributed immensely to the popularisation of the region as a counter-hegemonic force incorporating a distinctive set of egalitarian values to the Tamil region. It favourably read an egalitarian trait into Tamil literature and history and popularised it as an antidote to inegalitarian Brahmanical values that were unchallenged and indeed reinforced by the national movement. It brought an amalgamation of regional consciousness and non-brahmin consciousness not by emphasising the region's historical or cultural values but by fundamentally investing

the region with this ethic of self-respect. This is the political dimension of the regional consciousness that Periyar propagated which has facilitated large scale social change in Tamil Nadu. The assertion of Tamil identity through cultural distinctiveness, when deprived of this political and ethical dimension, cannot mount an egalitarian critique of the dominant articulations of Indian nationalism which Periyar critiqued as shielding a rigid and hierarchical social order and thus risks the danger of seamless integration into hegemonic culture and discourse. This article aims to be an effort towards resuscitating the political dimension of the region and preserve its legacy from distortion, symbolisation and reductive culturalisation in lieu of a more just society.

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Caste, then Class: Redistribution and Representation in the Dravidian Model[1]

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Abstract

Dravidian parties believe that changes to the economic structure will not lead to social justice if the upper/dominant castes continue to exclusively possess social capital. To them, and later, to the successive Dravidian party governments, economic justice was not possible without first ensuring social justice. This view was held by the stalwarts of the Dravidian movement such as Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar henceforth), the subject of this engagement, and actualised by leaders such as C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi, whose electoral politics was a means to empower subaltern groups in Tamil society. We contend that Periyar was the chief aggregator of the ideas put forth by earlier social justice ideologues, and an effective disseminator of the Dravidian political ethos among the masses, making his contribution comprehensive and unique. Through an analysis of the approach of Dravidian party governments towards affirmative action, administrative reform and legislation, and through comparisons of the performance of Tamil Nadu in terms of development indicators with other states, we reveal the profound influence of Periyarist thinking on the Dravidian movement and State praxis. The quest of the Dravidian movement for social justice did not just focus on class inequalities but on caste inequalities, which it saw as a propagator of class inequalities.

Keywords

Caste, Class, Dravidian Model, Tamil Nadu, Periyar, Welfare

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[1]We borrow the phrase Dravidian Model from Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar (2021) in which, model signifies the functioning of a system wherein multiple variables be social, political or governance interact towards delivering systemic outcomes. They contend that mobilisation against caste inequality can yield both dignity and development.

Introduction

Analyses of the impact of prominent social activists tend to be delimited by the specific issues—caste and race inequality, gender discrimination, communalism—they fought. This issue-centric approach is illuminating per se, but can benefit immensely from examining movements in their entirety, i.e. recognising the multidimensional assaults on the prevailing social order. Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar henceforth) as a social activist contributed to strengthening the social justice agenda in Tamil Nadu in a way that merits wider analysis incorporating the hitherto under-studied aspects of his activism. His radically reformist activism was firmly focused on recognition-redistribution-representation, the staples of any justice movement, but studies of his contribution have not paid sufficient attention to the economic component of the social justice gestalt: redistribution. The South Indian state of Tamil Nadu is known for the Dravidian Movement that married progressive affirmative action policy with a relentless struggle for greater autonomy for states within India's federal framework and, increasingly, it is recognised for its ability to democratise economic growth. This success entails not only redistributing the benefits of economic growth, but also pre-distribution of opportunities and resources that enable people to participate in the growth process.

Existing literature on Tamil Nadu pertaining to the scope of the article can be classified into two categories. One is of literature, including Ramaswamy S. (1997), Geetha V. & Rajadurai S.V. (1998), Subramanian N. (1999), Pandian M.S.S. (2007) Manoharan K.R. (2017), who elaborated and critically examined the role of prominent activists including Periyar. Later, they examined the role Dravidian parties played in changing social relations within 'caste society'. They highlighted the activism against systematic and graded discrimination emerging from caste as a lived practice, and the possibilities and limits of their approaches. Pandian, Ramaswamy, Subramanian and Manoharan differed in their evaluation of the potential and outcomes of the Dravidian-Tamil subaltern construct. While Subramanian contended that the movement could contain ethnic conflicts between seemingly hostile groups, he noted a differential impact on caste groups based on their relative ritual status and agility. Pandian traced the genealogy and possible futures of the non-Brahmin construct and Periyar's contributions. Ramaswamy typologised the different kinds of activists ranging from U.V. Swaminatha Iyer to C. Rajagopalachari and their contribution to political developments in Tamil Nadu. Geetha and Rajadurai discussed the contributions of anti-caste leaders from Iyothee Thass to Periyar towards forging non-Brahmin politics. Ramaswamy expressed concerns over Periyar's support for Tamil identity, while Pandian noted, within the non-Brahmin construct, concerns over conflicts between lower castes and the Dalits. Manoharan engaged with the limits of Periyarist understanding and explored the tensions between the universalism and particularism in his anti-caste discourse. However, all of them concurred on the vital role of Periyar in widening the anti-caste political repertoire across communities within the Dravidian-Tamil construct. At this juncture, we contend that Periyar is not necessarily

the figurehead of the Dravidian movement but the aggregator-in-chief of the ideas put forth by activists before him and a guiding light for the generations that followed. The other category of literature including Harriss-White (1996, 2013), Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar (2021) discussed the nature and quality of socioeconomic development in Tamil Nadu in the context of the changing political economy of the country and Tamil Nadu in particular. Harriss-White (1996) had argued that government policies and investments induced the formation of agro-industrial capital, which helped the subalterns find mobility. However, the development state induced different outcomes across communities. For instance, there is sub-par representation of Dalits in business sectors (Harriss-White et al., 2013). Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar (2021) provide an account of how Tamil Nadu (or the Dravidian Model) makes room for broad-based growth and development across communities, better than the rest of the country. However, they note that populist mobilisation within the State needs to reorient to address emerging complications in the social and economic realms. Though the above-discussed literature discusses the interplay between economic policies and their impact on social justice, it sees Dravidian parties and their policies as the vectors for such discussions. Our article traces the influence of Periyar and his ideas on the Dravidian parties' redistributive policies.

Social empowerment and economic mobility were non-negotiable goals of the Dravidian Movement, which held the clear-eyed understanding in public policy theory and praxis that the latter is impossible to achieve without the former. For instance, in his introduction to the serialised Tamil version of the Communist Manifesto he published in 1931 in his weekly magazine *Kudi Arasu* "*Republic*", Periyar considered the caste system the single biggest obstacle to communism in the Indian subcontinent. In a public meeting twelve years later, in 1943, he challenged his communist friends to recognise and annihilate the discriminatory caste system which distributes privileges to Brahmins and Shudras according to their status in the caste hierarchy before they aspired to introduce and expand communism. (Ramasamy E.V., 2005)

In other words, changing the economic structure will not have progressive outcomes if the Brahmins (and Banias) continue to wield the levers of social power. This in a nutshell is the worldview of the leaders of the Dravidian movement such as Annadurai and Karunanidhi, who took electoral politics as the route to empower subaltern groups in Tamil society. We present a careful analysis of their pragmatic policy-making approach, which can potentially reveal the profound influence of Periyarist thinking on the praxis that grew around the quest for social justice.

Over the years, it has become clear that, within the ambit of political conflict, struggles for recognition were taking precedence over struggles for redistribution (Fraser, 1997).

It was important not just to deal with class inequalities but deep-rooted caste concerns as well, for the latter disallowed the members of oppressed castes from accessing precious physical, social and cultural capital. Social justice politics, seen through the Periyarist lens, prioritises the critique of caste-based inequalities and Brahminism over economic inequalities.

Affirmative Action as an Effective Means to Redistribution alongside Representation

In his essay 'New Times in Tamil Nadu' Pandian (2011) notes that the politics of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [Dravidian (Land) Welfare Association] (DMK henceforth) was built around two principal ideological planks: caste-based social justice and Tamil identity. Such politics emerged as a critique of caste hierarchy and Brahminism, coupled with continuous improvisations in the reservation system for government jobs and seats in educational institutions for the lower castes. Since the 1950s, the communists in Tamil Nadu regularly criticised Periyar, Annadurai, and subsequently the DMK, for stressing on caste and not class. To the communists, it was evident that casteism survived because of class-based rule.

The president of the "Forum of Thought" best articulated the Periyar-led Dravidar Kazhagam's [Dravidians' Association] (D.K) disagreement with the communists:

> It is unfortunate that communists believe Indian social problems can be solved by economic means. Indian society is a caste society and class conflicts are only secondary. The caste structure is forming a super layer over the new class structure. For example, in the newly established industrial colonies, the scavenger settlements are constructed separately from the rest. So the old caste society is being imposed on an industrial society. The class-minded trade unions, mostly led by communists, do not see this problem because their leadership is dominated by high caste people.[2]

These ideological underpinnings of Periyar, the DK, and DMK paved the way for some of the boldest and strongest affirmative action reforms seen in India. They sparked a debate that is still heatedly discussed in India. Even as the writers of the Indian Constitution generally agreed that graded and ascriptive inequality needed substantial redressal, they often differed on the methods to do so. Ajantha Subramanian (2019) noted that one of the major points of debate was around the appropriate constitutional language of social differentiation—specifically, whether caste should be accorded legal recognition. She notes that in refusing to accord the individual citizen primacy over the caste collective, opposing the coupling of caste with class criteria, and exceeding the 50 percent ceiling on reservation, Dravidian party governments[3] disregarded the liberal norm of formal equality. It can be argued that the sustained resistance of Dravidian party governments against formal equality also led to a shift towards finding a balance between merit and affirmative action. Formal equality did not seem to hold as much importance as redressing historic social injustices. This can be seen in multiple reforms of successive chief ministers; Annadurai, Karunanidhi, MG Ramachandran (MGR), and Jayalalithaa.

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[2]Meeting of the Rationalist Forum and Forum of Thought, Coimbatore, April 1972 as quoted in Charles Ryerson's *Regionalism and Religion: The Tamil Rennaisance and Popular Hinduism*.
[3]In the context of this article, by Dravidian party governments we mean the governments led by the DMK and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam [All India Anna Dravidian (Land) Welfare Association] (AIADMK).

In 1970, the First Backward Classes Commission, commonly known as the Sattanathan Commission, constituted by the Karunanidhi-led DMK government, reported that the higher classes within the backward castes have been gaining disparate advantages from the quota system. In turn, this was hampering the aspirations of the smaller and more backward classes. In response, the Commission proposed in its report the creation of a separate administrative category for the most backward castes and a fixed quota for them.

In 1971, the reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) increased from 25 to 31 percent and the reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SCs and STs) from 16 to 18 percent. Later, the AIADMK, led by MGR toyed with the idea of reservations based on economic criteria, which the DMK vehemently challenged. The AIADMK was routed in the 1980 parliamentary election. The social justice discourse the DMK popularised, combined with competitive electoral compulsions, led MGR to raise the reservation quota for the OBCs to 50 percent.

In 1989, Karunanidhi returned to power and responded to the agitations by Vanniyars (a lower backward caste group) with a 20 percent reservation within the OBC quota for the most backward castes including denotified communities. In this way, he sought to check the disproportionate influence of a few dominant backward castes (Kalaiyarasan and Manoharan, 2018).

After a Supreme Court directive, the Tamil Nadu government constituted the Ambashankar Backward Classes Commission in 1982 to review the enumeration and classification of 'socially and educationally backward' groups. It found that 87 percent of the state population was eligible for reservation, based on which the government further expanded the list of backward classes to include lower-caste converts to Christianity and Islam, bringing the total to 69 percent—the highest in the country.

However, the most significant turning point was Karunanidhi wholeheartedly supporting the Prime Minister V.P. Singh coalition government in implementing the Mandal Commission's recommendations. The Mandal Commission recommended 27 percent reservation for the OBCs in central government and public sector enterprises, raising the total reserved seats to 49.5 percent. This was immediately challenged in the Supreme Court leading to the landmark Indra Sawhney vs. Union of India judgement. Tamil Nadu's political stance on reservation came through in two key arguments against the 1992 judgment. First, state counsel Siva Subramanium forcefully argued against the exclusion of a "creamy layer" from the ambit of OBC reservation. He contended that it was "a mere ruse, a trick, to deprive the backward classes of the benefit of reservations." Second, he said the 50 percent ceiling was arbitrary, especially in states like Tamil Nadu, where the enumerated Backward Caste population was over 80 percent. Subramanium heralded Tamil Nadu as a model state with its long history of reservation dating back to 1921 and where the quota has steadily grown to 69 percent at the time. (Subramanian, 2019, p. 213). Here one can clearly identify the emphasis on education in the Dravidian Movement as a method to propagate its social justice and economic development goals. This emphasis has roots in a long legacy of innovation in affirmative action, starting with Periyar who set the precedent when he resigned from the Indian National Congress in 1925 after his resolution demanding caste-

based reservation in government institutions was disallowed in the Kancheepuram conference of the Tamil Nadu Congress (Pandian, 2007, cited in Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar, 2021).

In 2007, the DMK also provided a 3.5 percent quota each, for Muslims and Christians within the OBC share of 30 percent. In 2009, Karunanidhi introduced the Tamil Nadu Arunthathiyars (Special Reservation of Seats in Educational Institutions including Private Educational Institutions and of appointments or posts in the Services under the State within the Reservation for the Scheduled Castes) Act to ensure representation for the most marginalised among the SCs, providing them with a 3 percent sub-quota within the SC quota. In his seminal work, *Capital and Ideology*, Thomas Piketty (2020) has arqued that redistributive measures have contributed immensely to reduce inequalitites, especially caste-based privileges amongst oppressed castes.

Use of State Legislative Assembly and Parliament to Further Social Justice

In an interview on 16 February 1965, a correspondent of *Pravda*, the official organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, asked Karunanidhi about the goals of the DMK. Karunanidhi responded that the goals were social justice in society, rationalism in culture, socialism in economy, and democracy in politics. The route to achieve these goals, he said, was via the Parliament.[4]

The use of Parliament by the Dravidian chief ministers (Annadurai, Karunanidhi, MGR, Jayalalithaa) resulted in legislations that had social justice and economic justice effects. The DMK government amended the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, to ensure equal shares for women in ancestral property. The party introduced numerous schemes, including the Anjugam Ammaiyar Inter-caste Marriage Assistance Scheme and the Dr Dharmambal Ammaiyar Memorial Widow Remarriage Scheme, as incentives that undermine caste and gender hierarchies (Kalaiyarasan and Vijaybaaskar, 2021).

Karunanidhi's biographer A.S. Paneerselvam (2021) notes that in his first term as chief minister, Karunanidhi emerged as an important interventionist in the state legislature. His interventions on Hindi imposition, police reforms, the budget deficit and the attempt by the Union government to control items listed in the Concurrent List were powerful articulations, especially when demanding the Union to share power. They make their point by delving deep into constitutional provisions and the best practices that make a polity truly federal in character. His speeches provided an idea of social justice beyond caste-based reservation and targeted affirmative action. It was inclusive and implementable. Karunanidhi prioritised social reform over all others in his first stint as Chief Minister. The Tamil Nadu Agricultural Labourer Fair Wages Act, 1969, was enacted to enforce the payment of fair wages to agricultural labourers in the Cauvery delta region and penalise landowners who exploited labourers. Another Act in the same year would ensure all tenancy rights and interests were maintained in the revenue records for the first time. In the following year, the Tamil Nadu Land

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[4]Quoted from https://www.epw.in/engage/article/m-karunanidhi-dravidian-sun-sets

Reforms (Reduction of Ceiling on Land) Act, 1970, was passed to reduce disparities in landholdings by reducing the land ceiling limit from 30 standard acres to 15 standard acres (one acre is 0.4 hectare). These reforms matured in the form of a specialist university to develop agriculture, learning and research in the agricultural sciences through the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University Act, 1971. Seen together, his agrarian and land-related laws were the first bundle of administrative measures that targeted the development of rural Tamil Nadu.

In response to multiple demands from small construction worker unions in Tamil Nadu, the Tamil Nadu Manual Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of work) Act was passed in 1982. This Act defined manual worker and principal employer and covered different groups of informal workers within the construction industry. It stipulated that workers, contractors, and subcontractors must register with the board. Today, there are 34 welfare boards in the state covering a range of occupations.

In 1994, the Tamil Nadu Manual Workers (Construction Workers) Welfare Scheme came into force. The benefits of this scheme include accident compensation, natural death compensation to survivors, funeral assistance, marriage assistance, maternity assistance, crèches for children of construction workers, education assistance for two children per family, assistance to buy spectacles and pension**.**

Welfare schemes and legislations such as these legally empowered many workers in the unorganised sector. Tamil Nadu also has welfare boards for transgenders and the differently-abled, a step towards creating a social security net for the extremely marginalised. Annika Wetlesen (2010) defines legal empowerment as a process in which the law is applied to increase the control people have over their lives and their extent of political participation. With regard to labor rights, collective organisation of the working poor increased opportunities for decent work, and social protection are key elements in the legal empowerment process.

Administrative Reform

Although detailed analyses of every administrative reform and its impact on the Dravidian movement are beyond this article's scope, a few reforms, though by no means exhaustive, stick out to illustrate the influence of Periyarist thinking on the praxis of the Dravidian movement. According to Ryerson (1988), Periyar held up a system of ethics that blended a 'scientific socialism' with a non-theistic interpretation of Tamil literary texts. The tincture of romantic nationalism that EVR brought to his message of radical socialism gave that socialism much of its appeal. This socialism carried forward by Dravidian governments was well reflected in administrative reforms that worked equally to improve the dignity of people, as much as their life chances. These reforms focused on ensuring the rights of oppressed castes and, overall, had a long-term programmatic commitment and generally sought to address caste-based biases as a method of economic empowerment.

Paneerselvam (2021), noted that the administrative reforms initiated by Karunanidhi had a profound impact and vastly improved the delivery capabilities of the state. One of the earlier and more critical reforms included the 1973 Administrative

Reforms Commission. It recommended that the existing part-time village officers be replaced by regular, transferable public servants who should form part of the revenue hierarchy. Based on this recommendation, in 1975, Karunanidhi promulgated an ordinance that abolished the system of hereditary village Karnam and headmen and replaced them with village officers recruited by the Tamil Nadu State Public Service Commission. This reform had implications from an economic and a social front. A hereditary village headman system allowed for the concentration of resources to few families and thereby a lot of the social capital.

During this tenure, Karunanidhi banned hand-pulled rickshaws and introduced cycle rickshaws instead, insisting that no man is beneath another to stand and pull a rickshaw. Tamil Nadu is the first state in post-independence India to introduce free mid-day meals for school children. The scheme, however, has its antecedents in the Justice Party rule in the Madras Presidency during the colonial period. The scheme acquired new life again under the chief ministership of K. Kamaraj, through the slogan of 'combating classroom hunger' in the 1950s (Rajivan, 2006). The programme retained children in schools and effectively reduced dropouts, especially those from a lower-caste and class background, and was further expanded from 1982 onwards by MGR.

The Dravidian model was not just to create social justice and welfare institutions but also for rapid industrialisation and economic growth. Paneerselvam again notes that accelerated industrial growth happened only with Karunanidhi's creation of the State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu (SIPCOT) in 1971. SIPCOT was responsible for establishing industrial estates across the state and creating land banks that proved very useful when the Indian economy opened up in 1991. In 1999, Karunanidhi was also responsible for the IT boom in the state with the setting up the first TIDEL park,[5] an information technology (IT) park in Chennai.

To improve social harmony and reduce caste-based discrimination, Karunanidhi introduced Samathuvapuram (Equality Village), a housing scheme where a village of 100 houses was to be created. Forty of these homes would be for Dalits, twenty-five for Backward Castes, twenty-five for Most Backward castes, and ten for other communities. Each village was to have one community hall and one burial ground. By 2001, over 145 Samathuvapurams were created across Tamil Nadu. Notably, despite such efforts, the scheme could not be scaled up owing to restive social tensions.

Tamil Nadu for long has been lauded to have one of the best healthcare systems in the country. Kalaiyarasan and Vijaybaskar (2021) argue that the state's better outcomes in health and nutrition have been made possible by ensuring relatively more equitable access to public health services and ensuring better utilisation. Considering the mushrooming of large private hospitals across the state, the DMK government also launched the 'Kalaignar Kaapitu Thittam', also known as Chief Minister's Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme, which provides health insurance. It was aimed at families living below the poverty line for life-saving treatment of up to Rs. 1 lakh.

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[5]TIDEL is a joint venture between TIDCO (Tamil Nadu Industrial Development Corporation) and ELCOT (Electronics Corporation of Tamil Nadu).

Given the DMK's experience of implementing a slew of social welfare policies and the relative success rates achieved in the state, the party's tryst with its variant of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) scheme underlines the Periyarist praxis within their policymaking approach.

In March 2021, the President of the DMK made an electoral promise in their manifesto that every woman in the state would get Rs. 1000 as monthly income support. On the face of it, the monthly transfer constitutes over 13 percent of the average monthly spending of a rural household[6] in the state (2017). More importantly, the monthly income support was conceived as 'urimai thogai' or a rightful entitlement, not a gift transfer or homemakers' wage. Also, women are addressed as 'kudumba thalaivi' or family heads and not 'illathu arasi'- homemakers. Such a conception radically expands the number of households covered and foregrounds the dignity of the beneficiaries. In his address on 7 March, M.K. Stalin promised that households that hold commodity ration cards are eligible to receive the monthly transfer. As of January 2020, there are 20,231,394 ration cards in Tamil Nadu of which 49,472 (0.2 percent) are non-commodity cards.[7] The former Chief Economic Adviser of India, Arvind Subramanian, wrote in the Economic Survey of India, 2016, that a Universal Basic Income promotes many of a society's basic values that respect all individuals as free and equal. It promotes liberty because it is anti-paternalistic and opens up the possibility of flexibility in labour markets. It promotes equality by reducing poverty and efficiency by reducing waste in government transfers. The universal nature of the scheme makes it a lot more effective with lower leakages, as argued by scholars.[8] The idea of this scheme is to guarantee a decent minimum income to women, which otherwise fails all tenets of justice.

Policy in Comparative Perspective

Dreze and Sen (2013) attribute the relative success of Tamil Nadu on various development indicators to a long history of collective action, which in turn resulted in political mobilisation amongst the oppressed castes. A policy paper published by the Centre of Government and Delivery of the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change compared the economic trajectory of two Indian states: Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Titled 'Inclusive growth in Tamil Nadu: The role of political leadership and governance', the evidence-based paper pointed out that in 1960–61 these two states were not so different across several measures related to development. It further states that in 1960, the rural poverty rate in Tamil Nadu checked in at just below 70 percent, much higher than Uttar Pradesh's rate of 48 percent. However, after nearly five decades of Dravidian party regimes, often severely criticised, the situation is vastly different. According to the study, 'By the year 2005, Tamil Nadu's per capita income outpaced

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[6]See p. 38 of https://www.nabard.org/auth/writereaddata/tender/1608180417NABARD-Repo-16_Web_P.pdf

[7]See https://cms.tn.gov.in/sites/default/files/documents/foodcp_e_pn_2020_21.pdf

[8]See https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-return-of-targeted-cash-transfers/article26155629.ece

Uttar Pradesh by 128 per cent—a gap more than twice as big as it was in the early 1960s. And in 2009–10, Tamil Nadu's rural poverty rate dropped to nearly half that of Uttar Pradesh (21.2 percent versus 39.4 percent), and its urban poverty rate was less than half of Uttar Pradesh's (12.8 percent versus 31.7 percent)' (Akileswaran, 2021).

It is even more prudent to compare Tamil Nadu with India's largest economy, Maharashtra and Gujarat, whose supposed development model led to the rise of Narendra Modi and the BJP. A report published by the NITI AAYOG in association with the United Nations ranked states on where they stood compared to others on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Tamil Nadu stands a tied second amongst all states in India in the composite SDG index, while Maharashtra stood at rank 9 and Gujarat at rank 10. Moreover, in SDG 1 ("No Poverty"), Tamil Nadu ranks first in India, whereas Gujarat stood at rank 16 and Maharashtra at rank 17 across all states in India.

In SDG 2, "Zero Hunger", Tamil Nadu ranks 7 among all states and the highest amongst big states, whereas Gujarat and Maharashtra lie at the bottom of the table. Gujarat ranked 18 and Maharashtra at 20. Ensuring basic amenities and aspiring to provide equal opportunities to all by different Dravidian governments is seen by Tamil Nadu's performance in SDG 4, "Quality Education", Tamil Nadu ranked at 5 amongst all states whereas Maharashtra came in at 8 and Gujarat at rank 17 (NITI AAYOG, 2020). Moreover, an analysis by Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar (2021: 19) found that Tamil Nadu has significantly reduced poverty across caste groups. For example, the gains SCs made in the rate of poverty reduction between 1993–94 and 2011–12 in Tamil Nadu is 43.1 percentage points, which are significantly higher than Gujarat at 34.3 percentage points.

If there is something called Periyarist gaze on Dravidian rule or economics, then it is marked by the democratisation of opportunities in a caste society and *then* ensuring basic amenities as entitlements alongside reducing economic disparities. An analysis of the affirmative-action reforms, administrative reforms and legislation are intended to show a Periyarist influence on Dravidian policies, which in turn acknowledges the efforts of the social justice ideologues that Periyar contributed to, furthered and democratised as he transformed the activism into a mass movement. While the leaders of the Dravidian parties' governments have attributed their policies to Periyar, we do not fixate on a narrow causal argument between Periyar and Dravidian policies of social justice and economic development or a firm attribution of such outcomes to a favourable environment that the region enjoyed. While one could argue that states like Uttar Pradesh have fared so poorly because of factors other than lacking a Periyar-esque figure, we draw from Pandian (2007, p. 7) to argue that a deterministic approach based on just contexts and landscapes would trivialise people's efforts. It would end with us disengaging from the praxis and movements led by activists and reformers like Periyar in Tamil Nadu.

Communism, Communists and Brahmins

In late 1931, Periyar was on a year-long tour of Europe, with an essential stop at the Soviet Union. Periyar contrasted his time in the Soviet Union with his time in Britain, France, Greece, and Germany. He noted that although they were "democratic nations, Russia alone has no unemployment. There are a few beggars, but all old or infirm, and the state supports them". (Venkatachalapathy, 2017). The impact of the Soviet Union on Periyar was significant. Upon his return, Periyar asked the members of his self-respect movement to desist from using honorifics and urged them to use "Thozhar" or comrade instead. According to Venkatachalapathy (2017), Periyar popularised this usage, and the communists adopted it later.

Moreover, his fascination with communism and the Soviet Union extended to naming newborn children (a popular custom in Tamil Nadu where elders are asked to name children) "Russia" or "Moscow" or "Lenin". However, Periyar soon began to see that communism or even an approach towards eradicating material/asset-based inequalities wouldn't work because of caste's primacy in Indian society. Contrasting with the Soviet Union, he said, "Since the Western countries did not have caste, they had to wage a class war before communism could be reached. Here, owing to the presence of caste, it is necessary to wage a caste war before achieving communism" (Periyar, 2009: 1647, as cited in Manoharan, 2019).

Later, Periyar gave numerous reasons for ending his friendship with the communists. He charged them, among other treacheries, with "secret attempts to convert Dravida Kazagham branches into Communist Party units." Yet the fundamental reason was the Brahmin preponderance in the Tamil Communist leadership and what the Kazagham would have us believe to be its logical consequence, Tamil Communist subservience to North Indian domination (Harrison, 2015). Periyar asserted, "In a country where there are no common rights, communism would only strengthen those who have been enjoying greater rights," adding that abolishing the privilege of Brahmins and the upper castes would result in going half the way towards the communist ideal (Periyar, 2009: 1647, as cited in Manoharan, 2019).

The communists could not mount a sustained critique on Periyar's thoughts beyond the notion that he didn't extend his seemingly material conception of religion to see the relationship between the methods of production and social, cultural and political values (Sivaraman, 2013, 109). The breakaway of the Dravidian movement from communism also stemmed from the critique that the communist movement in Tamil Nadu only looked upon the need for material equality and class relations. It failed to look into the themes of memory, identity, myths and superstitions, something that the Justice Party, DK and its offshoots have addressed to varying extents. Sivaraman herself notes that the communists did not adopt a clear policy on Periyar based on study or analysis. (Sivaraman, 2013, p. 116). The welfare state brought forth by successive Dravidian governments since 1969 focused on inclusive growth, i.e. social justice coupled with economic development. The Dravidian movement clearly did not just focus on class as an essential factor for mobilisation but focused on caste inequalities as a propagator of class inequalities.

Harrison (2015) reports the following comment by Periyar in an interview on December 14, 1952. "The Communists have their office at a foreign place, Bombay or Delhi, and they are just as interested in exploiting our country as any of the other foreign-controlled parties. Besides, most of the Communists leaders are Brahman. Ramamurthi is a 'pucca Brahman'." What Periyar meant by Brahman / Brahmin got clearer with time and the politics propagated by his lieutenants Annadurai and Karunanidhi.

Even B.R. Ambedkar shared Periyar's scepticism of the Indian communists. To quote from Volume 17 of Babasaheb Ambedkar's Writing and Speeches, "The communist party was originally in the hands of some Brahmin boys-Dange and others. They have been trying to win over the Maratha community and the Scheduled castes. But they have made no headway in Maharashtra. Why? Because they are mostly a bunch of Brahmin boys. The Russians made a great mistake in entrusting the communist movement in India to them. Either the Russians didn't want communism in India-they wanted only drummer boys-or they didn't understand".[9] Both Periyar and Ambedkar shared a similar scepticism of Indian communists while also believing that communism did indeed have a role in bringing about social justice in India. The sustained criticism continued to be that communism didn't consider caste inequalities because the communist leadership consisted of proletariat upper-caste men.

The Dalit Critique of the Dravidian Movement

There has been sustained criticism from scholars such as Hugo Gorringe (2011a), Rajangam S (2011), Karthikeyan Damodaran (2018), among others, that caste continues to be at the centre of politics in Tamil Nadu not despite but because of the Dravidian parties (Damodaran et al., 2012) with the claim that the Non-Brahmin movement was precisely that, a non-brahmin movement, not an "anti-brahmin" movement. Having wrested control from the Brahmins, the intermediate castes monopolised power in return (Damodaran, 2012).

Subramanian (2002, p. 126) argued that Dravidian parties 'increased political participation, aided the representation of the emergent strata, enriched civic life, and thus strengthened pluralist democracy'. Social pluralism, he explains, refers to the proliferation of autonomous associational forms that are tied neither to the state nor to each other. However, as Gorringe (2011b) noted, this social pluralism has not been inclusive of Dalit aspirations and that there has been a "Dravidian" read lower castes hegemony over Tamil politics. This critique goes back to the early political days of the Dravidian Movement, where, by stressing language rather than class, the DMK (and later the AIADMK) attempted to create an imagined community of Tamils and avoid acting upon its politically sensitive election pledges on land reform, dowry and caste.

Sustained violence against Dalits by lower-caste groups like the Vanniyars and Thevars have cast a shadow over Dravidian notions of justice. However, anti-caste leaders like Thol Thirumavalavan of the VCK have pointed out that the Dravidian movement and the Panthers movement fostered economic, educational, developmental and political assertions by the Dalits that have led to intermediate castes falling back

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[9]BAWS Vol-17, Part-1, Page 406, Dr B.R Ambedkar

on brute caste pride as a weapon to defend their dominant status.[10] Thirumavalavan has gone so far as to say that he views Periyar in the same light as Ambedkar (Gorringe, 2017, p. 38). The case of Devendra Kula Vellalars,[11] hitherto called the 'Pallars', have also engaged with Periyar in their claims to recognition and redistribution, albeit differently from that of the fellow Dalit caste groups like Paraiyars. Gross (2017, pp. 176, 292, 381) argued that while Periyar's influence on contemporary Devendra politics was mixed, prominent leaders invoked his ideology and regarded him to be the pioneer of the anti-caste and subaltern movement. Not discounting the brutalities that members of the lower castes inflict on the Dalits, she argues, the relative economic decline of the lower and land-owning castes has (vis-à-vis the Dalits, who now have access to education and resources), unsettled the previously dominant caste groups. The social relations that were once well-defined are now complicated and in flux. At the same time, Manoharan (2019: 289) highlighted the politics of containment versus that of appeasement practised by the DMK and the AIADMK respectively in their approach towards Thevars and their attempts towards establishing dominance.

To borrow Nancy Fraser's framework (Fraser et al., 2004), we should think about welfare politics not only in terms of who gets what but also who gets to interpret people's needs. The politics and legacy of Periyar's Self-Respect Movement have allowed for political claims-making in terms of group identity. However, Periyarist thought on Self-Respect and Dignity has also vested in people a claim to be full partners in social interactions.

Karthik K.R.V. and Ajaz Ashraf (2019) show the relative upward economic mobility that SCs in Tamil Nadu have had thanks to multiple socialist welfare policies compared to states like Uttar Pradesh. In analysing the Intergroup Average Annual Per Capita Income in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu by looking at the Indian Human Development Survey 2011–12, they found that the average per capita income of SCs in Uttar Pradesh was Rs. 11,762/-, while in Tamil Nadu, it was Rs. 28,109/-. The Dravidian movement succeeded in aggregating a range of social groups marked by class, caste, linguistic, religious and ethnic diversity by establishing a chain of equivalence across these groups and communicating a political logic of difference vis-à-vis elite nationalism and caste elites (Kalaiyarasan & Vijayabaskar, 2021, p. 43). Amit Ahuja (2019) noted that multiple socio-cultural movements have led to the broad basing and mainstreaming of Dalit grievances in states like Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra as against states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. However, it is worth noting that the quality of participation of Dalits through electoral politics has continued to remain limited, with the number of ministerial positions given to Dalits low and the portfolios assigned to Dalits often not prominent. At the same time, the aspirations of Dalits has been marked by periods of considerable support like the sub-categorised quotas for lower Dalits or apathetic silences and worse use of state machinery to reinforce discrimination and dominance.

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[10]See https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/Dalits-targeted-for-their-upward-economic-mobility-leaders/article15617026.ece

[11]Devendra Kula Vellalar is a group of castes formerly referred to as Pallars. They were a part of the list of Scheduled Castes that were predominantly agricultural workers in southern Tamil Nadu. After years of assertion to be referred to as the Devendra Kula Vellalar that signifies their' sons of soil' and 'primal agricultural clan' status as against Pallars—a word that has become a discriminatory slur in common Tamil parlance.

Notwithstanding the chequered impact of the Dravidian policies on social and economic fronts within the state, the current Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, MK Stalin, announced an All India Federation for Social Justice[12] in his Republic Day address in 2022. The idea hints at the importance of political pragmatism in finding allies in the quest for social and economic justice in the larger Indian context, a practice that Periyar consciously undertook, which explains his camaraderie with multiple activists fighting for various causes. Periyar had vociferously defended independent Dalit politics. He believed that separate social-political organisations for untouchable castes were necessary and was opposed to intermediate castes seeking a position of pride within the *system of Brahminism (*Manoharan, 2020: 8). Similarly, Manoharan also argued that Periyar did not want to assume leadership of the Dalits and sought to be a comrade in their fight for self-empowerment with the idea of fighting not for the equality of castes but the removal of caste as an identity-marker, an Ambedkarite approach. Such an understanding becomes a lot more compelling today when the state witnesses restive conflicts between lower castes or Dalits. As a response, tall anti-caste leaders like Thol Thirumavalavan of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi continue to locate answers in the Periyarist thought and approach.

In sum, notwithstanding the Dravidian parties' mixed success, the Periyarist gaze at social justice is a continuous instinctual-subalternising mechanism that foregrounds social justice as a precursor to economic justice in the quest for making an equitable society. While one of the markers of social justice—caste—is being continuously dealt with, questions of gender are gathering momentum with time. The redressal of the concerns raised by women and people from the LGBTQIA+ community, while simultaneously addressing the newer complexities within the caste matrix that complicate class inequalities, will test the limits and possibilities of the sustenance and comprehensiveness of the Dravidian political mobilisation.

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[12]See https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/tn-cm-stalin-to-launch-all-india-federation-for-social-justice/article38328183.ece

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Barishaler Jogen Mandal: Construal of the Undisputed Dalit Leader of Undivided Bengal through a Twenty-first Century Bengali Novel

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Abstract

Barishaler Jogen Mandal is a Bengali novel by Debes Ray, published in 2010 from Kolkata, India. The book revisits the socio-political arena of Bengal during the final decade of colonial rule by construing Namasudra politician Jogendranath Mandal (1904 –1968) as the central figure. This article studies the novel as a literary appendage to anti-caste thought—as an attempt to reclaim the Dalit history of the nation and re-establish the significance of J.N. Mandal in the history of anti-caste politics. My reading of the novel reflects Bakhtinian perspective of inseparability between form and content. The novel traces evolution of J.N. Mandal's political disposition through novelisation of history, while addressing the nation building processes in late colonial South Asia and developing conceptual understanding of Dalithood in terms of imposed powerlessness as well as wisdom and culture acquired in the intimate connection they share with the habitat through everyday struggle for survival. I argue that the author develops his locus throughout the novel by adopting J.N. Mandal's own standpoint. With adherence to a definite *sudra* perspective, the text navigates history, challenging many of the discipline's standardised interpretations. It engages with the discourse of power by strategically situating itself at the peripheral locus of the Dalit life-world, and develops the narrative of power as it would appear from that fringe. By doing so, it effectually calls for a conceptual inversion of power, re-centring it in terms of Dalit history.

Keywords

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The mutuality of relationship between social sciences and literature is well-recognised in current academia. Dalit literature, for example, occupies an increasingly significant place in caste studies—the unique autobiographical approach of Dalit literary tradition remarkably expanding our understanding of subaltern life-world. The present study, however, engages with the discourse connecting caste and literature by underpinning the versatility of novel as a literary genre. Reviewing a contemporary Bengali novel based on anti-caste politician Jogendranath Mandal, this article develops a critique of the history of caste in late colonial Bengal. It analyses the novelistic representations of the caste system, Dalit life-realities, caste politics and its relation to wider nationalistic politics and state. By exploring the novel's powerful stand against the elements of sustained caste-Hindu domination in the society and politics of contemporary India, this study partakes to the discourse that connects caste studies with literary theories.

Barishaler Jogen Mandal (*Jogen Mandal of Barisal*) (Ray, 2010) is a Bengali novel by Debes Ray (1936–2020), published in 2010 from Kolkata, India. This over-1000 page book revisits the socio-political arena of undivided Bengal, and locates it within the broader Indian and wider imperial contexts during the final decade of colonial rule, by construing Namasudra[1] politician Jogendranath Mandal (1904–1968) as the central figure. The author delves into the socio-cultural edifices of caste in Bengal through the depiction of the deltaic-riverine Eastern Bengal as the quintessential Namasudra habitat. The novel depicts J.N. Mandal's entry into politics from a humble background in light of the widening opportunity for Dalit entry into mainstream politics with the Act of 1935 and the ensuing provincial elections in 1937—Mandal, though himself elected from a general seat, was representing a 'moment of political awakening'. His rise to the height of the undisputed Namasudra leader in undivided Bengal has been chronicled in relation to the complex and layered ideological and interest groups that interplayed in the mainstream politics of pre-independence Bengal. His distinct political line that focused on politico-ideological departure and autonomy from Varna-Hindu superiority, according to the novelist, is a significant phenomenon in the history of Bengal's caste movement. Mandal demanded political participation for the most downtrodden sections of Bengali society—the Dalits and the Muslim masses who were historically pushed to the social and political periphery. His leadership, for the time being, did ensure political representation of these marginalised groups at the provincial, and potentially at the national level of politics. By identifying strata of marginalisation present in colonised political existence, and probing into the roots of rapidly increasing communal tensions in Bengal, the text, at the same time, problematises our understanding of 'nation', as the concept evolved in India's colonised public life. The author argues that conceptual underpinnings of nationalism, despite attributes of colonial derivative, presented multivarious political possibilities through pluralistic and sometimes contradictory imaginations of *desh* and *jaati* and therefore questions the exclusivist trends in (and readings of) nationalism as

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[1]Earlier known as *Chandala* (or *chaadaal* in Bengali), Namasudra is a downtrodden community in Bengal that belonged outside and below the four-fold Varna strata. The community acquired the name *namasudra* in the process of engagement in an upward social mobility movement during the colonial decades.

a product of elite domination. Our perception of the history of Indian nationalism, he remarks, needs to go beyond the elite tropes. The novel unfolds the multiple layers in the operation of power politics—including issues like colonial authoritarianism, to right-wing manoeuvring and ego conflicts between national and provincial level Congress leadership—as it construes J.N. Mandal's political career in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The space for Dalit political participation and their acceptance within nationalistic politics that Mandal searched for, as the undisputed Namasudra leader, was lost during 1946–47 in the context of political marginalisation and heightened communal tension in War and Famine-ridden Bengal, and in the haste of political manoeuvring for transfer of power. The novel is an attempt towards re-reading and de-coding of history to search for the factors that caused not only Mandal's political failure, but his eventual erasure from popular memory. The narrative of his political life and its potential must remain a significant phase in the history of Dalit struggle, more so in the context of the current rise in right-wing politics that increasingly attempts to mould Dalit politics. With these concerns, in this article, I share my experience of reading of the novel. This article contemplates the novel for being a literary appendage to anti-caste thought and intends an analytical understanding of the Dalit perspective represented in it.

Debes Ray's novels are characteristic in their representation of peripheral life world. He started writing in the 1950s and in his seven-decades long literary career has produced over forty novels, hundreds of short stories, and a number of non-fictional work including literary critique and studies on literary theory. Born in a Hindu upper-caste middle-class family in a small town in north Bengal, he was politically involved with the Communist Parties since an early age and his literary endeavours should be placed within the urban Left intellectual milieu of that time. Though he became distant from direct party politics later, imbued in his writing is a strong belief in Marxist ideology, blended with his litterateur's self-commitment to represent the polyphonic reality of his time. Multifarious life-realities in post-colonial South Asia form the theme of his writings and his works reflect life in its 'totality'—achieved through realistic and intricate contextualisation of the individual in her/his lifeworld. This pursuit for artistic totality reinforces a belief that art, though a representation and thus innately superficial in nature, must conform to the realities of the lived world. Novelisation, in his writing, is an aesthetic experience that implicates new signifier(s) to the individual's mundane and everyday life-moments by situating it in the wider spatial-temporal canvas. He is a critic of the essentialization of the West-centric notion of novel as a literary genre and emphasises the need and scope for integrating indigenous knowledge and storytelling formats in novel writing (Ray, 1994). Continuous experimentation with forms is indeed a key feature of his novels. We will see how many of these traits are present in *Barishaler Jogen Mandal*.

The author has premised his work on a theory of inseparable mutuality of form and content in the making of this novel. The novel recreates the past through exquisite narration, dynamic conversations, realistic characterisation of historical figures and narrative reconstruction of events using detailing as a key technique. As a novel founded on history, it adheres to absolute factual authenticity (Ray invested

much time and effort to collect data for the novel) and the text deserves merit for the historical depiction of Jogendranath Mandal, a relatively less studied figure in current scholarship, and for the analytical framework with which the author explains political events and situations during 1937 and 1947. Composed during the early years of the twenty-first century, it provides a rich ground for colligating our contemporary experience with this crucial phase in the history of the Indian subcontinent. However, merely an appreciation for the narrativization of history would indicate a very limited reading of the text. The distinctive reconstruction of history in this novel is a product of the author's cognizant perspective and theoretical position. The novel addresses the evolution of J.N. Mandal's political disposition through novelisation of history, and at the same time embraces his own viewpoint for revisiting the familiar history of nationalistic politics of the time. The author defines his locus in the novel through J.N. Mandal. By espousing him, the text develops and articulates its position that situates itself at a farthest point in the spectrum of power. With adherence to this definite *shudra* perspective, the text navigates history, challenging many of the discipline's standardised interpretations and in the process problematising our understanding of dimension and scope for Dalit political thought. Throughout the expanse of the novel, the author exercises fluent interchangeability between his own voice and that of his protagonist. At the crux of this dynamic engagement with Jogendranath Mandal lies a fundamental affinity the author shares with his protagonist. The novel holds on to this historical figure not only for his life account, but also for framing the ideas and theoretical foundation for the novel. The author here has tasked himself to reconstruct life-stories of Mr. Mandal by adopting his own standpoint. In other words, the approach of the novel is not only to expound but to adopt Mandal's own standpoint to revisit politics of his time and utilise this perspective to form an understanding of our contemporary politics. In that sense, J.N. Mandal is simultaneously the purpose and the subject for this novel.

The novel is an attempt to reconstruct nation-building processes in late colonial South Asia from the viewpoint of this Dalit leader.[2] The author subscribes to this primary point that the modern history of South Asia would remain incomplete without its understanding and interpretation from a Dalit standpoint. Throughout the stretch of the novel, Ray highlights the institutionalisation of power in everyday living through his exploration of caste system, colonial authority, communalism, nationalistic politics with its social predispositions, and other socio-cultural circumstances that regulated life in late colonial Bengal. The text engages with the discourse of power by strategically situating itself at the peripheral locus of Dalit life-world, and develops the narrative of power as it would appear from that fringe. By doing so, it effactually calls for a conceptual inversion of power, recentring it in terms of Dalit history.

The novel is significant in anti-caste studies featuring two vital aspects: first, it is a literary attempt to reclaim Dalit history of the nation and second, in connection to the

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[2]Twentieth-century Bengal's caste-politics doesn't identify itself with the term *Dalit*. Debes Ray has used *sudra* in the novel. In this article I have interchangeably used both terms to denote politics and identity of the Dalits.

former, it re-establishes the significance of J.N. Mandal, an almost forgotten figure,[3] in the history of Bengal's anti-caste politics.

I intend to present my reading of the novel in four interconnected but thematically divided sub-sections dealing with the author's conceptualisation of *sudra* identity as being defined and redefined in history in terms of social and political structures of power (and powerlessness); Dalit politics in relation to nationalistic political formulations; distinctiveness of J.N. Mandal's political thought; and the eventual failure of his political line in the backdrop of War and Famine-ridden Bengal during the final years of transfer of power. My reading of the text endeavours to decode the narrative of power that has been portrayed and challenged in the novel through the author-subject union.

Sudratva

The novel understands Dalit life reality and identity formation in connection to structural and ideological administration of power in everyday life. Constant marginalisation and conscious degradation of their cultural world stands at one end of the spectrum of sudra life. At the other end lies the unbound wonders that take place in lives sustained through labour and archaic coexistence with nature. The author indicates how this second aspect induces an inbuilt structural autonomy for sudra existence, beyond the domination of power. The novel is thus an attempt towards redefining *sudratva* (Dalit-hood), while conceptually extending its relation to power beyond the trope of domination-hegemony.

J.N. Mandal belonged to the Namasudra community that for long inhabited the riverine deltaic tracts of eastern Bengal, was traditionally engaged in various labour-intensive and menial occupations, and since the late nineteenth century experienced a process of social mobilisation (Sanyal, 1981) facilitated by introduction of cash crops like jute that brought a degree of economic stability for some within the community and utilising the new socio-cultural opportunities in the advent of British rule. The meaning of sudratva is reconstructed through persistent and well-manifested references to the socially entrenched forms of upper-caste domination in the Namasudra life. Belonging to the lowest level of caste hierarchy, to serve the upper-caste objective of sustaining status quo, is what defines sudratva. It is through continued degradation of the sudra's social and cultural status that the upper castes reinforce their privileged position within the Hindu society. Sudratva, in this sense, is the flip side of the scheme of power. By focusing on Dalit life-world, the author searches for an alternative understanding of sudratva that accepts the latter as a prominent social reality but endeavours to challenge the elite-constructed meanings of it.

An embedded narrative within the novel retells an incident where a zamindar penalised and restrained a sudra by cutting his tongue off for his ostensible audacity of failing to convince a sahib when asked to provide a full name during an interrogation,

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[3]Scholarship on Bengal's caste politics, for long, has failed to comprehend J.N. Mandal's role. For example, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has discussed him little (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). Recently, Dwaipayan Sen's publication, however, is a significant attempt towards amendment (Sen, 2018)

that a Dalit's lowness implicates he shouldn't even deserve a surname. Incidents like this are inevitably ingrained in Dalit collective memory, violent and forced subjugation had been, and continues to be, such an incessant part of their life. Reading the novel in 2021, a reader may draw reference of a recent incident that received some degree of media attention— the Hathras rape case in 2020 (UP),[4] where the victim's (a young Dalit girl) tongue was taken off in a final blow of violence. Entrenched in deliberate and ruthless modes of silencing for generations, Sudratva, no doubt, is the 'tongue of a cut-off tongue'.

Hegemonic relations are often so engraved in Dalit life and subjugation so all-pervasive that an illusory harmony is created and entailed in the habitual forms of cohabitation with the upper castes.

> [T]he Namasudras are so mingled, in everyday life, with the Brahmin-Vaidya-Kayastha households, that both the parties observe the diverse strictures of untouchability almost unconsciously, producing no apparent discord. Due to such long-standing relationship, many Namasudras… unwittingly imagine unified Brahmin-Shudra life to be real—can a Brahmin sustain himself without the sudra's labour? Likewise, can the sudras even breath [*sic*] without a Brahmin's shadow over them? Rules of untouchability, *jalchal-jal-achal*, taboos on touch and food—all these strictures, enduring hundreds of years of sustenance, are now so solid that neither the Brahmin nor the sudra need to remember the boundary…it genuinely creates an illusion of oneness…as if, these [the strictures] are external to actual living… (Ray, 2010, p. 299)

But even the apparent imperceivability of boundary is undoubtedly an illusion, effectively maintained only to sustain the implanted injustice in social practices of caste hierarchy.

The depreciative sudra existence, as essentially entailed in everyday practices of labour and work, is also intimately connected to the surroundings—the land and the environment to which the community belonged. Sudratva thus shares material as well as conceptual inseparability with the landscape and in turn gives a specific character to it. The author explores this mutuality of relationship in the context of the Namasudras and their habitat of the deltaic-riverine plains of middle and south Bengal. Namasudra predominance in the *bil*s (marshland) of Khulna, Jessore, Faridpur, Barisal, Dhaka, Comilla, and Pabna can be traced back to the early colonial decades— presumably in consequence of 1770s Bengal famine that uprooted a large section of peasants and following the 1778 Dhaka flood that created these *bil*s and *chars*, some of whom may have resettled in these marshlands. Situated at a geological confluence connecting the catchment basins of Bengal's major rivers and their tributaries with the deltaic estuaries of Sundarbans, this marshy swampy land is an assemblage of thousands of everchanging and often unpredictable waterbodies. Life-forms here are essentially determined by habits of water, and humans may make living possible in this uncertain marshland only through profound ecological knowledge and intensive

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[4]For details see https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/hathras-gangrape-case-dalit-woman-up-police-6669922/

labour. The Namasudras and Faraiji Muslims are primary agriculturalists here who had transformed the landscape into a remarkably high-productive agricultural zone. In the author's terminology this 'mythical-mysterious' landscape is the *Sudrabhoomi*— land of the sudras.

If cultural-ecological marginality of Sudrabhoomi and the community's socio-economic desperation are at one end of the sudratva spectrum, at the other end it touches upon the eternal connection that human labour shares with habitat in the history of civilisation. Intimate cohabitation with water and the wisdom to produce crops, a large variety of high-quality rice, in the marshlands, are key features of Namasudra life. Water and cultivation are thus prevalent in the community's folk repertoire, producing legends of mythical crops that magically harvest within a single night and enables the mother goddess to provide even for the insatiable begging hands of the God. In the author's explication, myths like this happen essentially in the context of everyday struggle for survival through labour, and are sustained to reinforce the community's right to its produce. Such cultural constructs are integral to sudra living and identity.

Ray evinces how the conceptual underpinning of Mandal's political philosophy was essentially rooted in sudratva—both in terms of the lived realities of marginalisation, and in affective spatiality of belongingness. Reconstruction of the Namasudra life world is a central theme of the novel, not only for its reflection on Mandal's background, but for providing the theoretical foundation upon which the author rebuilds the political history of late colonial Bengal and posits J.N. Mandal within it. To comprehend dimensions of his politics, however, we need to trace the novel's trajectory that locates the Dalits in relation to the history and discourse of Indian nationalism.

Colonialism, nationalism, and the Dalits in Nation-Building Processes

Debes Ray develops a critical understanding of the history of Indian nationalism in this novel. The last decade under colonial rule, in his observation, was crucial for giving final shape to the concepts of 'nation' that emerged and were rehearsed in the subcontinent's public life for the preceding two centuries. The formation of the first provincial governments by the Indians in the 1937 elections following the Government of India Act of 1935, despite the restricted nature of native autonomy, was a significant step towards the political realisation of the Indian nation. The author identifies how the pluralistic possibilities in historical imaginations of 'nation' were politically underplayed, making Partition inevitable. The text engages with existing academic scholarship in formulating a nuanced understanding of Indian nationalism. Debes Ray is critical of many strands in the historiography of Indian nationalism including negation of nationalistic politics as a powerplay (as done by the Cambridge school) (Seal, 1971) and the 'derivative discourse' and fragmentary models of nationalism (Chakrabarty, 2002; Chatterjee, 1993).

Ray believes that the conceptual affinity of nationalism with European Enlightenment and Western rationality rendered an imbued modernity. At the level

of practise, however, a colonised or capitalistic socio-political setup accounted for its self-contradictions. While the Indian political leaders were struggling to construct achievable visions for a free Indian nation, the colonial administration was keen to exploit/utilise their dilemmas. Throughout, Indian nationalism retained a strong caste Hindu and elite bias/character. Hindu nationalism aimed to engulf all alternate visions for the nation—in a similar vein of Brahmanism's attempt to absorb the sectarian, ethnic and even religious diversities within its fold. The Indian National Congress, despite being the largest and most significant nationalist organisation, failed to go beyond its Hindu character. Its failure to acknowledge Jinnah, to utilise a non-hegemonic position of the Muslim League to represent Muslim politics even in 1937–38, and to befriend the alternate Muslim political groups, especially those in the Muslim majority provinces, resulted in rapid estrangement of Muslim population from the mainstay of India's freedom movement and, in turn, to politico-religious consolidation of identity. By the 1940s the alienation became complete with the Muslim League's two nation theory, and the gulf unbreachable in context of heightened communal tension, thus finalising the triumph of orthodoxy in both communities. It is true that the British government's 'divide and rule' policy nurtured communalism, yet, it was essentially rooted within the Indian social hierarchy. Nationalism, thus, should be comprehended in relation to both what it was and whom/what it excluded—the limitations as well as the possibilities it contained. The author's understanding of Dalit politics is premised on this theoretical understanding.

Due to the elite character of nationalist politics, both the lower castes and the Muslims remained largely dissociated from the mainstay of Bengal's political sphere. Some communities, including the Namasudras, underwent what is called the 'social mobilisation'—a socio-religious movement consequential to the betterment of the socio-economic position of some members within the community and aimed to achieve greater acceptance within the caste hierarchy through renewed self-proclamation. Matua sectarian movement of the Namasudras exemplifies this process of social mobilisation. The first Matua guru denounced the nationalist movement and instructed his followers to be loyal to the British rulers. Roots of this loyalty should be traced in the social and educational opportunities Dalits could enjoy due to colonial intervention in Indian society. However, since the 1920s, some amongst the educated and socially established members of Dalit communities associated themselves with mainstream Indian politics. Most leaders from the Dalit communities achieved political eminence as part of their social accomplishment, through which they managed to uplift their status to meet that of the upper caste bhadraloks. These leaders often joined one or more of the existing political parties like the INC, the KPP and the Hindu Mahasabha. While they remained emotionally connected to the community and wished for their own people's betterment, their political activities failed to identify Dalit agendas or promote Dalit political solidarity. In Bengal, thus, Dalit politics was under-pronounced for long, a fact that perhaps prompted some scholars to argue that caste discrimination was unimportant in modern Bengal's social hierarchy. Debes Ray offers a critique of this formulation through his portrayal of J.N. Mandal, with whom, he shows, a new and promising phase of Dalit politics began in Bengal.

J.N. Mandal's Brand of Dalit Politics: 'Sudras are not Hindu'

J.N. Mandal stepped into politics by contesting the Legislative Assembly elections of Bengal in 1937 as an independent candidate in a general seat from Maistarkandi. He came from a poor Namasudra family who earned from boat-making and other menial jobs. By 1937, he was already a bright young lawyer in Barisal High Court. His humble origins coupled with the indepth knowledge of local issues which he highlighted during election campaigns, accounted for his acceptability among the Namasudras and the Muslims—the newly enfranchised mass of Barisal. His victory in 1937 against the Congress candidate, who was a local zamindar and nephew of legendary nationalist Aswinikumar Dutt, implied that a significant section of Barisal's urban educated bhadralok recognised this son of the soil as pioneer of a new political awakening in the aftermath of the Government of India Act (1935). Though Ambedkar failed to ensure separate electorate for Dalits due to Gandhi's staunch opposition, the Award of 1932 was indeed an important stepping stone for the scheduled castes who were granted reserved seats. It enabled the Dalit population to get substantial political representation for the first time. Mandal was the most promising candidate amongst the newly elected SC MLAs, and he became the first secretary of the Bengal Assembly's Independent Scheduled Caste Members League, created after declaration of election results. Thus, the Bengali scheduled caste leadership accredited him as an able leader to carry forward Dalit solidarity.

Under Mandal's leadership, independent Scheduled Caste MLAs did not provide support to the first KPP-Muslim League coalition government in Bengal but maintained an issue-specific negotiable position. Throughout, Mandal's political strategy was to extract political gain for the Dalits utilising SC numerical presence in the Assembly. His major political decisions, including his refusal of Fazlul Huq's offer of ministership in 1939, and joining as Law minister in Nazimuddin and Surawardi's governments should be explained in terms of this prudential approach and politico-ideological integrity imbued in his personality.

J.N. Mandal realised that the true source of his power lies with the newly enfranchised scheduled caste-Muslim combination of voters, and always prioritised political accountability towards them. Immediately after acquiring MLA-ship he took initiative to renovate a local school at Agailjhara, named after Namasudra activist Bhegai Halder. In 1940 he assisted the Leftist leaders to organise Mahilara Krishak Sammilan (peasants' gathering at Mahilara) and participated with the Muslim and Namasudra cultivators in the excavation of an irrigation canal. During the devastating Bhola cyclone that wiped out lower Bengal, he made it a priority to reach the affected areas in person at the earliest, even risking his life, to take account of the situation and to ensure the quickest manoeuvring of relief. These are only a few illustrations from the novel reflecting his passion, leadership quality and political commitment.

A staunch anti-communal stand has been highlighted as another significant aspect of Mandal's political disposition. The novel depicts several episodes in his political career where he was at the forefront in mitigating communal riots. His experiences made him aware that what surfaced as 'Hindu-Muslim riot' often involved caste-Hindu ploy of manipulating Namasudras into enmity against the Muslims. He recognised

class affinity among scheduled castes and the Muslims, and this understanding is reflected in his unhesitant declaration that Namasudras should withdraw themselves from getting involved in the Hindu-Muslim riots to protect the caste-Hindus. He was keen to propagate Dalit-Muslim cordiality based on an understanding of their shared social and economic constraints in the Bengali countryside.

In traditional Namasudra worldview, power functioned within the purview of upper-caste Hindu domination that envisioned recognition by the caste-Hindus and inclusion within the fold of the 'bhadralok' as its ultimate objective. J.N. Mandal reversed this conceptual-epistemological framework of power through his politics. He exclaimed that his goal is not to transcend the sudra identity to meet that of the caste-Hindus, but to demand the rightful share in the nation-building process by remaining a sudra, who, irrespective of the position Hindu society grants or denies them, are entitled to enjoy equal political rights as citizens. 'Shudras are not Hindu'—this exclamation in fact implies a different and bolder sudra concept of power that poses a direct challenge to caste-Hindu supremacy. This political disposition contradicts the Harijan project of Gandhi, the most powerful voice within the fold of Indian nationalism. The novel illustrates how Mandal comprehended Gandhi, despite his reverence for the great political leader, as his ultimate opponent. Rather, he embraced Ambedkar's leadership, founding the Bengal branch of The Scheduled Castes Federation.

As a leader forwarding Bengal's Dalit politics, J.N. Mandal needed to address the interface between Dalit identity and nationalist politics. This includes reshaping his perception on the anti-colonial struggle and redefining his position in relation to the multifaceted politics of nationalism. He brought himself out of Dalit's positional indifference about terrorism and radical nationalism. His affinity with the Bose brothers—Sarat and Subhas Bose, and especially his personal friendship with Subhas whom he regarded as a political mentor, brought him close to the liberal trends within Congress politics. He also developed friendship with the Communist leaders. All these substantially broadened his political perspective, though he never got formally affiliated to these parties. He contested for Calcutta Municipal Council Election in 1940. Later, as a Councillor he got involved in the Calcutta scavenger's movement, opening possibility for wider Dalit solidarity with a potential to incorporate non-Bengali and urban sectors within Bengal's scheduled caste politics. His keen interest on international politics, especially during the War years, reflects his intention to expand the horizons of Dalit politics.

Ray makes his audience aware that for J.N. Mandal, a self-made politician conscious of remaining rooted to his background while keen on acquiring power, political consciousness required resolution of contradictory images of power. Mandal hailed from a peripheral sudra community, and while he transcended the Dalit reality of powerlessness by raising demands for rightful share of power and political participation, he never dissociated himself from the world of the people he was representing. His political exclamation that 'sudras are not Hindu' is to be understood as a direct outcome of this ideological integrity. Ray demonstrates how Mandal's life and thought contested the discourse of nationalism and pose a direct challenge to the self-congratulatory nation building processes that allowed an abysmally limited, if

any, space for the Dalits. This straightforwardly anti-Varna Hindu approach, while it became the distinctive aspect in Mandal's political line, experienced very limited approval from the high rank of Bengali Scheduled caste politicians of the time. Neither were his people, the Namasudra and Muslim mass of East Bengal, prepared to grasp this ideological position as a political line. It was Mandal's personal charisma and leadership qualities that appealed to them, but for the majority, the opportunity for exercising political right was too new and required mindful renunciation of the caste system. Mandal presented a unique and promising political opportunity for Bengali scheduled caste politics, being a product of and taking advantage of the possibilities offered since the Communal Award, but the moment was lost during the final years of colonial rule and amidst the Imperial War, as we will see in the next section.

Denial

'Denial' as the heading for final part of my discussion of the novel, denotes the situations and processes that rendered Bengal's interest forfeited during the closing phase of colonial rule, with the outcome of the cause of Bengal's scheduled caste politics manifoldly overthrown. British War policies devastated Bengal's countryside in unprecedented ways, the 1943 Famine bearing its most disgracing testament. While the inevitability, as war strategy to combat Japanese invasion, of policies such as scorched-earth, denial, and acquisition of boats—a lifeline in East Bengal countryside, is still being questioned; their horrifying consequences are definitive.[5] It caused unprecedented havoc in Bengal's social and political fabric. The author novelized J.N. Mandal's experience with War and Famine-ridden Bengal in several sections, the titles of which are telling: '*Juddhakshetre probesh*' (Entry into the battle-field), '*be-kabul desher tollash*' (In search of the denied land), '*aloukik aaro tallash*' (Some more of the un-worldly/mythical search), and '*loukik kichu protikaar*' (Some worldly remedies). In Debes Ray's novelistic manifestation, for Mandal, it was the time when his most familiar world was transformed into 'unreal/unworldly' (*oloukik*)—

> …the world is scraping yourself off from the water that sustains you, along with the crop you cultivate from within that water, the water now must become unidentifiable and devoid of any human touch, and so does the people who belong here with that water—the shudras, once exiled from mainland and now rooted in these waterbodies for thousands of years, —must find themselves uprooted… Jogen was crossing over these denied water-world, in search for these uprooted folks… He was walking through, though his feet were never touching the ground or the water underneath. (Ray, 2010, p. 983)

In inevitable cruelty of the grand imperial War, the government and military were penetrating into the lives of common people with unprecedented alacrity, intervening in their everyday life and economy, and uprooting the majority of them. For people's leaders like J.N. Mandal, it was an acutely exasperating and hapless time when

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[5]Recent scholarship provide detailed analysis on Bengal's War experience and consequence of colonial policies (Mukherjee, 2016) (Mukerjee, 2010).

people—both his charges and his strength—were dying and suffering, their known world soon becoming non-existent. He desperately and relentlessly worked for organising relief, utilising the little that could be manoeuvred amidst administrative confusion and chaos of War-years.

The political profile of the subcontinent was also undergoing transformation. At the national level, Gandhi was already a lone figure launching the Quit India movement, calling his fellow countrymen for a final battle against the Empire, and responding to conditions of increasing penury. Irreconcilability of the breach between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League was more than evident, as exemplified in failure of the Cripps Mission (1942) and the Cabinet Mission (1946), and resulting in Jinnah's declaration of Direct Action Day (August 16, 1946) on the day of the formation of the Constituent Assembly. The post-War British government, on the other hand, was as manipulative as ever to ensure a hasty and less deplorable exit. Narrow self-interest of politicians and power groups raised ugly heads within the environment of intense uncertainty and political turmoil. Bengal's provincial politics was increasingly being sidelined in national politics, a trend that started with marginalisation of Subhas Bose by Congress right-wing elements and Gandhi in 1939. Relation between All India Congress Committee (AICC) and Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) was a strained one for long, and by the end of the War, there was no heavy-weight leader from BPCC representing Bengal at the national forum. Communal polarisation already reached its zenith, triggering Great Calcutta Killing (August,1946), Noakhali riots (October, 1946), and other perpetual massacres. Political underrepresentation, coupled with famine and communal tension, furthered marginalisation of the Dalit cause. J.N. Mandal's politics lost its ground—he was being opposed by a section of Scheduled Caste leaders (including P.R. Thakur) who criticised his proclamation of Dalit self-determination as a distinct social group claiming political right, and instead preferred a reconciliatory position in relation to wider (and more powerful) caste-Hindu society.

Geopolitical marginality of Bengal, the catastrophe induced by the colonial-Imperial War, the Famine, and the unprecedented degree of communal tension—all these conglomerated in the final years of British rule to the result of complete relinquishment of the Scheduled Caste's political autonomy. Mandal vehemently opposed India's Partition (August 1947). He was nominated by Jinnah, a Muslim League representative at 1946 Interim Government, at the cost of disapproval from his own people, both Muslims and Dalits, who by then were too polarised to accept it. Facilitating Ambedkar's electoral win from Bengal for Constituent Assembly was one of Mandal's final successes. The novel bids adieu to this exceptional historical figure at a juncture when he joins Pakistan's cabinet in 1947. Ending words of the novel narrates his journey in Karachi express to join Pakistan ministry. As the train departs, Mandal embarks on yet another uncertain path with the aim of establishing sudra's political identity. Ray writes, "Jogen requires to see himself, a sudra, the single representative of the past thousands of years of vision, that is called India. He is going to Pakistan. To remain truthful to that dreamt homeland… Who else, other than a sudra, would take the responsibility?" The novel does not cover the story of how Mandal had

to escape from Pakistan in 1950, in the face of continued riots and the authority's brutality towards the minorities, and how he had to spend his final years in Calcutta.

Conclusion

Historical novels undertake the task of re-reading and sometimes un-reading history and through engagement with history, at the same time, it enables readers to reconnect with that past. The final decade of colonial rule had unprecedentedly impacted the lives of the people of the subcontinent. It also cast final shape to the conceptual underpinnings of statehood that would determine relations between the states and people for the nascent independent nations since 1947. In *Barisaler Jogen Mandal*, the author points to the pluralistic nature of political concepts of nation in colonial India. Hegemonizing tendencies of Varna Hindu ideologies were prevalent—sometimes even to the effect of obliterating alternative and resisting versions from the purview of discourse—but not omnipresent. Mandal's political line presents one such alternative that the novel attempts to reinstate in our collective memory. It encourages the readers in a dialogue connecting the reinterpretations of history and our present experiences concerning caste politics and social realities of caste.

The novelistic call for reorientation is founded on the belief in the potential of the novel as a literary genre to represent the totality of the lived world. The past comes alive in the novel through an expert navigation between fact and imagination. The text meticulously uses standard historical data and maintains a striking degree of authenticity in factual details and reconstruction of historical personalities. The author develops character attributes of the historical figures through realistic, lively and humorous conversations. Narrativization, while recreating the ambience, is intertwined with sharp analytical interludes. Throughout the novel, the author reorients our understanding of caste and its relation to power by redefining *sudratva*. The concept of *sudrabhoomi* has been invoked to problematise the conceptual binary that explains Varna Hindu-sudra relationship exclusively in terms of hegemony-subordination. While accepting sudratva as a conscious and direct state of powerlessness, the author points to the parallel realities of sudra life—realities that empower sudras through the wisdom they achieve by their labour and survival strategies, their embodied presence and intimate understanding of their habitat.

J.N. Mandal's political philosophy and practise reveal a bold attempt to fight the entrenched social and political forms upper caste superiority. He attacked varna-Hindutva at the very core by proclaiming sudra autonomy. This perpetual call for Dalit self-declaration, as traced in the novel, had its root in Dalit life-realities itself. In this sense novelisation of Mandal is in itself an act of resistance. Ray, in a self-reflective section at the end of the novel, explains how as a twenty-first century author, every day and incessant news of violence and injustice acted as a direct drive in his construal of Mandal. He reminds the reader that episodes of antiepics are present ever in the histories and heritage of civilisation. He develops the novel and its hero, J.N. Mandal as one such episode of resistance—anti-epic—in the history of South Asia. This novelisation of Mandal, in this sense, is the author's call for his literary audience to decode history and rethink our understanding of past and present structures of power.

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Struggling for Freedom from Caste in Colonial India: The Story of Rettaimalai Srinivasan

Malarvizhi Jayanth[1]

Abstract

Rettaimalai Srinivasan (1860–1945), a Dalit leader in colonial India, argued that there were two kinds of freedom struggles being waged in the region–one against the British and the other against caste. His autobiography, published in Tamil in 1938, is likely the first Dalit autobiography, and along with his other papers, pamphlets, and speeches comprises a potent anti-caste archive that is yet to be studied. In these texts, Srinivasan defined untouchability as a complex of social and economic practices and emphasized the role of Dalit leadership in undoing these practices. As his work indicates, the freedom struggle against caste required a re-signification of caste names and untouchability itself and an increased representation of Dalit groups within governance. By seeking to turn the name of the Pariah caste into one that could be used with pride, he continuously grappled with the question of self-representation and an appropriate vocabulary to do so. His definition of untouchability as intimately linked with agrarian labour lies at the heart of his emphasis on the importance of Dalit representatives governing and leading people from these communities towards freedom.

Keywords

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Introduction

In the anti-caste Dalit view in colonial India, the project of representation required re-signifying caste names and groupings, and—in order to ensure both the undoing of caste disabilities and the full participation of lower-caste groups in the democratic process—making space for leadership from their own communities.[1] The struggle for anti-caste representation was also at loggerheads with nationalist projects, as was most famously exemplified in Mohandas Gandhi's fast against allowing the Depressed Classes (as Dalits were known in colonial India) separate electorates—a provision of electoral reform that had been formulated and presented by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) and Rettaimalai Srinivasan (1860–1945) at the Round Table Conference in London. Srinivasan's writings and speeches at this Conference and elsewhere show that arguments for representative government in British India were formulated as part of anti-caste—and not just nationalist—struggles. While Ambedkar's national contributions have received some attention, the manner in which the many meanings of representation coalesce in the work of Srinivasan is yet to be addressed. Srinivasan attended the Round Table Conference in 1930 to 1931 with Dr. Ambedkar and participated in various struggles to improve Dalit representation both in the southern administrative bloc known as the Madras Presidency and across British India, arguing that Dalit political representation was crucial to righting the offence of untouchability. Through a forthcoming translation of his autobiography, which is the oldest known Dalit autobiography, and a recently-published collection of his writings and other papers related to his work, it is possible to reconstruct how Srinivasan's work in representing his political life, the caste he was from, and the Depressed Classes more generally feeds into his definition of untouchability in relation to agrarian labour—a definition that led to his belief in the importance of leadership drawn from Dalit communities in order to erase caste disabilities. The case for Dalit leadership of their own communities or the project of representative government that Srinivasan advances—I will argue—is marked by these three meanings of representation: (1) representation of the political self in the autobiography, (2) of a specific caste within the Madras Presidency region, and, (3) of the Depressed Classes across British India. This history will show how anti-caste claims were advanced in the struggle for representative government and how categories like 'Pariah' and 'Dravidian' were re-signified through such movements, thereby continuing to shape contemporary political formations.

Representing the Self

Srinivasan summarised his life and work in a short text that appears to be the first Dalit autobiography. Though Dalit literature—with an emphasis on Dalit autobiography—is generally dated to the 1990s, work by Srinivasan and his contemporaries pushes this date further back by several decades.[3] Srinivasan's autobiography is currently the

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[1]See Parthasarathi Muthukaruppan (2014) for an introduction to the use of the term 'Dalit' in political mobilization.

[3]Parthasarathi Muthukaruppan (2017, p. 65) documents the rise of Tamil Dalit literature in the 1990s, starting with the publication of Bama's autobiographical novel *Karukku* in 1992. The work of Srinivasan's colleagues in anti-caste struggle, including that of Ayothee Thass and M.C. Raja, is discussed later in this article.

earliest known text in the genre. He likely wrote this autobiography at around the same time that Dr. Ambedkar was writing his autobiographical notes titled 'Waiting for a Visa', dated to around 1935–1936 (Ambedkar, 1993). While Dr. Ambedkar's notes would eventually only be published in 1990 (Ambedkar, 1993, p. 661), Srinivasan's autobiography was published in Tamil in 1938. Reprints followed in 1999 and 2017. This makes the autobiography one of the oldest, if not the first, Dalit autobiographies. Srinivasan presents his autobiography explicitly as a political biography, noting that it was a record of his work for his community. Remarks about his early life and his account of his wife, for instance, feature as little more than asides. He writes in his preface that the autobiography is a record of the social history of his people and of their hard work directed towards uplifting their community. While scholars have attended to the political meaning of late-twentieth-century Dalit autobiographies in conjunction with their literary quality, Srinivasan's work is relentlessly focused on the political work of its author.[4] Its brevity and matter-of-fact presentation have more in common with the political pamphlet—a genre Srinivasan wrote in as well—than other genres. For this reason, this article seeks to locate the text within a political context, rather than explore its literary value.

The text lays much emphasis on Srinivasan's work as a Dalit leader. It begins with a felicitation offered by the Revenue Collector of Chingleput, summarizing the work that Srinivasan has done for his community. It then moves into Srinivasan's voice, briefly sketches his childhood and early work and discusses his publication of a journal titled "*Paraiyan*" (which may be translated as 'The Pariah' in English)[5] starting in 1893 in a bid to reclaim a name used with disgust and elevate it to respectability. After mentioning his attempts to travel to London and the detour to South Africa that followed, he offers a summary history of caste as an external imposition upon the indigenous Dravidians of southern India. He devotes a paragraph to the petition against conducting the Civil Services exam in India—a petition that is provided in fragmentary form at the end of the autobiography. It is his view that the labour commissioner, intended to support the welfare of the Depressed Classes, was established in response to this petition. He documents the political mobilizations intended to meet and felicitate various British administrators as formative of "Adi Dravida society".[6] He sketches the difficulties faced in educating children from this community, despite some desultory government efforts to do so. He moves on to discuss his work in the Legislative Assembly of the Madras Presidency, discussing the laws he brought in to undo the exclusions produced by caste practice, and briefly mentions his contemporary M.C. Raja's similar work. He writes of his visit to London for the Round Table Conference, discusses the contradictions of joint and reserved constituencies and the problem of temple entry. He declares his antipathy towards religious conversion, arguing that those within the Depressed Classes were not Hindu. He goes on to criticise the leadership of the Indian National Congress and Gandhi, writing that he signed the Poona Pact out of pity for the

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[4]Raj Kumar (2010), for instance, sketches the differences between Dalit personal narratives and more nationalist work in the genre.
[5]As noted later in the article, the word 'Pariah' in English stands in for all 'out-caste' groups, while Srinivasan was using the Tamil word to refer to the specific caste he was from.
[6]The use of the terms 'Dravidian' and 'Original Dravidian' or 'Adi Dravida' are discussed at length later in the article.

latter. A brief aside about his wife follows, just before he concludes this very brief tour of his life history. The autobiography was published with three appendices—the first being the petition against the Civil Service exam (which the author notes was similar to that submitted by the Muslims), the second being a summary of his legislative work opening public spaces to all, and the third a summary of the Poona Pact for subsequent electoral regimes following the Round Table Conference.

As this summary indicates, and as Srinivasan himself declares in the preface, the autobiography was intended to be a political biography, largely concerned with documenting the ways in which he sought to improve the well-being of both his caste and Dalit groups more generally. This is of relevance to his life project of improving the condition of Dalit groups though leadership that is drawn from their ranks. Srinivasan's Tamil autobiography used to stand alone, as a fragmentary text with little other evidence to support its claims. The first lines and sections of an appendix were found to be missing in the 1999 reprint. There were no other available sources with which to reconstruct his anti-caste work and philosophy. This text is now, however, bolstered by a wealth of newly discovered and published material. Gauthama Sanna (2019) has collated several documents related to Srinivasan into a volume that stands tribute to the long history of Dalit resistance and liberation and provides fresh insights into how the freedom struggles against caste and colonialism could undercut each other. A forthcoming translation of his autobiography will further be accompanied by newly-discovered English material, including an open letter addressed to Gandhi,[7] all authored by Srinivasan. These new sources allow us to reconstruct Srinivasan's anti-caste thought in far greater detail than had been possible before, showing how the many meanings of representation coalesce in Srinivasan's work.

Representing the Caste

Before the widespread use of 'Dalit' as a revolutionary term, Dalit pride was expressed in various ways, some of which might seem exclusionary in contemporary times. Srinivasan, for instance, ran a journal named after the Pariah caste, starting in 1893 (Balasubramaniam, 2017; Srinivasan, 1999). Copies of this publication have not survived. He sought to reclaim the name of his caste, a name used with disgust and disdain (Viswanath, 2014), in this endeavour. While it must be noted that the category of the 'pariah' was used a stand-in for all untouchable castes in some colonial

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[7]This open letter, published in English and dated to 1921, was recently discovered in the British Library, London, and is critical of the Non-Cooperation Movement for undercutting the government that was seeking to improve the condition of Dalit groups. It begins by differentiating the freedom struggles against caste and colonialism and offers a summary of the history of caste, based on the Aryan invasion theory. He describes Dalit migration to South Africa as offering a means to improve their lot and complains that this was stymied by Gandhi's agitations. He documents the problems with the notion of equal rights as he summarizes the inequality to which Dalits were subject, how they were not allowed into schools, the minimal redress offered by the limited options for self-government in this community and the difficulty with seeking redress for these issues before elite caste magistrates. He cites his petition against conducting the Civil Services exam in India to buttress his claims. He refutes the stereotypical views of the community held by elite caste groups. He suggests that the only way forward—seeking full participation in the mainstream—is being blocked by Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement. The letter is signed with a South African address in Natal and dated 1921.

documentation of the time, Srinivasan was likely using it to refer to people of his caste. He details the reasons for having established this journal in his autobiography in the following (translated) words:

> [H]e who says, 'Me! I!!' of himself and speaks the truth of his caste without fear or embarrassment and celebrates his freedom, he will lead a respectable family life with good property and eternal peace. Therefore, unless a member of the Pariah caste comes forward and says 'I am a Paṟaiyaṉ', he will not be able to celebrate freedom and will remain oppressed and a pauper. Therefore, I published a journal crowned with the name 'Paraiyan'. It was published in October 1893. It was a small monthly with four pages. It cost 2 annas a copy. People of my caste, the ones called 'Paṟaiyar', endorsed it with great enthusiasm.
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> The advertisements for the journal and the first print run cost Rs. 10. In two days, some 400 copies were sold inside Chennai city. In three months, the journal became a weekly, and after two years, there was a printing press. The journal spoke in favour of that section of society called Paraiyar, sought the support of the government and discussed the codes of good conduct. Wherever this section of society gathered, there they discussed this journal with great enthusiasm. (Srinivasan, 1999, pp. 20–21)[8]

While copies of this journal have not survived, it is possible to deduce that it was part of a vibrant Dalit print culture of the time. This is indicated scholarship on the journalism of his brother-in-law and contemporary Ayothee Thass (1845–1914), based on reprinted copies of his journal '*Tamiḻaṉ*', which may be translated as 'The Tamilian' (Dickens, 2021; Rajangam, 2019; Jayanth, 2019; Ayyathurai, 2011; Ponnoviyam, 2010; Anbarasan, 2009). This scholarship shows how Thass used creative etymology and critical reading of Tamil literature to argue for Tamil country's Buddhist past and, relatedly, to argue for reading those of the Pariah caste as being the original Buddhists, who were sidelined by those claiming elite caste identity. Thass' critique of Brahmin dominance and elite caste nationalist aspirations has also received some attention (Geetha and Rajadurai, 2011, p. 40, pp. 60–66). Besides Thass' journal, which was the primary staging ground for his arguments, Balasubramaniam's (2017) ground-breaking research on Dalit journalism in southern colonial India shows the existence of a Dalit print public between 1869 and 1943, formed by multiple journals and reading constituencies through the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries. Thus, we have a small but growing body of work dedicated to recovering Dalit writings and print publics, expanding our knowledge of Dalit political and literary activity in colonial India. Srinivasan's work can be read as part of this emergent print culture—his writing spanned autobiography, journalism, petitions, and pamphlets to educate the public.

While Thass is studied as a theorist of caste and how it may be undone, Srinivasan's later work, in particular, is understood as primarily concerned with representation in government.[9] Through the freshly available archive of sources now available, however, it is possible to go further and document the multiple forms of

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[8]Translation mine.

[9]Rajangam (2008), for instance, reads his work after joining the Legislative Assembly as related to the political—marking a shift from Srinivasan's earlier interest in the history and literature of his people (pp. 61–62).

representation his work encompassed. He reads untouchability as a complex of social, political, and economic injunctions, and caste as an external imposition, going on to argue for leadership from Dalit castes to lead the way out of caste subjugation. He deploys the category of 'Dravidian' in an anti-caste manner, reading the subjugation of lower castes—including untouchability and agrarian servitude—as the outcome of an 'Aryan' invasion. His critique of elite-caste and nationalist interventions against caste all underscore his belief in Dalit leadership for undoing caste in British India.

Dravidian to Original Dravidian: The Language of Anti-Caste Work

While Srinivasan's anti-caste representative work is yet to get its due, the work of intermediate castes working toward similar ends is better known.[10] We know, for instance, that the former nationalists who would go on to lead the non-Brahmin movement in the Madras Presidency issued a manifesto in 1916, arguing that Indians were not ready for self-rule, since it could lead to the tyranny of Brahmins (Pandian, 2008, p. 1). This argument that Brahmin dominance would follow from nationalist aspirations—a claim promptly denounced as 'unpatriotic' (Geetha and Rajadurai, 2011, p. 1)—has a longer history that remains to be told. In 1893, Srinivasan led a petition against the nationalist demand for conducting the Civil Services exam in India, arguing that it would lead to Brahmin dominance and poor treatment of lower-caste groups (Srinivasan, 1999).[11] Since the two landmark studies on the anti-caste movement in Tamil country (Geetha & Rajadurai, 2011; Pandian, 2008) do not mention Srinivasan, our knowledge of Dalit political activity in colonial India remains fragmentary. The genealogies of political movements and the categories they deploy are thereby obscured.

To seek the genealogy of the category of 'Dravidian', which Srinivasan substituted for 'Pariah' in his later work, we have to attend to the vocabulary Srinivasan uses to denote Dalit groups. Given that Srinivasan was a national leader, his interactions with other national leaders are a source to understand the significance of his vocabulary.

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[10]The reasons for the erasure of Dalit political history in the anti-caste history of Tamil country have been debated. Some have suggested that this erasure was deliberate. Karthick Ram Manoharan (2020) sketches these discussions before going on to argue that the non-Brahmin leader Periyar (as E.V. Ramasamy Naicker was affectionately known) engaged with the work of Ambedkar and stood by the Dalit cause in his work.

[11]This document begins by declaring that the petition was from those of the Pariah caste, who formed an estimated 25 percent of the population of Madras Presidency. It is described as similar to the petition from Muslims against conducting the Civil Services exam simultaneously in England and India. It argues that doing so would unfairly benefit the Brahmins, who do not compare favourably with the British when it comes to the administration of justice. Since Brahmins were primarily responsible for the infliction of untouchability on those of the Pariah caste, this would be detrimental. The document notes that the Pariah caste were 'the highest class among those who do agricultural labour' and were subject to many cruel forms of exclusion. These practices were not unique to villages and could be found in the big city of Madras as well, the petition notes. It concludes by saying the Pariah caste could become 'a tower of strength' for the British if they were allowed to continue accessing education as before—a feat that would be impossible under a Brahmin-dominant administration. Translation mine. (Srinivasan, 1999, pp. 53–60).

He appears to have maintained a cordial—if combative—relationship with Gandhi.[12] In a published interview with Gandhi, he is recorded as saying that "The Depressed Classes Community was not consulted when you chose to call them Harijans. Large sections of the people resent the name Harijan" (Sanna, 2019, p. 287) dated December 22, 1933. While rejecting the term 'Harijan' to refer to Dalit people, Srinivasan uses the descriptors Adi Dravida, Pariah, Depressed Classes and Scheduled Castes. All these terms can be found in his autobiography. In a pamphlet discussing agitations for temple entry, dated to 1938,[13] he defines Adi Dravida as encompassing the 86 Scheduled Castes (Sanna, 2019, p. 301). The term Adi Dravida is derived from the 'Dravidian' which has primarily been associated with the non-Brahmin movement—a social and political movement challenging Brahmin hegemony from the early twentieth century onward. While this movement finds no mention in Srinivasan's work, traces of the history of its dominant category of Dravidian can be found in Srinivasan's work and in the work of another little-studied Dalit leader of the time, M.C. Rajah (1883–1943). Rajah writes about the Pariah caste:

> The Caste Hindus have called them for a long time Pariahs. Whatever be the derivation of the name, this word uttered by a Caste Hindu tongue, conveys everything that is mean and despicable today and means the opposite of all that is holy and respectable…So they sought for a name which would indicate that they were the first inhabitants of Southern India and had nothing to do with that most inhuman of human institutions, Caste. They wanted a name which would point to their racial and territorial origin. Disliking the name Eurasian, the Eurasian community took to themselves the name 'Anglo-Indian'. The Non-Brahmin caste Hindus, disliking the name Sudra took to themselves the name Dravidian. When the question of a name for the community was considered some thirty-two years ago, it was decided that they should be called Adi Dravidas to distinguish them from "Sudras", who had now taken the name Dravidians or Dravidas. Adi means original, pure and unalloyed as in "Adi Saivas, Adi Sankarachariar, Adi Lakshmi, Adi Bagavan, Adi Sivan, Adi-Narayan, Adi-Kesavan, Adimulam", etc. (Raja, 1925, pp. 30–31)[14]

[12]He mentions having Gandhi's friendship in his autobiography. In his interview with Gandhi cited after this note, he writes in English, "My dear Mahatmaji,- We were old friends in South Africa; we crossed swords at the Round Table Conference in St. James Palace; we joined hands and entered into a compromise at Yerrawada; we became friends again and we are met here together to concert ways and means for ameliorating the condition of the Depressed Classes" (Sanna, 2019, pp. 282-283).

[13]Starting with the declaration that Adi Dravida referred to the 86 Scheduled Castes (referring to the list drawn up in 1935 of Dalit castes), the Tamil pamphlet sketches a history of caste as produced by an Aryan imposition and goes on to argue that the Adi Dravida had attained several advancements under British rule. In an attempt to undo these advancements and to absorb them into the Hindu fold, the idea of temple entry is now being propagated, he writes. After sketching the history of temple entry bills in the legislative assembly, he argues that temple entry is unnecessary and may be rendered mandatory if the Adi Dravida were not careful. He concludes by praising the king of Travancore for having issued a proclamation opening temples to all castes and says that the Adi Dravida must garland and celebrate his statue that was to be installed in Madras shortly. Translated summary mine (Sanna, 2019, pp. 301–307).

[14]Titled 'The Oppressed Hindus', this English book documents the suffering of Dalit groups in the Madras Presidency, noting that the arrival of the British had ameliorated their condition. He argues that these groups were converting in large numbers to Christianity to escape the poor

Rajah, who identifies as President of the Second South Indian Adi Dravida Congress and the Honorary Secretary of the Madras Adi Dravida Maha Jana Sabha,[15] also uses the terms Adi Dravida and Adi Andhra to refer to Dalit groups. In his words, then, Dalit groups started calling themselves Adi Dravida to differentiate themselves from the non-Brahmin caste groups mobilizing under the name Dravidian. By 1925, then, the intermediate non-Brahmin castes were calling themselves Dravidians. Srinivasan, who had his differences with Raja (Sanna, 2019, pp. 160–161), sketched a similar history of caste in his open letter to Gandhi, dated 1920:

> Dravidians are ancient inhabitants of South India, immigrated from Indo-Oceanea submerged land or some other parts of the World. Their language is Tamil. High literature can be found in that language written by their ancients long before Ceylon was separated from the main land India. There were Lords (Perumans) among them, also Kings and Saints.…Taking advantage of changes caused by invaders, Brahamins (*sic*) (Priests they were), and Hindus, who got into the caste bondage, gradually oppressed and crushed the Dravidians down, calling them outcastes and other degrading, defamatory, and insulting epithets, such as chandalas (miserable wretch) Puliya (corrupted person) Paraya (stranger or belonging to another) Panchama (a fifth class) and untouchable; calling even their saints as "untouchable saints." They would not allow the Dravidians to pass in village public streets, use water in tanks or ponds in the village commonage, enter in temples, touch a Brahamin or caste Hindu or any article belonging to him. They were debarred from trading, for they were untouchables. They were kept under bondage for generations by the usuperous (*sic*) landlords and the usury of money lenders. They were kept under serfdom, so that they could not claim their former rights and privileges. In other words the Dravidians were subjugated by the subtle non-violent, non-co-operation methods of the Brahamins.

Srinivasan reads untouchability as the outcome of invaders crushing the indigenous Dravidian people in his open letter to Gandhi, terming this process the outcome of the 'non-violent, non-cooperation of Brahmins', poking sly fun at the nationalist agitations of the time. The system of untouchability served to keep them under the yoke of caste and unable to regain their former glory, in his view. He goes on to argue that Gandhi's political leadership in South Africa shut off avenues of work and savings for Dravidians—the original inhabitants of the South Indian region. In his autobiography, he notes again the exclusions upon which the system of caste is

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treatment at the hands of the caste Hindu. He writes that the past glory of the Adi Dravida people was decimated by the Aryan intrusion and speculates on the etymology of various words used to describe Dalit groups. He argues that several extant customs pointed to the former greatness of these groups. He writes about government departments established for their welfare and concludes by arguing against reading a Madras labour strike as a labour movement.

[15]This Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha existed atleast from 1891—a fact indicated by Srinivasan joining the Sabha at this time. See the speech delivered by the Chingleput collector in Srinivasan's autobiography.

premised and rues that Dalit communities have been absorbed into 'Aryan caste rules'. In his autobiography, he writes:

> When the Aryans settled in our country and created the rules of caste, the Dravidians – who are now called Pariah, Panjamar and Adi Dravida – were subject to much misery because they refused to give in. They lived as a separate society, in a separate space called the *Cheri*. They created their villages with such things as their own temple, pond, priest, village head, panchayat members, washerman, barber, burial ground, burning ghat, and the customs of widow remarriage and divorce. …Instead of openly celebrating their freedom, they have been absorbed into the Aryan caste rules. Those people have kept them under control. I tried to collect them into a large community, that they may ask for and enjoy their rights (Srinivasan, 1999, pp. 24–25).[16]

In his 1938 English pamphlet on temple entry, Srinivasan writes again, "When the Aryan Race invaded India those of the Dravidian Race in South India, who repulsed the introduction of the caste system were oppressed, expelled from the towns and kept out of reach of the caste converts and treated them as untouchables" (Sanna, 2019, p. 310).[17]

Srinivasan, Raja, and Thass (Geetha and Rajadurai, pp. 92–105), then, all proffer a similar theory on the origin of caste. In their view, the practice of caste was not indigenous to the region, had been imposed by invading outsiders, and that the resulting processes of excluding the ones who refused to practice caste led to the exclusions on which untouchability was premised. In making these claims, these Dalit leaders were participating in the scholarly consensus of the time. Trautmann (2006) has shown that languages and racial groups were twinned in early nineteenth-century European language study (p. 34). The development of 'Dravidian proof' or evidence for the Dravidian family of languages was thereby used to formulate the Aryan invasion theory. This theory held that light-skinned Aryans invaded and mixed with dark-skinned Dravidians to produce some contemporary distinctions including caste (p. 225). This theory was part of a scholarly consensus. Therefore, when Ayothee Thass and Rettaimalai Srinivasan repeated the claim, they were not fabricating history—they were, on the contrary, participating in this consensus and citing then-prevalent scholarship on Indian history, while also giving it an anti-caste interpretation.

These understandings of history shaped the anti-caste civic associations that emerged under Srinivasan's leadership. He had joined the Adi Dravida Maha Jana Sabha in 1891—showing that using Adi Dravida for Dalit groups was an established practice when he began to use Dravidian in place of Pariah or Panchama. These fluid

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[16]Translation mine.

[17]The English pamphlet makes for interesting comparative reading with the Tamil version of the pamphlet. After summarizing the history of caste using the Aryan invasion theory, he argues that the Depressed Classes were misrepresented to the British administration in the early part of their presence in India, but were now coming into their own due to the 'impartial British administration'. He argues that temple entry was a ruse for absorbing the Depressed Classes into the Hindu fold and takes a strong stance against it (Sanna, 2019, pp. 310–312).

naming conventions were associated with improved political representation and with political movements led by Dalit leaders. Srinivasan notes in his autobiography:

> [T]he ones who were called by many names including Pariah, Panchama and Depressed Classes, were now called Adi Dravida, given the right to participate in the Government's administration and had ministerial posts. People of this caste were appointed as ministers and mayors in Legislative Assemblies, Municipalities, Local Boards, Panchayats and given other administrative posts, high posts in the Civil Service, that they may grow in wealth and education. Besides this, the efforts I put into gathering this caste to make it an important part of society were also an important reason for their progress. The Mahasabha of the people of this community continues to function. The name was changed in the course of time. The Madras Depressed Classes Federation and the Scheduled Castes Party are conducted by respectable members of this community. They have also selected me as the leader for this. (Srinivasan, 1999, p. 31) [18]

Srinivasan repeatedly emphasizes that leadership from within Dalit groups was vital to improving their condition. Here, he says that improved representation within governance would allow Dalits to "grow in wealth and education". All that was denied by caste could, in other words, be granted by participating in governing. This passage implies that the denial of respectability for low-caste names could feature among these potential reversals. The necessity of such reversal and leadership drawn from Dalit communities can be deduced from his definition of untouchability.

Representing and Re-signifying Untouchability in Relation to Agrarian Labour

Srinivasan's 1928 supplementary memorandum submitted to the Simon Commission,[19] which was intended to propose constitutional reform, offers a definition of untouchability that is distinct from colonial understandings of caste as occupation or societal function. In his words, "Untouchability is a device adopted by high-caste men to live upon low caste people by dislocating them from all social, economic and political privileges. It is a public offence committed under cover of social customs and religious observances" (Sanna, 2019, p. 136). In other words, the religious reasons given for the practice of untouchability were merely a ruse to exploit low caste people and enact the social, political, and economic dominance of upper caste groups.

This definition of untouchability is of a piece with Srinivasan's emphasis on agrarian labour as the primary occupation of Dalit groups. The agrarian servitude

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[18]Translation mine.

[19]The English supplementary memorandum, in Srinivasan's words, was intended to show "the condition of the Depressed Classes before and since the advent of British rule, their political advancement, the effect of the introduction of English education, the Indianization of the services, the local self-governing institutions, the revenue department, untouchability, conversion, Depressed Classes welfare, Dominion status and the granting of full self-government" (Sanna, 2019, pp. 112–113).

that people from Dalit castes have been subject to has received some recent scholarly attention (Jayanth, 2020; Viswanath, 2014; Major, 2012). Mohan (2015) has attended to the emancipatory movements that emerge from among the former agrarian slave communities in the Kerala region. The majority of those among the Depressed Classes were associated with agrarian labour, according to leaders from colonial India. In a joint statement submitted to the Round Table Conference by B.R. Ambedkar and Rettaimalai Srinivasan, likely dated to 1931,[20] they write that Dalit groups "…cannot consent to subject themselves to majority rule in their present state of hereditary bondsmen… [E]mancipation from the system of untouchability must be[come] an accomplished fact" (Sanna, 2019, p. 173). They note that the poverty among this group is enforced by prejudice, differentiating them from 'the ordinary caste labourer' (p. 184). In the main memorandum submitted to the Simon Commission,[21] Srinivasan describes the Depressed Classes as mainly agricultural labourers who "…form the backbone of the Revenue administration" (p. 108). Srinivasan writes that "we have always been on the soil and attached to it…[E]very argument religious, social or political is used by them to keep us in a state of serfdom" (p. 109). He argues for ensuring that agrarian labour from the lower castes is paid in "coin" rather than "unwholesome grain" (p. 111). Those branded untouchable, in Srinivasan's view, propped up the revenue administration, since land revenue derived from agrarian land was the primary source of income for the British administration. Srinivasan, therefore, reads untouchability as a complex of economic, political, and social restrictions and seeks the emancipation of the untouchable agrarian labourer from bondage into wage labour, all while shrewdly appealing to the British administrators to protect a vital source of their income.

In the Round Table Conference statement cited earlier, Ambedkar and Srinivasan go on to describe the social boycott of rebellious people from the Depressed Classes as among the most effective methods for suppressing them. They describe the various ways in which untouchability is inflicted—showing how "orthodox classes have used their economic power as a weapon against those Depressed Classes in their villages, when the latter have dared to exercise their rights" (Sanna, 2019, p. 176). They list the ways in which boycott should be made an offence while making an argument for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes in the first ten years of the reformed electoral system and reserved seats thereafter (Sanna, 2019, p. 181). The quest for electoral representation, therefore, is rooted in their understanding of the Dalit condition in colonial India. Since social boycotts could coerce Dalit groups to act against their interests, they turn to the idea of a separate electorate as a means of producing Dalit representation. While Srinivasan would later differ with Ambedkar on

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[20]The statement lays out the conditions under which the Depressed Classes would consent to "majority rule in a self governing India": equal citizenship, free enjoyment of equal rights, protection against discrimination, adequate representation in the legislatures, redress against prejudicial actions or neglect of interests, special departmental care, and representation of the Depressed Classes in the central Cabinet (Sanna, 2019, pp. 173–187).

[21]The memorandum notes the various exclusions used to uphold untouchability and requires the following for inclusion in the constitution: representation (of the Depressed Classes) in the legislatures, representation in the government, representation in the services, improved economic position, and improved access to education (Sanna, 2019, pp. 108–112).

the question of the emancipatory potential of conversion to other religions (Srinivasan, 1999, p. 45),[22] their joint statement and Srinivasan's other writings all emphasise the significance of Dalit political representation.[23] His definition of untouchability as a complex of economic and social restrictions which has been given a religious veneer is at the heart of his ambivalence to causes such as temple entry and conversion to other religions. Likewise, his understanding of the multiple forms of coercion that Dalit groups could be subject to underlies the need for Dalit political representation and leadership.

Self-rule for the Depressed Classes, its Necessity and National Significance

Srinivasan's critique of the nationalist demand for self-rule was accompanied by demands for better Dalit representation within the existing administration. The demands laid out by the Dravida Mahajana Sangam in 1891, for instance, included punishment for those that ridiculed the Pariah using their caste name, and—pertinent to the point being made on political representation—equal respect for those from the Depressed classes for running panchayats and municipalities (Geetha and Rajadurai, 2011, p. 54). "[T]he removal of untouchability," Srinivasan notes during the Round Table Conference in 1930, "depends upon the vesting of political power in the Depressed Classes". He finds that there is no other alternative after his forty years of experience working among them. In a speech delivered to the Conference during the second session in 1931, he notes that "[A]bolition of untouchability by law will not suffice" (Sanna, 2019, p. 214). Since it would require administrative action as well, the Depressed Classes must have power in the Legislative and Executive arms of government (p. 215).

His rejection of Gandhi's leadership and of his vocabulary for describing Dalit groups must be read in the context of his belief in leadership from within Dalit castes for advancing the community. While he believes that the community would be best helped by itself, he adds caveats to the manner in which this action should be taken:

> Some among the Depressed Classes say that: "The evil spirit called untouchability has taken full possession of the caste Hindus. They will not be able to exorcise it by themselves. If we take up the stick, we will be able to drive it out of the country in a year. If revolution is born, justice will be born." Revolution will create terrible miseries and, I would say that it would take a long while to recover from it. Enmity, hatred and arrogance are sinful.

[22]Conversion was a national question and one on which he differed from Ambedkar. He attacked Olcott for introducing Buddhism to Dalit groups and told Ambedkar that Dalits were not Hindu and therefore did not need to convert—stances that he documented in his autobiography. He sees nationalist temple entry and anti-untouchability movements as self-interested interventions by the caste Hindus, to prevent the Depressed Classes forming "a big, distinct, strong community". In the English pamphlet on temple entry, dated to 1938, he writes that the Depressed Classes were "…more keen on bettering their economic condition than on temple entry…[E]ntering Hindu temples will take them to the fringe of the caste system to be called a fifth caste and thus into the Hindu fold." (Sanna, 2019, p. 311)

[23]Viswanath (2018) has argued that Ambedkar moved away from this belief in representation, seeing it as a necessary but not sufficient means for Dalit liberation.

> It would be more helpful to learn political intrigue and work toward capturing power. For this, the Adi Dravida community must be strengthened. We see the caste Hindus setting goats against each other, sitting and weeping when a goat is drenched and then springing into a flock and looting it when necessary. We need to move them aside and bring to heel those who cheat society for power and money. The Congress and the caste Hindus conduct governance in the manner of home rule. They continue to struggle to achieve complete home rule. Before they achieve this, the Adi Dravidar must stand in opposition to them and strengthen their caste and bring themselves ashore as rapidly as possible. In my experience, until the caste Hindus realise that doing otherwise would bring loss and difficulty to them, they will not give way to the Depressed Classes. We must engage in social service that supports society (Srinivasan, 1999, pp. 48–49)

Here he explicitly argues against revolutionary movements against caste, further underscoring his belief in the advancements that can be effected by leaders from lower-caste groups in political work. That this is his theory of anti-caste work is a case that can be made based on his autobiography as well.

Conclusion

The definition of untouchability as an economic and political process, accompanied by the use of Dravidian and other terminology in anti-caste manner, is—as instantiated by the open letter to Gandhi—at odds with the nationalist crusades for self-rule and against untouchability. One such nationalist crusade that Srinivasan agitated against was the demand to conduct the Indian Civil Services exam in India. His petition against the exam being held in India, which was addressed to the Commons of Britain and Ireland in Parliament, presented a scathing critique of Brahmins for whom, Srinivasan argues, Western education is only a thin veneer. He shows that caste is not simply a problem of the villages but continues to structure life in the big city of Madras.

> That this is no idle anticipation can be readily shown, not only from the condition of affairs in the remote Mofussil, where caste is still paramount and sways with a rod of iron, and the rustic mind exhibits all the immobility of ignorance, but also in the capital city, Madras, where Pariah boys are severely excluded from that typical Hindu institution, Pachaiyappa's College, and where, in that great Brahmin centre, Mylapore, a street exists,-and that street forming one of the boundaries of the residence of the Brahmin Judge of the Madras High Court,-in which may be seen a sign board, declaring the way 'No thoroughfare, Pariahs prohibited' and threatening certain pains and penalties, should they not give good heed. (Srinivasan, 1921–24)

These strictures on the education and movement of Dalit people show that, in Srinivasan's view, that the Brahmins "are utterly unfit to share in the administration" and reiterate that caste was not only a problem of the villages (as one might infer from

his characterization of Dalit groups as agrarian labor) but persisted in the urban centre of the Madras Presidency. This awareness of continuing discrimination, therefore, across urban and rural centres influences his critique of the nationalist aspirations. Srinivasan contrasts the two freedom struggles underway in late colonial India in his open letter to Gandhi: "While it is considered 330,000,000 of Indians are kept under subjection by the British, it should equally be considered that one-fifth (66,000,000) of that population is kept under perpetual oppression by the other four-fifths." (Srinivasan, 1921–24, p. 1) He goes on to note that British administration gave this one-fifth a chance at freedom. His attitude toward British administration remained marked by an ambivalence. Here he noted that they might help the Depressed Classes attain freedom, in other places he is critical of their lack of interest in this cause.

Srinivasan's usage of Pariah or Dravidian to refer to those from the 'Depressed Classes' show that he is still grappling with the question of how best to reclaim shameful names (M.C. Rajah, in the passage cited earlier, also grapples with this question of nomenclature. Thass famously rejected the Pariah name altogether, preferring to refer to the caste as the original Buddhists). The tension between calling his community Pariah and Dravidian shows that he was actively grappling with the question of self-representation. Srinivasan, in reclaiming the identity of being of Pariah caste or of being a despised dark-skinned Dravidian, is deploying caste identity in an anti-caste manner. He uses a category associated with disgust and exclusion with pride to undo the shame associated with the identity. He further demonstrates that the category of Dravidian was still fluid and available for appropriation in 1921. By 1925, according to M.C. Rajah, the intermediate non-Brahmin castes had begun calling themselves Dravidians—a term that has persisted into the present political formations in the region.[24] However, the long Dalit engagement with and use of this category has not been given its due in the scholarship on the histories of the Dravidian movement.[25] This grappling with naming is significant to anti-caste mobilisation because it is among the earliest signs of an oppressed group cognizing its condition. On recognising that a name has been rendered shameful and disgusting, Dalit leaders chose a variety of ways to reclaim or reject such naming conventions. In Srinivasan's rendition of this process, Dravidian and Pariah become anti-caste, changeable nomenclature, and names that were given or adopted within history rather than timeless and immutable.

While Srinivasan is slightly better-known in Tamil country and, through his work with Ambedkar at the Round Table Conference, as a part of anti-caste history, it is important to see his life as a part of national history, as in conversation with the anti-colonial struggle. His relationship with Gandhi, his attitude towards nationalist projects

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[24]Sanal Mohan (2015) documents the struggles of the Dalit leader, Ayyankali, who was fighting the landlessness and illiteracy that was a result of former enslavement, echoing the political struggles of Srinivasan. A charismatic preacher drawn from the ranks of the formerly-enslaved, Yohannan, used 'Adi Dravida' to refer to all those who had suffered slavery in Travancore (p. 285).

[25]Pandian, for instance, notes the Dalit critique of the non-Brahmin movement towards the conclusion of his book and speculates that it may now be time for Dalit groups to inhabit the Dravidian category, ignoring the longer history of the Dalit use of the Dravidian terminology (pp. 239–240).

like conducting the Civil Service exam in India, his work as part of the Round Table Conference, his views on temple entry and his legislation rendering public spaces truly public, all put him firmly in conversation with the struggle for freedom from British rule, while advancing the struggle for freedom from caste. His work shows the diversity of thought and political activity in the anti-caste freedom struggle—this Dalit intellectual heritage is a crucial counterpoint to the theories about 'uplift' that infantilize Dalit people. His work further indicates the regional support structures that held up and advanced the work of national leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, showing that they were fighting similar battles at the national and regional levels.

I have shown that Srinivasan defines untouchability in political, economic and social terms, rejecting ritual explanations for the practices associated with the exclusion of low caste groups from full social participation. He deploys the category of Dravidian and Pariah in anti-caste manner as part of his political project to improve Dalit political representation. Srinivasan's political interventions and writing allow the reader to construct Srinivasan's theory of caste and the significance of anti-caste political movements. The various projects he undertook as a legislator, pamphleteer, national anti-caste activist, and head of regional caste associations, all contributed towards building a public sphere. Democracy depends on such work.[26] The work of Rettaimalai Srinivasan, therefore, must be reclaimed for national and anti-caste history.

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[26]Balasubramaniam (2015) and Dickens (2021) make cognate arguments regarding the significance of Dalit contributions to the formation of a public sphere.

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Maadathy-An Unfairy Tale: Caste, Space, and Gaze

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Abstract

This essay engages with *Maadathy* (dir. Leena Manimekalai, 2019) to explore how space is constructed as a marker of caste and interrogate the concomitant intersection of caste and gender in a divided community. Through the retooling of myth, *Maadathy* explores the horror at the heart of a patriarchal society that is invested in caste as a means of oppression, violence, and inequity. However, such a perverse agenda comes back to haunt the community, which is invested in destroying an adolescent girl without any concern for her desires and finally trying to deify her and find a way for the catharsis of their guilt. Untouchability runs as a subtext throughout *Maadathy* as Yosana and her family are marked, even more inhumanely and unjustly, as unseeable people, wherein the onus to be not seen falls on them. They are abused verbally and physically when they are going about their mundane chores. Nonetheless, the focus on the joyful demeanor of the pleasure-seeking Yosana through the Lacanian lens of the gaze initially enables the understanding of the yearning for subjective mastery from the other side of the village community whose men repeatedly target and try to contain her. However, Yosana's gaze does not allow itself to be domesticated. The jouissance of Yosana, marking her singularity as the casteless adolescent girl, troubles those who want to contain and destroy her effervescence and, even after her death, continues to haunt them as they are blind to the impossibility of knowing the secret of her desire.

Keywords

Maadathy**,** Leena Manimekalai**,** Tamil Cinema**,** Dalit Cinema**,** Caste**,** Gaze**,** Lacan

Introduction

This essay engages with *Maadathy* (dir. Leena Manimekalai, 2019) to explore how space is constructed as a marker of caste and interrogate the concomitant intersection

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of caste and gender in a divided community. *Maadathy* creates its own mythical space, which is timeless to examine the continuing hegemony of a relatively higher caste, just above in caste hierarchy, in the rigidly casteist Tamil society. Through the retooling of myth, it explores the horror at the heart of a patriarchal society that is invested in caste as a means of oppression, violence, and inequity. However, such a perverse agenda comes back to haunt the community, which is invested in destroying an adolescent girl without any concern for her desires and dreams and finally trying to deify her and find a way for the catharsis of their guilt. This essay will focus on the way *Maadathy* engages with caste and gender in the context of religion to explicate the way caste subsumes gender and is intricately intertwined with religion in enabling men to assault and pulverize women without any moral responsibility or legal scrutiny.

In *Maadathy*, areas surrounding Tirunelveli, particularly the forest region surrounding the Tamira Bharani river in Papanasam, are invoked by shooting on location and matching such a space in locations near Virudhunagar. According to director Leena, it was difficult for her to get permission to shoot in areas surrounding Papnasam, in Tirunelveli district, as Mundanthurai, with its tiger sanctuary, and the adjacent regions are reserved (forest reserve) areas, not accessible for shooting. Therefore, Leena has combined the shots of the forest and river in areas near Virudunagar, where she was born, with the shots on the locale of villages near Papanasam.[1] Therefore, one could argue that *Maadathy*, like many of her other films, has a touch of the personal. The essay, thus, engages with Leena's intervention as a feminist filmmaker through the representation of female desire in a masculinity-driven, rigidly casteist space. The performative aspect of the film, mainly through Veni (Semmalar Annam), the mother of the protagonist Yosana (Ajmina Kassim), is analyzed through the Lefebvrian analysis of space as explicated by Ceri Watkins (2005) in the context of theater. Such an analysis delineates the otherwise overlapping categories of space as expounded by the iconic Lefebvre and sheds light on the performative aspect of Veni as she goes about her everyday life in quotidian spaces.

Untouchability runs as a subtext throughout *Maadathy* as Yosana and her family are marked, even more inhumanely and unjustly, as unseeable people, wherein the onus to be not seen falls on them. They are abused verbally and physically if inadvertently they fall into the view of the members, higher in the caste hierarchy when they are going about their mundane chores like picking up firewood as in the case of Veni or just wandering in merriment like Yosana or even when they are walking to the workplace of the spot by the river where they wash the clothes as washer people. The washing of the menstrual cloth is foregrounded in the film as we distinctly see Veni aggressively washing the stains by stomping with her feet and venting out the anger after she is cunningly isolated from her husband by the members of the community from the village on the other side, from where the dirty clothes arrive, and violently raped. Therefore, her gesture of silent but angry protest is not only against the debauched men but also the women who are silent enablers, despite her cleansing of their clothes of bloodstains that they do not want to touch. However, this is far removed from Yosana's silently walking away with the (stolen) shirt of a young

[1]Telephonic conversation with Leena Manimekalai, 5 Oct. 2021.

man (Panneer), spread over her shoulder, subtly expressing her joy. Veni's gestures and behavior have an element of pathos, propelled by her heavy and gloomy heart, unlike the sprightly young Yosana, who is looking forward to the company of her (non-human) friends in the forest (Gopinath 2021).

The focus on the joyful demeanor of the pleasure-seeking Yosana through the Lacanian lens of the gaze initially enables the understanding of the yearning for subjective mastery from the other side of the village community whose men repeatedly target and try to contain her. However, Yosana's gaze does not allow itself to be domesticated. Later, the possessed woman in the village, who signifies the desire of the community, through her role-playing in a male-centric world drives the fantasy of a new temple for the village/caste deity. The final segment of this essay details how when desire and its source—the incomprehensible gaze of Yosana—are sought to be resolved through the fantasy of the temple, it leads to an encounter with the gaze and enables the eruption of the Real regarding the horror surrounding caste in *Maadathy*. The jouissance of Yosana, marking her singularity as the casteless adolescent girl, troubles those who want to contain and destroy her effervescence and, even after her death, continues to haunt them as they are blind to the impossibility of knowing the secret of her desire.

Importantly, *Maadathy* treads a contentious terrain—the caste hierarchy within the Dalit community. One of the reasons why there are no films or earlier documentaries on the Puthirai Vannar community; they generally remain on the fringes even in the discourse surrounding the Dalits. They are classified as Scheduled Caste by the State, and there is only a book about them in Tamil by Professors C. Lakshmanan and Ko. Ragupathi, *Theendamaikkul Theendamai: Puthirai Vannar Vazhvum Iruppum*/ Untouchability Within Untouchability: Lives and Times of the Puthirai Vannars (2016). The foreword for the book was written by Imayam, the Sahitya award-winning Dalit writer, who wrote about the Puthirai Vannars in his seminal novel *Koveru Kazhuthaigal*/Beasts of Burden (1994). Imayam's novel and *Theendamaikkul Theendamai* foreground Puthirai Vannars' predicament as being the lowest in the caste hierarchy. The latter's detailed research questions the framing of easy binaries regarding caste and sheds light on its complexity and intricate structure, as expounded by Dr. Ambedkar. For instance, the difficulty of proving their profession when the State requires them to bring a donkey and washing equipment to verify regarding caste certification. It does not take into consideration that generally, the Puthirai Vannars do not have a secure and stable place to live as they are constantly targeted and forced to be unseeable, thus often forcibly displaced and compelled to move from place to place. The book talks about how they used to wash the clothes and perform the cleansing of dead bodies for other Dalits, higher in the hierarchy. But Leena locates a small village in Tirunelveli district and focuses on the Puthirai Vannar community, where such activities and oppression continue. Nevertheless, Leena as an outsider and an experienced filmmaker, through her framing of the people inside/ from the village and those who are forced to live outside its limits, shifts the binary revolving around hierarchy into one of those drunk with caste, the caste-full and the casteless Puthirai Vannar community, in the spirit of Babasaheb and Periyar regarding oppression and self-esteem.

Apart from reframing hegemony and oppression as a binary between the caste-full and the casteless people, where the traditional (spatial) divide between *oor/*village and *cheri*/colony is rearticulated as the community inside and outside the village, the significance of *Maadathy* lies in it being the work of a woman filmmaker. Karthick Ram Manoharan, in his discerning essay, "Being Dalit, Being Tamil: The Politics of Kabali and Kaala" (2021), compellingly argues for how *Kabali* (dir. Pa. Ranjith, 2016) as a significant Dalit film is hero-driven, whereas *Kaala* (dir. Pa. Ranjith, 2018), though similarly having Rajnikanth for the hero, differs in the hero being the enabler of the community to unite and fight against its Hindutva antagonist. Karthick's framing is also helpful for us to discuss Mari Selvaraj's films: *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) and *Karnan* (2021) regarding the hero/(Dalit) masculinity and the community. As Karthick astutely showcases in his essay, the discourse surrounding Rama/Aryan and Ravana/ Dravidian has been profound for Dravidian ideologues and politics. Nonetheless, the predicament of Sita/women also has to be shed light upon and brought center stage. Leena does that with *Maadathy* by interrogating caste (instead of race). One could trace a link between Sita's life in the forest and Yosana's—their ecofeminist impulses uniting them. More importantly, not only being untouchable but unseeable as well as blindness plays a crucial role in *Maadathy*. Therefore, Lacanian meditations on (the encounter with) the gaze offer the rich theoretical framework to study the extremity/enormity of oppression surrounding caste, in the context of visibility/vision, in *Maadathy*.

The Context of Leena Manimekalai as a Feminist Filmmaker and *Maadathy* as Part of Contemporary Dalit Cinema

Starting from *Mathamma* (2002), Leena has two decades of experience as a committed filmmaker who began her career as a documentarian. While she has been making documentaries regularly, *Sengadal* (The Red Sea, 2011) and *Maadathy* mark her as a significant fiction filmmaker as well. *Mathamma* engaged with the Arunthatiyar community in Mangattucheri near Arakkonam. Arunthatiyars belong to the Dalit community and are lower in the hierarchy, like the Puthirai Vannar community in *Maadathy*. One could see the two decades of work of a significant filmmaker being bookended by her preoccupation with the virulence of the caste system as it keeps destroying the lives and livelihood of people by oppressing them through exclusion and oppression both in the material and the mythic world in the name of inhuman sacrifices. In particular, those who are the lowest in the hegemonical and unscientific construct of caste hierarchy. Consider, for instance, the predicament of young female children who are offered to the deity in *Mathamma*, not unlike Yosana in *Maadathy*.

Additionally, there are many remarkable films in Leena's repertoire that address the predicament of women at the intersection of patriarchy, gender, and caste system, as exemplified by *Goddesses* (2008)—the film which won deservingly for her the Golden Conch at the Mumbai International Film Festival, arguably one of the best in the world for documentaries, despite its politicization in recent years. Leena's feat is unparalleled among documentarians in Tamilnadu. *Goddesses* engages with the lives

and times of three extraordinary women who challenge and subvert the patriarchal norms and gender hierarchy by successfully pursuing professions generally marked as male: fishing, grave-digging, and funeral-singing, not unlike Leena herself. Think of *Sengadal*, the first feature-length film to meaningfully address the Sri Lankan-Tamil issue in the backdrop of the predicament of fisher people in Dhanuskodi, Rameswaram. As with her engagement in foregrounding the plight of the almost invisible Puthirai Vannar community in *Maadathy*, Leena has always been a pioneer.

Maadathy: Caste, Gender, and Mythmaking as Spaces of Oppression and Denial

The reception of *Maadathy* foregrounds the discourses surrounding Dalit *Chetna* or Dalit consciousness when it comes to writing about Dalits, whether in literature or films. Sharankumar Limbale, in his path-breaking book on Dalit criticism, defines it as "the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle" (2004, p. 12). For him, "Ambedkarite thought is the inspiration for this consciousness … Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature; it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness" (p. 32). He leaves no room for ambiguity: "By Dalit Literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness" (p. 1). Laura E. Brueck, the eminent scholar on Hindi literature, gives us an idea about the complex and diverse ways the concept of Dalit Chetna is harnessed: "It can, at times, refer to the notion of political *awareness*, in the sense of consciousness-raising among certain sections of the Dalit population, and at other times refer to a collective notion of *identity* among diverse Dalit communities" (Dalit Chetna). In this context, the response of Dr. Thol Thirumavalavan, the Dalit activist/thinker and the leader of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (Liberation Panther Party) from Tamilnadu, attains significance. He responded to *Maadathy*, after watching the film at the Chennai Independent Film Festival on Leena's invitation, by appreciating the film and pointing to the space needed for the agency of Dalit women.[2] Leena is a feminist writer/filmmaker who has a rich corpus of work over the last decade. She has many dimensions, like being a poet, publisher, and activist.

Against this backdrop, I am invested in analyzing *Maadathy* regarding Leena's locus as a committed filmmaker who is invested in anti-caste and feminist discourses, whose earlier award-winning documentary *Goddesses*, like much of her other films, engages with caste, class, and gender. In this essay, I want to focus on *Maadathy*'s representation of caste and gender through space for its critique of masculinity and the misogynistic Tamil culture. Anindita Datta draws from Joan Wallach Scott's definition of gender as predicated on "perceived differences between the sexes and a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (Scott, 1988, p. 42) and Judith Butler's "styles of the flesh" (Butler 1990, 1993) to foreground how gender is socially constructed not through biology but performance or performing gender to be more precise, and in the case of *Madaathy*, through an "incessant activity performed... with or for another"

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[2]Ibid.

(cited in Datta, 2021, p. 2) to argue for how such performances, which have their own history and are socially determined, are rooted in particular spaces and geographic locale. Thus, according to Datta,

> the nature of space or location by itself determines to a large extent the manner in which 'the styles of the flesh' or gender are performed. Conversely, these performances of gender may then, in turn, go on to constitute specific kinds of gendered spaces … Essentially, therefore, both gender and space eventually co-create each other (2021, p. 2).

Datta posits the idea of regional genderscape, particularly in the context of India, which has resonances for the way gender is constructed through space in *Maadathy*. Veni's performativity and the space in *Maadathy* are intertwined, as discussed in detail later. However, even regional seems too broad a term to engage with the plight of the adolescent protagonist Yosana of *Maadathy*, who is marked in the film as the lowest in the caste hierarchy and personifying the most virulent oppression from men. Since we do not see her with other friends or relatives, any kind of rubric to explain her loneliness, alienation, and exploitation in terms of caste or gender seems inadequate to fully understand her predicament in a dangerously violent and ferociously casteist society. The official press kit of the film informs us about Yosana as belonging to the "unseeable" among the Dalits:

> Puthirai vannaar is an 'unseeable' Dalit caste group, in southern India. Their forced occupation is to wash clothes of other Dalits, the dead and the menstruating women. This film is a tale about a young girl who grew up in Puthirai vannaar caste group and how she came to be immortalised as their local deity, Maadathy … India is a land of Subaltern deities. Each deity has an unique legend and these legends are often interwoven with socio-historic tropes of India.

> —(*Maadathy*, 2019)

Anavan Kudiyiruppu, the area around which a significant portion of the film was shot, is not far off from Papanasam, which is easily accessible through buses—there are direct buses from Chennai and all the big cities and towns in Tamilnadu and Bangalore City and Trivandrum. Yet Anavan Kudiyiruppu, the small village, on the other side of the Ghats is not known much in Tamilnadu. Along with her casteless people.[3] It also undermines the general notion of the contemporary surveillance era

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[3]As I go onto focus on and analyze *Maadathy*, I prefer using the term "casteless" for Yosana and her family belonging to the Puthirai Vannar community, as all of them are not *Vannars* or washer people, though donkey as a signifier is ubiquitous in the film. For instance, according to Leena, Mr. Murthy, who plays the village head in the film, is a retired govt. officer. Similarly, for the people on the other side of the village, I have used "caste-full" to indicate their being intoxicated with caste pride/arrogance. They are not marked in the film as Dalits, though the extra texts like the press kit, says so. Besides, some among the *Devendrakula Vellalars* in the area are also questioning the label of Dalit to address their caste identity.

where nothing escapes the possibilities of looking at and gazing back in return. Caste and its tentacles defy the ubiquity of the Foucauldian panopticon and its reach in this digital era, where Tamilnadu is notorious for its CCTV culture, even in rural areas. More importantly, *Maadathy* set in contemporary times foregrounds the failure and betrayal of the majoritarian Hindu society to fulfill the spirit of Babasaheb Ambedkar instilled in the Indian constitution regarding the various means to achieve economic democracy (Jadhav, 1991).

The plot revolves around the lives and times of Yosana (Ajmina Kassim), her mother Veni (Semmalar Annam), her father Sudalai (Arul Kumar), grandmother (Stella Raj), and the wandering mystic—her grandfather. In her quest, the lonely Yosana too wanders into the forest and the river and seeks company with animals and birds. She identifies and sympathizes with a foal—the baby donkey that has moved away from the group, just like her, to explore the landscape secretly. This quiet side of Yosana's life in a pristine and mythical landscape is contrasted with the lived reality of her mother's anxiety surrounding Yosana's future and her carefree and vivacious nature. Her mother goes about the chore of washing clothes with the help of her father and steps out only for work and hurries back home not only because she is "unseeable" but mainly to keep away from the eyes of depraved and debauched men. She similarly wants to protect her daughter, who would not share her concerns in her pursuit of the mysteries surrounding nature as well as desire. One of the remarkable scenes in *Maadathy* is when Yosana is hiding behind a rock and later, desiring a closer view, moves further and ducks underwater as she sees a young man, relieving himself of his clothes, jumping in nude head-on into the water, and swimming. Such a scene shot from an adolescent girl's perspective is unparalleled in Indian cinema in the way it punctuates the female desire to explore the mystery surrounding the male body and sexuality. She would later be grabbing the stolen shirt, which Panneer had left to dry on the rock after washing, and walking away smelling it. Such tender scenes are juxtaposed with the harsh realities of her mother washing the clothes with menstrual blood and working hard to prepare the fire for steaming a considerable load of clothes, and later, her father waiting in the vicinity but yet hiding from the pyre of the corpse awaiting the clothes of the dead to be washed with a bottle of country liquor as the tip. Besides, her mother inadvertently attracts a curious woodcutter's attention as she rushes to hide behind the tree with her. Nevertheless, his hypocrisy is revealed, when after looking back and searching for her in vain, he spits on her vessel that she left on the way while rushing to hide.

More sadly, all of her mother's apprehensions come true when she is molested on her way to work and raped against her will. Later Yosana, too, is subject to the same fate by a group of young men who were at odds till then, in the backdrop of the festival to celebrate the new temple built by the village community. Leena bookends the film with the myth of Maadathy, the village deity who took her form from the tragic narratives of a young woman like Yosana, whose life was nipped in the bud in a casteist and conservative society which does not seek the truth behind the dark realities of its cathartic rituals. Her anxieties regarding a grown-up daughter mark Yosana's mother, and her behavior recalls Bordieu's concept of the habitus as "the way society

becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them" (Wacquant, 2005, p. 316, cited in Navarro, 2006, p. 16). Additionally, Bordieu was invested in exploring the cultural phenomenon of "misrecognition" to foreground the possibility of "reflexive sociology," which according to him, "while uncovering sources of power and illuminating reasons that explain social asymmetries and hierarchies, offers a good chance of producing real knowledge about a given context and, as a result, is a powerful tool to enhance social emancipation." (Navarro, 2006, pp. 15–16). Nevertheless, such reflexivity and emancipatory possibilities are foreclosed for Veni due to the massive burden of work and the isolation of her family from the larger community in the name of caste and the denial of interacting with her kith and kin who live on the other side of the river. Veni's "propensities to think, feel and act" are thus subsumed by the helplessness of living in a porous bubble that is prone to violent attacks by the virulently masculine universe outside undergirded by the gradations of caste hierarchy and hegemony.

Yosana's world is far removed from her mother's. Her pristine world is mythical as it encompasses the colorful flora and fauna, though it keeps reminding us of the dangers lurking around the corner in its emptiness, where often we see her alone, for relatively long stretches of time. We get the sense of reality only through the intrusion of people from the village, like when Yosana stealthily watches Panneer who comes with his donkeys and swims. After the bath, Panneer comes out of the water and searches for the shirt he had left to dry on a rock nearby in vain. He also looks for the missing young donkey in the group that he had brought with him to bathe. Thereafter, he reluctantly moves away with the other bathed donkeys, searching along the way for the lost young one. Meanwhile, we see Yosana moving away from the camera with the shirt spread over her shoulders and back. This is a poignant moment in the film where tactility of cloth is used as a signifier of desire in contrast to the general use of clothes by a washerwoman, like her mother in the film, and the Marxist alienation of labor where the source of oppression could be traced through the huge pile of clothes to be washed. More importantly, the casteist oppression is punctuated when Veni breaks down after her rape by one of the lecherous men who gets her husband drunk and violently pulls her away and rapes her when she is hurrying to avoid the anticipated tentacles of caste and its violent and ghastly masculinity. All she could do to take out her anger and helplessness was shout at her husband, whom she had forewarned, and scrub hard with her feet the unyielding bloodstains on the menstrual cloth in the river water. Veni's reaction is thus an affirmation of the foreboding sense of gloom she projects as someone who could foresee the way caste structure plays out, foreclosing any hope or agency for someone like her. This contrasts with Yosana's vivacity and throbbing of life in her exploration of nature, seeking friendship with animals, and looking for human contact and warmth. Because of this element of the natural and uncontainable energy in her, she is loved by her grandmother, who coddles her by treating her injured barefoot with herbal paste when she visits her after one of her strolls into the forest. We also see her mystical grandfather suddenly arriving at the door, uninvited and unwelcome by her grandmother, who offers a small packet

(probably with the sacred ash), and her grandmother reluctantly accepts it and adds the content to her mix of the paste. The grandfather who has deserted the family seems to use the garb of the mystic to become visible/seeable to the casteist world outside where such irrationality resonates. Nevertheless, in one of the critical moments in the film, as Yosana is on her stroll, she suddenly comes across this older man—her grandfather— in front of her, and she is astonished, like us, to see him fall flatly (at her feet) on the ground at a distance. His reverential gesture of falling with head down and hands folded up in front of her prefigures her later transition to the deific Maadathy. In stark contrast is the mundane and predictable world of Veni, where caste seems to offer no reprieve and the expansive nature, unlike in the case of Yosana, seems to close in and become increasingly confining, stifling, and claustrophobic. It is as if the entire nature, encompassing her permeable and wall-less home, has become a haunted house, and she is performing to the diktats of this dark dystopian figure—caste (oppression/ hierarchy/hegemony).

Veni's performance, unlike Yosana's spontaneity, begs the question of performance in the context of space. More importantly, because all her fears regarding Yosana's future ultimately come true despite her garrulous nature of speaking her mind and expressing her concerns and anxieties, as if to ward them off, and scoffing at the nonchalance of her husband and the dispassionate mother-in-law and the ebullient Yosana. It also recalls Ceri Watkins's "Lefebvrian analysis" of space in the context of theater. The representation of space, the first one in the triad, which is not concrete, "is the dominant space in society and is a conceptualized space constructed out of symbols, codifications and abstract representations" (Watkins, 2005, p. 209). Watkins sees parallels in "the text or script, the Deputy Stage Manager's book, the composer's score, and various 'notes' from the director, producer, composer, designer, etc." (p. 212). In films, we may translate this as the shooting script, which, like a blueprint, includes the details of the backdrop and the dialogue for the scenes, apart from the notes of the chief technicians like the cinematographer, music composer, choreographer, production designer, among others. Spatial practices, the second one in Lefebvre's taxonomy, which "embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33), resonates with, according to Watkins, "the accepted and acceptable spatial practices of the theatrical context, on which the actors draw, along with the representations of space, to develop a framework for the performance" (Watkins, 2005, p. 213). It includes accepted norms of the theatre, like "'knowing your lines well enough' and 'giving the right cue,' or definitely 'not grandstanding or upstaging another actor." (Ibid.) In cinema, we can see the parallels not only in taking and giving the cues for other actors, particularly in close-ups and remembering your lines, but also taking the lights, generally from the catwalks above, by getting to the right marks on the floor. Spaces of representation, the last one of the triad "are the space of lived experience, it is space 'as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of "inhabitants" and "users"'" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39, original emphasis; Cited in Watkins, Ibid.). Watkins links this to the "awareness of the cast to the role that actual physical space … plays in any performance" (Watkins, Ibid.) She also points to the

"the emphasis the cast placed on the final rehearsals taking place in the same physical space, with the same costumes, props etc. as the final performance" (Ibid.).

Semmalar Annam, playing the role of Veni, attracts our attention through her performance because of all the reasons enumerated earlier. She is dramatically intense in her delivery of dialogue, and her retorts are sharper, reflecting her finesse and sharpness with cues as a professional with more experience than others, but the last one— spaces of representation is significant for us. In *Maadathy*, the actual physical space is the unlimited space of the forest, the actual physical space of the film, often delineated by the space that opens in front of the camera. The diegesis horizontally is limited by the frame but vertically extends, as it is a natural landscape, often till the horizon. In significant scenes, we can see Yosana wandering away or towards the camera in her joyful explorations, or in contrast, Veni often hurrying to her work spot with clothes or rushing back to her home with Yosana by her side or trying to evade the men, warning her husband from joining them, as she is on her way to the river. While the actual space inhabited by Yosana parallels the expansive forest region with the river, Veni's is constrained and narrow, often contained by the enclosed path surrounded by the trees. In critical moments, like the rape sequence, she is framed from the back walking away from the camera. Her looks (back at the camera) allude to the constant fear caused and the threat posed by the thing behind her. The danger is personified by the men who intrude into her terrain to lure her husband away and violate her in isolation, thus breaking the casteist and social taboo of her "unseeability" when it does not fit their salacious nature. The relatively softer version of the woodcutter, too, expresses his depravity through the action of obnoxiously spitting (at her belonging).

It is remarkable that the only glimpse we have of the other side of the village, as opposed to the green but barren landscape inhabited by Veni and her family, has to do with the process of the construction of a temple for Maadathy, the village deity. It begins with the woman who is possessed during what seems to be a day of festivity and through the spirit of the goddess that has come to occupy her orders for a temple to be built. We see the village men and the priest standing in reverence in front of her and obeying her orders by promising a bigger temple (in place of the smaller one behind them). Since this is the only sequence, with a linear progression of scenes—the possession to the process of gathering the money and the building of the temple—that is in parallel cut with the quotidian lives of Veni and Yosana, and later, the tragic and violent gang rape of Yosana on the very day of the temple festival to install and consecrate the statue of the goddess in the newly erected temple, it attains significance as the space of casteist virulence and oppression which was unseeable for us from Veni's perspective thus far. The possession of the village woman provides the entry as it mirrors Veni's performance, bordering on the neurotic, albeit the difference is in Veni as a casteless and helpless woman around whom the tentacles of caste are increasingly tightening its demonic and inhumane grip. Her doppelganger, the privileged and "caste-full" woman, engulfed by the charged and frenetic people of her caste, marked by the devotion to the common deity, too, performs neurotically as the possessed woman to give vent to her feelings as a woman, who has shifted the gear from being a slave to the sacred at the intersectionality of gender and seems to regale herself at the obeisance

of the symbols of patriarchy—the enforcers of the illogical caste hierarchy, who are hypocritical and morally corrupt, recalling Lacan's words, "the subject in question is not that of the reflexive consciousness, but that of desire" (Lacan, 1998, p. 89). Nonetheless, she is intoxicated with caste, as her utterances are rhetorical. She has no uncertainty about the point of her enunciation at the intersection of caste/religion, thus recalling Ambedkar and Periyar's theorization of caste as intricately intertwined with Hindu religion (Ambedkar, 2011; Manoharan, 2020, p. 10). Her gender-bending is at the aural level since the possession offers her the "masculine" voice to order rather than suggest or request. Thus, she symbolizes the schizoid woman at the intersection of caste and gender. Her caste-fullness is in polarity to her powerlessness as a woman who could only connive and be an enabler of the casteist lechers around her. More importantly, she is a signifier of caste who has solidified without the renewal or re-institution of desire, and possession could be read as a momentary interruption.

Laura Mulvey's theorization of all gaze (man and women) as that of male while watching a Hollywood film is instructive here (Mulvey, 1975). However, one could stretch the linear understanding of the mastery of the (Lacanian) gaze further. In this case, too, one could argue the possessed woman is performing to the men around and their scopophilia. However, through her appropriation of agency through a spirit, she denies any pleasure of looking at her body, although she draws attention to her performance. Instead of being commodified on the screen, she inhabits the subjectivity of men to order and force their subservience to her roleplaying as an agent of the divine or the imbiber of divinity. Her ephemeral posture of power works because of the seamlessness between the point of address and reception. There are no questioning or doubts about her authority as the uniformity of caste and its unquestionable faith in rituals erases any possible rupture. Thus, caste (and religion) precedes and subsumes her identity as a woman, marking her as one full of caste pride/hegemony, flaunting her commitment to caste/clan through her being the chosen one of their *Kuladeivam/Kuldevata*—the deity for their *kul*/clan, thus acceptable to the men around her, as they comply with her orders by agreeing to build a temple instantaneously. It is important to note here that such a performance in a milieu of generally lecherous men, as exemplified by the actions of men in the film, is possible only under an altered state of being possessed by a spirit from elsewhere. To that extent, her agency is contained as she is not behaving on her own accord as a normative woman from a traditional village. Ultimately, she is allowed her freedom as a member of kul/clan or, more precisely, caste in this case. One could argue that this space, like the house of Norman Bates in *Psycho*, is gazing at the haunted Veni. But it complicates our understanding of the subject and the object. Here the inanimate space of the object is animated as it is occupied and marked by the (hierarchically above) caste/ people inhabiting it, thus occupying the subject position. The oppressed Veni and her family are objectified as exploitable and expendable.

Todd McGowan responding to, Joan Copjec's criticism on the misconception of the gaze and claim that "film theory operated a kind of 'Foucauldinization' of Lacanian theory" points to the way it changed from the idea of mastery in his early essay on the mirror stage to the way it becomes "objective rather than a subjective gaze" later

when it "becomes something that the subject encounters in the object." (Copjec, 1994, p. 19; McGowan, 2003, p. 28). After addressing the limitation of the reductive reading of Lacan regarding the mastery of the gaze and interpellation of the audiences into the dominant ideology, McGowan points to Lacan's investment in the mysterious/obscure object posited in the Other. For Lacan, "desire is the desire of the Other."

> The subject posits the objet petit a as the point of the Other's secret jouissance, but the objet petit a cannot be reduced to anything definitively identifiable in the Other. To paraphrase Lacan, this object is in the Other more than the Other. The jouissance embodied in this object remains out of reach for the subject because the object exists only insofar as it is out of reach (McGowan, 2003, p. 32).

This later Lacan's theorization of desire as motivated by objet petit a has relevance for the understanding of the core of *Maadathy*. One thing which remains uncontainable in the film is the jouissance of Yosana despite the tentacles of caste spreading around her, intruding into her innocent life, and finally raping her to death. Lacan describes jouissance as "not purely and simply the satisfaction of a need but as the satisfaction of a drive" (Lacan, 1997, p. 209). It is thus not reducible to the satisfaction of something instinctual. Literally, in the case of Yosana, it is exemplified in the way she cares for the lost baby donkey after the scene where she walks away with the shirt. She is more bothered about leading it back to its fold as she could not bear its isolation and tears. However, it would be normal if love were to be her primordial need at that age, particularly after the scene of her surreptitious body-watching. But her instinctual needs shift to caring for the foal, which seems in consonance with her love for the fishes, monkeys, and the rabbit. Her joie de vivre driven by empathy is in contrast to the death-drive driven aggression of the people from the other side. Only when we see the possessed women, *Maadathy* offers the reverse shot of the people in the village. Retroactively, it dawns on us it has been from their point of view—the people of caste—the casteless Yosana and her people have been showcased thus far. Though Yosana's strides in the outdoors on uneven terrains mirror her free-spirited interiority and are not anticipating any onlookers. On the contrary, the source of Veni's anxiety is revealed as the community which gathers around and is tied through caste. The signifier gets displaced from the woodcutter to the rapist to the libidinous and neurotic community, wherein a woman is allowed to perform in the public sphere only when there is an imbalance between the body and the spirit, particularly at the intersection of religion and the invocation of the spirit from above, alluding to the line between inclusivity and exclusivity marked by the irrationality of caste. What is absurd here is the yearning for the sensorial experience of a spirit that is otherwise untouchable and unseen by a community that wants to segregate people in the name of caste and the pretext of untouchability and unseeability. Veni's gazing back, however, is not troubling for them. Extending Mulvey's thesis, predicated on early Lacan's theorization of the mastery of the gaze, Veni's performance is in their comfort zone of lending herself to their subjective mastery of her gaze, thus enabling her cooptation into their ideology of an oppressive caste structure and hegemony. In contrast to Veni's submissive nature,

Yosana's pursuit of happiness and her jouissance troubles them as they cannot find the key to the secret of her jouissance, which they lack and want to possess, not unlike the alien spirit that comes to animate their dispirited life. Yosana's gaze eludes their grasp. "Even when the subject sees a "complete" image, something remains obscure; the subject cannot see the Other at the point at which it sees the subject. The gaze of the object gazes back at the subject, but this gaze is not present in the field of the visible." (McGowan, 2003, p. 33).

The framing of Yosana in the film exemplifies her as the object gazing back but "not present in the field of the visible." For instance, when she unexpectedly comes across someone, she hides behind an adjacent tree, and we see her getting admonished through the sound/voice. Such a reaction is seen in tandem with her mother as well. Later, when she is raped, it is nighttime, and she is in darkness—we could hear her exhausted and feeble pleas to the drunken young men to leave her. When she is with the monkeys, she is composed from a low angle. During other key moments, like when she is watching Panneer swim, we see her hide behind a cavernous rock and later under water. At home, too, she is sleeping as her mother and father stealthily move away when they feel amorous. When her grandmother is applying the herbal paste for healing her wounds, she is again composed in low light from the only source of the lantern inside the house. Similarly, we see her sneak away from the camera with the shirt, albeit joyfully. The mythos-driven representation of Yosana is framed within the film as a mise-en-abyme—the scene that prefigures the narrative trajectory of the film—when we see her own grandfather prostrating in front of her. However, we are precluded from knowing her response since the reaction shot is denied to us. Additionally, and more importantly for our discussion here, the source of Yosana's jouissance, the objet petit a, is obscured as she inhabits the realm of the sacred, particularly in the shot where we see a parrot resting on her left shoulder as she walks away from the camera, recalling the iconic goddesses like Madurai Meenakshi or Andal, and the profane, marked by her curiosity regarding male nudity, simultaneously. The desire of the Other thus remains indecipherable, though the milieu in which she lives, and the low lights and angles in which she is framed are suffused with sensuosity and desire. Yosana— the casteless object in this case to the caste-full subject, occupying the village sphere—disallows the perception of her (returning) gaze through the multiplicity of the porous/overlapping spaces she occupies, ranging from the physical and sensorial to the mythical.

McGowan points to the general tendency of Hollywood in using fantasy as a trope for closure and the resolution of the dichotomy between desire and gaze as encompassing its lack in objet petit a after analyzing *Duel* (dir. Spielberg, 1971) [Ibid., pp. 33–40] and *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, 1941) [pp. 35–37] for the way they remain true to the obscurity of the gaze by concealing the antagonist truck-driver and secret regarding the rosebud. Initially, film theory engaged with Lacan to interrogate "the relationship between fantasy and ideology (fantasy and the symbolic) rather than on the relationship between fantasy and the gaze (fantasy and the Real)" [Ibid., p. 39]. Therefore, fantasy was deemed negative as it offered the space for spectators to be deluded and interpellated, and the theorists took upon the responsibility of revealing the ideological underpinnings of the symbolic and alerting spectators to the dangers of

pleasure. However, according to McGowan, "when we focus on the gaze as objet petit a, fantasy ceases to be simply negative. Fantasy, for Lacan, has a double role in the experience of the subject" (p. 40). In *Maadathy* too, the fantasy of building a temple— an imagined space, an enormous and ornate alternative to the existing rudimentary functional one—is seen as the resolution to the issue of the obfuscation of the objet petit a—the secret of the object in the gaze posited by the community at large, outside Yosana's family. The possessed woman's desire is posited against Yosana's gaze, and the solution is sought through erecting a temple. As the signifier of the voice of the community, the possessed woman mobilizes through her rhetorical utterance the entire village to participate in collecting funds and building the temple. Since Yosana's divinity is already alluded to, the fantasy of the temple seems like a logical extension. Consider, for instance, the scene where after performing a small ritual, the team from the village with the priest leave after having measured and chosen the piece of rock for what seems to be the first pillar of the temple to be constructed. After they move, carrying the chosen piece of rock covered with the yellow cloth, we see Yosana arriving at the rock and looking down at them from the top. Her attention is drawn to the offering for the goddess they left–the guava, pomegranates, and bananas. Yosana's acceptance of what is offered to the goddess is juxtaposed with her jouissance of relishing the fruits and sharing them with her friends, the monkeys, who relish them like her. The saintly (offering) and the sensorial (gratification) are juxtaposed in positing Yosana as grounded and simultaneously ethereal—one of the ways the objet petit a is obscured. However, objet petit a itself is a product of misrecognition, particularly when we think of it as presence rather than as absence in a subject:

> Desire for Lacan, as it is manifest in the mechanisms of language, is the attempt to attain or understand that which is missing from the being of the subject, which is the *objet a*. The *objet a* is that around which desire circulates, that upon which fantasy is constructed, and that which is the product of *méconnaissance*. (Lacan, 1977, p. 22).

> (Hendrix, 2019)

Therefore, between desire and its lack, as objet petit a, in gaze, fantasy is invoked for resolution. In a film like *Schindler's List* (dir. Spielberg, 1993), the protagonist Oskar Schindler himself plays the fantasy figure to resolve the obscured gaze of the Nazi commandant Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes). McGowan details how "Goeth's gaze does not remain an impossible object throughout the film. Through the [father] figure of Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson), Spielberg domesticates this gaze and thereby deflects its trauma" (p. 38). Schindler is thus able to free a thousand Jews and shield us from Goeth and "the Real through the enactment of a fantasy" (p. 39). But as detailed by McGowan, like in the case of *Blue Velvet* (dir. David Lynch, 1986), fantasy need not always be regressive, deployed in the service of ideology (pp. 41–42). "Even though fantasy is a retreat from the gaze and a screen obscuring the gaps in the symbolic order, cinema has the ability to employ fantasy in a radical way" (p. 43). It could also enable our encounter with the gaze, like in the case of *Maadathy,* wherein

the domestication of the gaze of Yosana is denied, despite the increasing aggression against her, from the verbal to the physical. Her violent death also provides the transition of her family members to the public sphere of the space around the temple, right at the heart of the village. Until then, as spectators, we are the witnesses to the events on both sides—the caste-full village, inhabited by people full of their caste arrogance/ aggression, and the casteless Yosana and her family with a porous home posited in the outskirts amidst a forest with a river running through it. But Yosana's traumatic death erases the divide and paves the way for her family to directly encounter the village people in front of the newly built temple. The gaze of the community looking at Yosana's family as they mourn their irreplaceable loss is emphasized in this sequence.

It resonates with the catastrophic preceding sequence, wherein Yosana's rape and death are parallelly cut with the rituals in the newly constructed temple, signifying the closure of the gap between the village and the outskirts/forest area and the folding of the disparate places, revolving around Yosana's home in the forest and the village sphere, into the space in front of the temple where villagers are forced to see and react to the unseeable Yosana's family's lamentation of her loss. When the sequence begins, we see Yosana with the shirt (of Paneer) in her hand, taking shelter under a cavernous rock. After a while, as it gets darker, we see four young men arriving with bottles of liquor and empty coconut shells, and they start drinking. Through their discussion, we come to know that Paneer and his rival, who quarreled and fought because of money, before realizing that the village headman had cheated them during the fund collection for the temple, are also part of the group. However, they come together, ironically, in their show of masculinity against the helpless Yosana. As they take turns to violently rape her, it is dark, and with the torchlight on their hand, we get a feeble glimpse of Yosana before we see the torch rolling over on the ground. The fleeting close-ups of her frightened and quivering face covered with her hair are juxtaposed with sound from the speaker in the temple where the song praises the hair and the tresses, and the heart and the (thousand) eyes of the goddess Maadathy. Paradoxically, she remains blind to the plight of Yosana, who is pleading with her savage rapists to let her go. In this scene, too, Yosana as object gaze is rendered obscure through her disorientation due to terror and dismay and the simultaneous glorification of the body parts of the deity—desecration and consecration are juxtaposed.

Thereafter, the depleted and ebbing Yosana musters enough of her feeble energy to crawl and climb over a nearby donkey, almost dropping dead on it. The donkey transports her to the village.[4] Here one could argue that the fantasy regarding the temple reaches its limits. If the temple signifies the most unpolluted of the space dreamed by the people of the village as their ideal spot regarding purity, the presence of the corpse of Yosana at its entrance creates a rupture. Additionally, the heartrending lament of her mother and grandmother not only intrudes and creates a rupture in the dividing line regarding touch and visibility but by their transgression into the temple space pollute

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[4]The parallels with the donkey in Bresson's acclaimed *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966) are striking here: Both the donkeys "bear the burden of mankind" (Vaux, 2004). See for details, on Bresson and *Au Hasard Balthazar*: Vaux, Sara Anson (2004), Divine skepticism: the films of Robert Bresson, Retrieved Nov. 15. 2021, from https://www.thefreelibrary.com/ Divine+skepticism%3A+the+films+of+Robert+Bresson.-a0125407684

and blur the boundaries of the sanctum sanctorum of caste and its hierarchy/structure, punctuated by the cursing of the community by Veni and her mother-in-law, who throw their handful of mud on them. The caste-full people overcome the momentary inertia due to the shock of having been touched by the untouchable and seen the unseeable, and they call upon each other for responding to the shattering of social norms and taboo by violently punishing Veni and her family. Thus, the fantasy regarding a space of purity reaches its limits and snaps on its edges, mainly because of the presence of Yosana as the stain. Such an image of the limit of fantasy enables an "encounter with the gaze." We see the goddess whose eyes (in the newly sculpted statue) were opened through a ceremonial ritual the night before, watching the pristine pillars and roof (carved out of stone) collapse around her. Her face too gradually morphs into that of Yosana—the Maadathy now. The free spirit of Yosana finds a seated/stable body in the statue of the deity: the object (which returns the) gaze becomes visible now. Nonetheless, the jouissance of Yosana/Maadathy will not allow her circumscribing within the narrow space of the interiors marked by the pillars and the roof—the key to the secret of her jouissance far exceeding the limiting and dichotomous idea of purity. Here it is important to note Lacan's engagement with painting, particularly the anamorphosis—the distortion in art that requires a particular angle or device to view— in Holbein's *Ambassadors*. The large skull depicted by Holbein clouds the painting and is decipherable as such only from a "radically oblique angle." (Iskin, 1997, p. 55).

In *Maadathy*, the precarity of Yosana and her subjectivity casts a shadow disallowing our perception of any intent look. Furthermore, unlike in a painting, or a sardine can, which is static, the movement of the camera is compounded by the meandering subjectivity of Yosana in *Maadathy*. Only when her face/head is morphed onto the body of the statue does the slanted view become possible due to the fissure in the transposing of the human with the inanimate. More importantly, the encounter with the gaze leads to the eruption of the Real: as the entire village, drunk with caste pride, aggressively marches with (mud and stones in) their clenched fists toward Veni and family, they are frozen and simultaneously blinded. It is not possible to belong to a caste and see the reality around as it is, uncolored by prejudice and irrationality. Yosana as Maadathy, therefore, renders the world unseeable to the caste-full people. The people propelled by their death drive, exemplified by their repeated (and only) acts of aggression, finally turn in inside and self-destruct themselves, as explicated by Freud (Smith, 2010). Indeed, they cannot have a clue about the world of Yosana throbbing with life, let alone the secret of her desires. Caste as a signifier of the horror of darkness within human hearts blinds people to see the unfillable void in their objective to oppress and destroy, thus, leading them to rape and kill and look in futility to the key for jouissance elsewhere, and in envy try to appropriate the unfathomable/ uncontainable.

Nevertheless, the Real escapes language or signification in terms of the profound impact it produces. Particularly in the end when, as part of the framing device to conclude the story, we see the woman who comes looking for her husband who had gone to the nearby thatched hut to get a piece of cloth for his (suddenly) menstruating wife, at the very beginning. We discover him, too, blinded among the people of the

village with a red bloodstain on the back of his shoulder in his white shirt, frozen in the concluding painting—the narrative had begun with the first one in the row. The bloodstain, a signifier of the menstrual blood, thus, runs as a subtext providing the canvas to weave a narrative on the jouissance, of an adolescent girl, which eludes the grasp of an unwaveringly casteist society that is blind and frozen/dead. Finally, as the young wife rushes out in horror from the thatched hut, the camera pans on the mountain to frame the tranquil Yosana, quietly standing there at a distance, uncontainable and undeifiable.

To conclude, I would like to refer to Roja Suganthy-Singh's insightful review of *Maadathy* (2021, p. 409). Recalling the free and wandering spirit of Yosana and her intricate ties with the fauna, she points to the presaging of the alluring "cave-tomb" by Maadathy's narrative where all the apprehensions of her mother turn into reality in a casteist society: "Ever since Yosana emerged from her womb as a girl, a Dalit girl, a Dalit Vannar girl—she knew that the stars lined up in that order to determine her fate." While her mother's fears come true to haunt us regarding the inescapable stranglehold of caste, the concluding shot of the "water lover" Yosana among the mountains, her natural abode, recalls the rabbits, quails, monkeys, donkeys, and the parrot, and punctuate her ecofeminism, thus alluding to the other much-needed and hopeful alliances to realize the objective of Babasaheb Ambedkar regarding the annihilation of caste.

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Pariyerum Perumal and a Periyarite Note on Political Engagement

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Abstract

What was in the rhetoric of Periyar that moved an entire people in a direction that has continuing political relevance? How does his style respond to concerns about how we may engage within contemporary political formations, especially given that his work continues to resist being co-opted by his detractors? Analysing the formal elements of a 1931 speech by Periyar, delivered at Nagapattinam, I investigate the movements in his rhetoric which repeatedly mobilises the self as a site of political action. I argue that Periyar's presentation of the self provides a distinct avenue of political engagement that substantiates the notion of inner conflict as crucial to the development of the titular hero in the 2018 Tamil film *Pariyerum Perumal*. Methodologically, I draw on the work of the relational psychoanalytic thinker D.W. Winnicott; in particular, his concept of 'playing', which refers to the creative moment of passionate immediate engagement with the other that opens up a potent space of understanding and is vital for survival. I show how charting out the various dimensions of this moment of creative play in these two works is crucial to further our understanding of the politics of Periyar and the journey of Pariyerum Perumal.

Keywords

caste, psychoanalysis, Periyar, *Pariyerum Perumal*, literary analysis, film studies

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I may have unconsciously sought respect, but the truth is I actually pursued only infamy for myself. Be that as it may.

– Periyar (1931, p. 279; translation mine)

These words taken from a speech by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879–1973; hereafter, Periyar) delivered at Nagapattinam on 3 October 1931 are a remarkable instance of a crack in an otherwise coherent image of the self that he is usually understood as presenting to his readers (or listeners, in this particular case). Following the tentative nod to a possible unconscious desire for respect from others, Periyar states that his actions which instigated outrage were motivated by the desire for disrepute. It is fascinating that Periyar embodied this struggle of opposing forces within himself, and it appears as fissures in rare instances. The space opened up by this quirk serves the narrative arc in his rhetoric which repeatedly mobilises the self as a site of political action. The work with the self in this speech provides a distinct avenue of political engagement that, I argue, substantiates the notion of inner conflict as crucial to character development in Mari Selvaraj's 2018 Tamil film *Pariyerum Perumal*. In the first section of this article, I present the critical literature on films, caste and psychoanalysis that have been formative to my thinking and the writing of this article. In the second section, I offer a reading of the structure of the film and in the process tease out the nature of political engagement that the lead character grows into through working out his cognitive crisis. Drawing on the formal learnings from the film, I then closely read the movements in Periyar's rhetoric to show how the nature of engagement delineated through the mind of Pariyan has been demonstrated in practice. I conclude this article by sketching the stakes of this argument.

The Critical Literature

It is imperative at the outset to present the theoretical literature which this article builds on and enters into dialogue with. My method of critical engagement is literary, that is, close-reading for form and content, and in this article, I stage a conversation between a particular film and a particular speech, both engaging and modifying the discourse around caste through a particular articulation of the self. Therefore, I rely on a small section of the wide and sprawling secondary literature on films, caste and selfhood from the Tamil land and beyond, and borrow from disciplinary contributions in film theory, sociology/anthropology, rhetoric and psychoanalysis.

Tamil films have had a long history with social movements. S. Theodore Baskaran, prominent film historian, has painstakingly documented the early history of Tamil cinema in *The Message Bearers* (1981) and *The Eye of the Serpent* (1996). He notes that political consciousness seeped into Tamil film-making as early as 1929, when A. Narayanan's film *Dharmapathini* took up Gandhi's campaign for prohibition by depicting how addiction to alcohol disrupts domestic peace, and was quickly followed by bringing to screen the anti-untouchability rhetoric enshrined in the story of the medieval Bhakti poet Nandanar in Raja Sandow's *Nandanar or the Elevation of the Downtrodden* in 1930 (Baskaran, 1981, p. 85).

Baskaran documents the local elite's revulsion to the cinematic medium in these early years and shows how, with the quickening pace of the nationalist movement, filmmakers and actors (along with the established theatre firmament) who vociferously supported political activities soon became a 'powerless elite' (Ibid., p. 98). With the Tamil film reaching and beginning to cater to the aspirations of the large illiterate masses by the mid-twentieth century, and freedom from colonial rule at hand, Baskaran notes, nationalist fervour was supplanted in favour of a distinctive Tamil consciousness, and this reached its apogee in Kothamangalam Subbu's 1953 film *Avvaiyar*, which collapsed at least three distinct historical personages into one legendary poetess who also symbolized Mother Tamil deriving legitimacy from Murugan who is presented unequivocally as the deity of the Tamils (1996, pp. 22–23). This was soon to be followed by what Baskaran calls 'the era of the dialogue-writer and the cinema of dissent', marked by propaganda films written and produced by scholar-politician screen and stage writers most of whom would soon form the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party. There were also formal innovations unique to the landscape that moulded the trajectory of the content of the Tamil film: when rural electrification became a reality, Baskaran observes, the classical and folk traditions began to be amalgamated in varying degrees (1996, p. *xv*); and with the ascendancy of ideologues in filmmaking, 'speech' became a pivotal rhetorical device that the cinematic medium exploited to its fullest potential (Ibid., p. 34). The dialogues and speeches in films such as R. Krishnan and S. Panju's *Parasakthi* (1952) and L.V. Prasad's *Manohara* (1954), dialogues penned by five-time Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M. Karunanidhi, were in terms of the camera angle and forceful delivery 'meant for crowds in a political rally' (Baskaran, 1996, p. 67). Speech and film, then, have an entwined and enmeshed history in Tamil politics, and I take this formal insertion of speech within films as a guide for the near-filmic momentum I demonstrate in Periyar's speech later in the essay; that is, borrowing on methods of reading film content to closely read that speech. This is where we will leave a historian's perspective on Tamil films and move to another historian's perspective on the history of the Dravidian movement which gave birth to the DMK. It is only appropriate at this juncture to introduce the colossus of the movement, Periyar.

The radical anti-caste iconoclast Periyar continues to be an intellectual and rhetorical behemoth in Tamil civil society since the early twentieth century. Born to a wealthy landowning family in 1879, Periyar cultivated an acute political awareness as a child and took up political posts early on in his working life despite missing out on formal education. In 1919, he began making a mark in the larger political movements of the time when he joined the Indian National Congress (INC). After six years of active involvement in the initiatives of the party, he resigned from the Congress in 1925. Precipitating this break away from what was perhaps the most impactful counter-colonial force in the subcontinent was the inability of the party's organisational apparatus to take a decisive stand against caste discrimination. This felt need for a critical inward gaze in social movements would come to mark his over fifty-year-long writing and lecturing life that was dedicated to subjecting the society he lived in and its political formations to sustained critical scrutiny. No

one was spared his incisive analysis, neither his detractors, nor his supporters, but most importantly not Periyar himself. The movement he began in 1925 came to be known variously as the self-respect movement, after the philosophy it espoused; or the Dravidian movement, after the ethno-linguistic turn the politics of the movement later took. Periyar had dissolved an erstwhile electoral political party which he led called South Indian Liberal Federation (or the Justice Party) in 1944 and established the non-electoral party Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) that same year, with the sole aim of realising the mission of the self-respect movement and eradicating caste, among other social evils such as the subjugation of women. In 1949, a large faction of the DK broke away and formed the DMK ostensibly to protest Periyar's marriage to the much younger Maniammai, but actually due to a fundamental disagreement about contesting electoral politics. The DMK would further split into a series of parties in the coming decades, but that party and one breakaway party—the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)—have successfully managed to stay in power in Tamil Nadu since 1967.

Since we have seen that the movement founded by Periyar has consistently worked on the plank of anti-caste resistance, it would be instructive to learn about the nature of the persistent and pernicious enemy that movement was engaging with: Brahminism, the ideological script of power that normalises caste order. In her speech/ article 'Brahminism and the Anxieties of History' (2002/2015), V. Geetha documents how Brahminism flexibly worked its way through challenges to its existence in the face of late colonial modernity, Independence and later. She details the critical moments when anti-caste intellectuals such as Iyothee Thassar, Periyar, S. Gurusamy and Ambedkar mobilized the tools of modernity to challenge the authority of Brahminism and demonstrates how even if Brahminism could not sustain its fraudulent logic, it creatively engaged with these issues of difference and inequality and thereby preserved its potency to prevail till this day. Under the colonial government, when Brahminism encountered legal and social injunctions which granted privileges and capital to castes lower in the caste hierarchy, it mobilised a rhetoric of reform that ensured the relevance of scriptural authority, only decrying its mistaken interpretation and practice. When Brahminism encountered legislative reform, it turned the problem on its head by claiming legitimacy under the rubric of nationalism. When the subcontinent was inching towards freedom, Geetha notes that Periyar's challenge to a narrow notion of freedom without self-respect for the cause of an independent nation would only result in the institutionalisation of a casteist nation state. This was met with Gandhi's formulation of fighting the evils of the caste system as an inner ethical and spiritual struggle for caste-Hindus. Thereby, according primacy to the morally-aware individual self of the caste-Hindu, who has to convince no one else but himself. In both these avenues, Geetha notes that the manoeuvres that Brahmin political agents carried out were in essence 'an exercise in self-regard' (2002/2015, p. 17). She uses the term 'narcissism', which has striking resonances in the psychoanalytic literature, when she argues for how Brahminism encountered the self in all these problematic sites and did not permit its critique but rushed to preserve it and shore up its hegemony: 'The peculiar narcissism that felt implicated in all matters from the sexual to the social, the

political to the spiritual, proved extremely significant: it granted the Brahmin the right to define and redefine the social world' (Ibid., p. 22). In other words, it appears as if the Brahmanical subject repeatedly wondered and enacted the answer to the question, 'How can I think of myself as a modern individual and yet reconcile my antiquated casteist beliefs?' It is this notion of the self, as coherent individual bearing rights, refusing to engage, that Periyar seems to puncture, and I will return to this later in this article.

Tamil films have taken a similar route along the trajectory of this conception of self-regard that Geetha delineates. Damodaran and Gorringe (2017) note that the political message was Dravidian in Tamil films until the 1970s, where the emphasis lay on the valour of the protagonist who would defend the vulnerable. Much of the audience's reception to the 'image-trap' of these films were to identify with their abject position in need of rescue, as M.S.S. Pandian (1992) argues in the case of the three-time Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M.G. Ramachandran (MGR). Damodaran and Gorringe's central argument, however, is that films since 1985 are replete with thematic and visual structures which move away from exclusive focus on the hero and extend into his community, i.e. films begin to valorise the intermediate castes as a community and the authors refer to it as nativist/neo-nativist cinema. The valour noted in the Dravidian (and MGR period) in this mode was now accented with the intermediate caste hero's honour which rests on preserving the family and caste loyalties and thereby violently marginalizes Dalits. They call this potent brand of films 'Madurai Formula Films', which celebrate violence and argue for social dominance of one particular caste—in this case, the Thevars: '[the film] has fuelled caste conflicts, resulting in an exaggerated sense of caste pride and an emphasis on caste symbolism that has periodically pockmarked the southern regions of the state with violence, and continues to inform caste politics today' (Damodaran and Gorringe, 2017, p. 22). The visual and spoken language of these films reify stereotypical notions of patriarchal inheritance and constitute in the Tamil polity what it means to belong to a particular caste; in other words, they reconfigure notions of selfhood in the service of violent ends within members claiming affiliation to those assertive castes.

The 2010s mark a significant moment in Tamil filmmaking, when directors identifying with their Dalit identity began making films that secured popular support beyond rigid identarian demographics, while also garnering critical acclaim. Karthick Ram Manoharan (2021) makes an argument about conceptions of the self with regard to the Dalit heroes in two recent Tamil films by Pa Ranjith, *Kabali* (2016) and *Kaala* (2018). Drawing on the work of the psychoanalytic theorist Frantz Fanon, Manoharan focuses on how the titular central character of *Kabali* identifies himself as Tamil, a universalist position in the context of a film that focuses on the struggles of Malaysian Tamils, when he is constantly viewed by both his adversaries as Dalit. On *Kaala*, Manoharan's point draws on another universalism that is predicated on the nature of the Tamil community's self-definition vis-à-vis the *Ramayana* through the interventions of the Dravidian movement, epitomized in Pulavar Kuzhandai's 1946 work *Ravana Kaviyam*. That this aspect of a Tamil imaginary, a fictive mythology created to serve the political demands of a movement, gets creatively adapted in a

film on Dalit oppression as *Kaala* lays claim to a universalism that exceeds narrow identity politics, Manoharan argues. The central problem with a narrowly-conceived brand of identity politics, after all, is the definitive certainty with which selfhood is constructed, without any permission or accounting for quirks or inconsistencies. This is along the lines of the 'real site' of untouchability that Sarukkai models for us as the 'person who refuses to touch the untouchable' (2012, p. 186); that is, untouchability can be located in the visible Brahmin self who finds meaning through the Dalit self that has to be made invisible. The identarian recognition and encounter of the Brahmin self is predicated on a violent erasure of the humanity of the Dalit self. How then do we engage with our own selves without reducing the other? The fabulous *Pariyerum Perumal* is an answer in engaging anti-caste politics creatively with frameworks of the community that the long history of Tamil cinema has generated, and arguably far surpasses all recent Tamil films in granting a conflicted interiority to its central character without participating in the politics of erasure of the other. In my reading *Pariyerum Perumal* resonates with a distinctive theorisation of engagement with the other—called 'playing'—in the works of the relational psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott to whose contribution we will now turn.

One can read for Winnicottian 'play' when one is looking for engagement, interaction or confrontation, and the anxieties and resolutions incumbent upon such contact. Winnicott (1971) draws on the children's world of playing, kids play with each other (or with a toy or with an idea, such as 'look there's the crow, eat this quickly!') only if they believe in the creative potential of the space they are capable of building. Within a facilitating environment, the child tries to overwhelm the other person/thing/ idea confronting it, and emerges in delight when that object has survived (Ibid.): the child invests the faculties of its mind to creatively imagine the space between the self and the other, and it plays with the object, i.e. the other, and is delighted when that object survives that aggression. This relationship with the surviving other and the creativity it entails is essential even in adulthood. What follows then is that we are able to play only when we do not doubt the stability of our relationship, and in that moment of play we try and test endurance. This is how meaning is made, belongingness is forged and beliefs are instituted. This moment of creativity, according to Winnicott, 'belongs to being alive' (1971, p. 91). In other words, every waking moment of our life is marked by our playing with people, with ideas, with struggles.

How am I working with this notion in the context of political engagement and caste? I would like to approach this question with the help of a reading of the poignant note that Rohith Vemula left behind. This work by a 'glorious thing made of stardust' urges us to re-evaluate our practice of engagement. Let me cite a few lines from his letter and attempt to say what they mean in this context:

> I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan.
> I loved Science, Stars, Nature, but then I loved people without knowing that people have long since divorced from nature. Our feelings are second handed. Our love is constructed. Our beliefs colored. Our originality valid through artificial art. (Vemula, 17 January 2016)

Rohith was denied a place to stay by his university. The state denied the scholarship he deserved. The society denied the dignity he was entitled. But, more importantly, all of us denied the space we could have facilitated for his creativity to emerge. He wanted to be a writer of fine prose. He wanted to think and write about the natural world, and he was disappointed when people around him had closed off their rich inner worlds to him. All art is artificial to Vemula because the art that engagement outside of ourselves (i.e. with nature) brings has been forgotten. Winnicott says that the decision to end one's life is because one is unable to creatively make sense of the struggle for making meaning, when one is unable to play. At that decisive moment one only wants to end the struggle; one is exhausted. That is why on the Winnicottian couch 'When a patient cannot play the therapist must attend to the major symptom before interpreting fragments of behaviour' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 64). If we are unable to play, we must begin to learn to play to stay alive. In the world of the Dalit protagonist of *Pariyerum Perumal*, we encounter this struggle for survival in the face of multiple attempts at extinguishing his life, and Pariyan continues to fight it out physically where physical force is necessary but more importantly with mental fortitude when structural forces threaten Pariyan's sense of self-regard. That is, while he has to face the threat of death every day, his inner world needs to grow into a life of its own because the prevalent societal forces prevent him from realising the wholeness of his interiority, enabling him to be able to creatively engage with the world outside him and play.

Before we delve deeper into the film, it is necessary to consider another strain of thinking on the powers of persuasion of the Dravidian movement that has informed this article. We began this critical survey with impressing the genre innovation of filmic speeches in the Dravidian model of filmmaking, but what do we know of the vitality of public speeches that were delivered to political audiences that the movement inherited? In his study of orations just before the emergence of the self-respect movement from 1905–1919, Bernard Bate argues that vernacular oratory 'played an infrastructural role in the transformation of Tamil society and the production of modern forms of politics, or at least the politics that came to dominate the twentieth century' (2013, p. 146). He rues the lack of scholarly work on this form of political rhetoric and attributes it to the assumption that speech is 'natural and pan-human, that people must have always orated' (p. 160). His argument, however, shows that the innovations in stage-speaking enabled a politics that took political action, which was until then confined to the elites, to the masses and 'entailed a new kind of agency on the part of an entirely new genre of political actor, the vernacular politician, who could now turn toward and evoke the participation of people formerly thought to be irrelevant at best and irrational and dangerous at worst' (Ibid., p. 162). In an earlier magisterial volume titled *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic*, Bate had focused on what he refers to as the 'centamil revolution' as he trains his eye and ears to the displacement of the colloquial register of the diglossic Tamil language with the high register (*centamil*) in public oratory and how that was necessitated to embody 'a "proper" distinction between leaders and the people, a political distinction between the DMK and the Congress Party, and a civilizational distinction between the Dravidian and the Indo-Aryan civilizations' (Bate, 2009, p. 183). This new mode of speech, Bate observes, different from the

unornamented speech of Periyar and in so weaning away from their political mentor, the Dravidianist speakers invented a neo-classical tradition that was tied to notions of antiquity as a way to adapt to the changing circumstances of confrontation: now they were no longer dealing with the British, they were struggling with their own in a quest for control and power. Bate adds that there is a formative paradox in this scenario: how can a movement that would go on to garner populist support effectively wielding this elite language? He shows us that the legacy of the centamil revolution relied on persuading its constituents that the modern turn the paradigm took was not really a succession of tradition but rather a reaffirmation of the old Tamil tradition which in the context of the nascent pan-Indian national identity was new; in other words, the modernity that the Dravidian paradigm entailed was a 'newness of old things' (Ibid., p. *xvi*). This modernity was working against the modernity ushered in by Periyar through his ordinary language. The site of that modernity enjoined by Periyar, a consequence of subjecting social structures and constructions of the self to reason, in my view was the self. This self—contradictory and conflicted, because of the essential tyranny of reason—can be satisfactorily read and examined when the language is not affected, i.e. when it is shorn of linguistic acrobatics that derive its force more from ingenuity than honesty: much similar to the need for free association as a prerequisite for a rewarding therapeutic relationship on the psychoanalytic couch.

The Central Crisis in *Pariyerum Perumal*

Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* is the story of the titular Dalit character (hereafter, Pariyan, played by Kathir) who enters law college, befriends his classmate Jo (Anandhi), and ends up facing the wrath of Jo's father (G. Marimuthu) and cousin Sankaralingam (Lijeesh) because they see him as growing too close to her. How he survives the attempts to humiliate and murder is the narrative arc of the rest of the film. This summary, however, does not map on to the three-act structure of the film. If we consider the villain figure in the elderly Thatha Maistry (Karate Venkatesan), who is commissioned to kill boys and girls, men and women across castes who have fallen in love, then we would read the romantic entanglement of Pariyan and Jo as the central conflict of the film. We would of course be on stable ground, because we could draw on the prevailing violence surrounding inter-caste unions, and the travails entailed in inter-caste romance would appear to be the force propelling the narrative. However, we do not witness any instances of desire flowing between the lead characters that could even be remotely construed as imbued with the conventional tropes of erotic or conjugal enrapture. In fact, for the entirety of the film, Pariyan is practically asexual; he is not constructed in the mould of the hypermasculine figure of desire that has come to dominate Indian cinema, he sternly opposes his friend Anand's (Yogi Babu) efforts at characterising his relationship with Jo as romance, and encounters the limits of everyone's understanding when a friendly teacher reads their relationship as romantic love. The flow of desire, instead, is from Pariyan towards self-preservation and development; it is as if the character is consciously working on building his arc through the narrative. He joins college because he is falsely implicated in an instance

of theft, and his mentor-grandfather imbues in him the desire to study law, in order to be able to do some good for his society. If at all there is desire, it is to survive—the personal extending into the communal—through the workings of his mind. This single-minded determination looking forward into inner development finds its first obstacle in language. During his first class in college, in what is ironically an instance of looking back—the History of Courts course—he is faced with incomprehensibility. He just cannot understand a word the teacher says because she lectures in English. He is subjected to ridicule for his honest and forthright request to be taught in a language he and indeed everyone in class is used to. Driving home this point even further is yet another round of singular humiliation he (and Anand, albeit initially) faces at the hands of the professor of English. Since he is unable to follow the notes dictated in class, he pretends to jot down points and instead draws rows of circles in his notebook. The professor snatches his notebook and asks Jo to read what he has written. When she says she cannot read circles on a piece of paper, the Professor says out aloud 'Read what he has written: Egg … Egg … Egg … Egg … Egg … Egg …' The class erupts in laughter and Pariyan is humiliated for occupying a seat in the college through reservations. It is this set up that brings upon his arc an interaction with Jo for the first time, when he approaches her and she offers to help him with English and follows it through the rest of the film. Pariyan's engagement in this first act is unabashedly motivated towards working on himself—narratively cemented in a scene by his insensitivity to Jo's bleeding hands, when he is only concerned if she would be able to write the assignment on his behalf as she had promised. The incident propelling the narrative begins at around the mid-point in the narrative when he is humiliated, thrashed, urinated upon and threatened by Jo's family for simply coming too close to her, when he accepts an invitation from Jo to attend a wedding in her family. This conflict is presented again in the register of incomprehension—Pariyan cannot understand the visceral hatred of people he has just met in his life. Since Jo does not get to meet him at the wedding, thanks to her family locking him up in a room in an attempt to break his spirit, she confronts him in class and asks why he did not turn up. Pariyan lies to her. It is in this scene that we first see an inkling of desire in the register of the romance flowing from Jo to Pariyan. She is angry and annoyed with him that he cannot relate to her feelings, and furiously walks away saying they will not talk to each other until she wants to talk to him herself. This expression of desire follows casteist logic—the right order of conduct always flows in a dictatorial route from the upper caste body to the lower caste body—and at this moment the logic of realism is bent in favour of conflict in Pariyan's inner world.

When Jo walks away, the classroom has been purged of its furniture and the blackboard is filled with rows of circles, the pivotal visual metaphor for incomprehensibility and tool of humiliation early in the film. This conflict is instantiated with the surrealist song '*Naan yaar*' ('Who am I?') and the arrival into the frame of Pariyan's pet dog, Karuppi, whose killing at the hands of an upper caste gang we witness in gory detail right at the outset of the film. The artistic genre of surrealism attempts to harness the creative potential of the unconscious by what may seem an irrational assemblage of symbols and otherworldly realities. With this formal break in

the narrative, the film asks us to focus on the turmoil in Pariyan's inner world. This crisis of the self in the face of attempts at his life is resolved at the end when he is able to tell Jo's father, 'As long as you are the way you are and expect me to be the dog, nothing will change. Everything will remain the same.' It is towards this realisation that the film wants us to reach. The film neither presents this resolution as preserving the status quo, nor as a refusal to admit change in the social fabric (i.e. the persistence of casteism through altered mechanisms), but as a realisation that the fight is still on for Pariyan. That Pariyan may yet have to face attempts on his life in the hands of Jo's family tomorrow; that no change has happened outside of him but a world of change has occurred inside him. It is on this premise, that the film asks us to do a reading of the shifts within Pariyan's mind which I would like to investigate through two conversations.

In the first interaction from the film I would like to analyse, Jo meets Pariyan outside the hospital where his father has been admitted after being jeered at by Jo's cousin and his friends for being effeminate, stripped, thrashed and made to run for his life. Jo closes her eyes and says she doesn't have the courage to look at him in the face and express what she then says:

> I've told my dad, mom, brother, everyone at home how much I like you. I don't know what they all feel about that. But I have feelings. I keep feeling that I should be with you. That I should come and live with your father, mother, everyone in your family. It is wrong of me to think all of this about you, without your permission. I know. But I should tell you this someday, shouldn't I? That's why I've told you this today, with my eyes shut. You don't have to respond to any of this. My desire is only this: Can we go back to being the way we were? The first day I saw you; you were sitting in the last bench and introduced yourself as Pariyerum Perumal BABL with a line on the top. Will you be that Pariyan? Tell me you will be that Pariyan, only then I will open my eyes. (translation mine)

We will be able to note the significance of the construction of Jo as a caste-blind dominant caste heroine in this film that is deeply embedded in working against the steady build-up of caste forces. In narratively literalising her blindness the film is conscious and incisive in its study that the hero is inexplicably torn between choosing to burst her bubble of blindness and maintaining the fiction because Pariyan sees her as his only ray of hope (post-caste future). To extend this further, when we consider the placement of this dialogue, it is after this scene that Pariyan faces what is perhaps the first instance of him fighting back without running away from the threat of destruction. Pariyan would physically overpower Thatha Maistry, fights back when Jo's nephew and his friends turn up to finish the work Thatha Maistry couldn't do, and struggles with the very-human urge to kill any and all of his assailants. Returning to the scene being analysed, as viewers we are privy to Thatha Maistry's assignment to murder Pariyan, and we see him hovering in the margins of the scene, blurred out by the blindness staged by Jo. Both Jo and Pariyan are unaware of being observed by Thatha Maistry. One may argue that Jo's playful language in this dialogue and her character

arc—which is all but a definitive point in this film—both point to the conventional fair-skinned heroine fantasy that popular contemporary Tamil films are replete with. However, I would urge us to look at the scene as depicting an adult who is ignorant, childish, at times brattish. Importantly, Jo is fearful of her sexuality, but determined to make something of the charge with which that desire possesses her. She is incapable of understanding the world around her, but is invested in carving out a potential space of creativity outside of her. The internal contradiction in the speech excerpted above is remarkable in staging a moment of play: she basically says, I will tell you without telling you that I desire you and that should create a future that is the past. To Pariyan that is incomprehensible; he has outgrown that past, how can he grow down? He smiles through his tears endearingly. That smile, in this reading, is representative of him having found in his interlocutor a playing child, and the subtle realisation that he has just learned a new detail about Jo and, in his mind, he has to shift in the way he engages the pernicious problem she presents.

The second scene I'd like to read is the climax, which is an interaction between Pariyan and Jo's father. After having been at the receiving end of multiple assaults on his life and severe violence in the hands of goons hired by Jo's father, Pariyan manages to escape alive. Jo is unaware of all of this and brings together Pariyan and her father to a meeting over tea. When she goes to buy tea for them, Jo's father repentantly asks Pariyan why he hasn't revealed any of his struggles to Jo. If we follow the interactions between Pariyan and Jo's father in a previous scene, we know that Pariyan has already answered this question. Perched atop the hood of Jo's father's car, Pariyan tells him that the love of his daughter is a charity bestowed on him by Pariyan's conscious act of not turning Jo against her own father by telling her the truth. But, then, in the climax, Jo's father and indeed we as audiences ask him again: Why doesn't Pariyan turn Jo against her father? Pariyan gives us another explanation. He says that he knows how much Jo loves her father and that is the reason. Both these reasons border on paying homage to the edifice of heteronormative patriarchy that fuels the villain in the narrative: casteism, the network of forces that evacuates a person's self-regard and ties it to the regard of the clan they belong to and motivates them to excesses of violence. In response, Jo's father says that he knows that Jo loves Pariyan as much as she loves him and enquires if Pariyan did not have reciprocal feelings for Jo. Having dealt with the same question from two other well-meaning characters in the narrative, Pariyan has by now arrived at a meaningful resolution of the conflict of incomprehensibility in him. The interaction is as follows:

> *Pariyan*: I don't know. Before I could understand it, you tore me to pieces. But your daughter is very lucky, she can say what she feels openly, anywhere. Look at me. I have to die so many times, before I can say what I feel.
> *Jo's father*: Sorry! You are a good person. You will become all that you wish to be. Study well. Ok? I can only say this for now. What else can I say. Let's see. Things can change tomorrow right? Who knows!
> *Pariyan*: I know sir! As long as you are the way you are and expect me to be the dog, you want me to be. Nothing will change! Everything will remain the same.

In the space of three exchanges, Pariyan makes the interaction pedagogic both for Jo's father and the audiences. It is true that as long as attitudes towards others do not change, oppressive structures are not going to be dismantled. It is also true that education is not going to make caste differences disappear. However, if we draw our attention to the throw-away remark about conversations that Pariyan begins with we may see this differently. Pariyan locates himself as someone who cannot speak without dying. In perfect alignment with the Winnicottian notion of creativity, he ties life to the ability to engage and converse. If he needs to speak he has to have suffered countless deaths. Besides the fact that he has had to struggle to keep his life throughout the film to be able to say these few words to Jo's father, will Pariyan still survive after this conversation? The threat of Jo's desire still hangs over him, and Jo's father, even if he is apologetic, still asks Pariyan to focus on studies. The workings of caste network have been left untouched and Pariyan's caste identity will follow him everywhere. We can attempt an answer if we ask the question: Has a conversation at all happened in this series of exchanges? In an earlier episode of violence and humiliation in the film, Jo's father tears up and admits to a thrashed up Pariyan, drenched in someone's urine, that he is helpless under the command of casteism; in other words, Jo's father implicitly admits that he is nobody without his caste. The violence that falls on Pariyan, therefore, does not have a face. That seems to have been the case with his interlocutor in this scene as well. Pariyan is able to say all of this to Jo's father because he isn't there to engage. Pariyan could die after this showdown because he has spoken to no one in particular. He hasn't been able to creatively engage with any person. But the difference here is, Pariyan has worked on what has bothered him all this while—the throttling sense of incomprehensibility; he has come to understand it as an idea and has overwhelmed it. The implication of this reading, then, is not that the caste-blind upper caste heroine is the prime mover of this coming-of-age narrative, but that Pariyan learns to play and creatively engage with the struggle he faces, and that begins mid-way through the narrative when he asks a question of his own self 'Who am I?' The formal shift from realism to surrealism, a moment of creative rupture in an otherwise straightforward narration then becomes exciting because the very real world outside is not engaging with Pariyan and he is moved to discover and confront his rich inner world. The conversation with Jo outside the hospital then is a significant witness to the growing comfort Pariyan feels with his own self, because he demonstrates being able to hold the frustration of having to deal with the complicated challenges of an adult–child, desire–non-desire. If his journey began with self-preservation, it has blossomed by now into a strength that is required to deal with the precariousness that we open ourselves to when we focus on our inner world. We will all run the risk of being Jo if we do not recognise the import of these political stakes of the film.

At this juncture, one might wonder how this kind of engagement that demands shifts in the inner world can come to bear on contemporary political movements. Is this reading of *Pariyerum Perumal* merely an attempt at theorizing and abstracting from the real world of struggle and political action? We are, after all, in a time of steady right-wing ascendancy, marked by the co-option of anti-caste struggles and leadership,

even scholarship and rhetoric as can be seen in the multiple instances when the current ruling dispensation has invoked Ambedkar to justify its casteist/communalist stances (Neelakandan, 2017; Banerjee, 2021; for an academic engagement with this appropriation, see Guru, 1991; Teltumbde, 2015). In this milieu, Periyar stands as one unforgettable figure, long gone yet constantly resisting appropriation and consistently persisting as a thorn to those in power. The predominant response to Periyar among his detractors is of mischaracterisation and revulsion (for instance, Neelakandan, 2018). Periyar would have smiled at the nature of this continuing legacy. It was after all Periyar who said:

> If I am seen as someone possessing divine powers, people will not think carefully about my words. If I am called a rogue, my words will be carefully scrutinized. … Therefore, since my words should not suffer the respect accorded to these works, since they should receive the careful attention they deserve, all those who declaim that I am a rogue or that I am someone who accumulates a lot of money or a thief are all people who have helped me. (Periyar, 1931, p. 278)

It appears as if Periyar is raring for a fight and he calls for a worthy opponent who would carefully 'scrutinize' him. The rhetoric of this speech is marked by the clarity of thought and simplicity of articulation that has come to define our understanding of Periyar's works. It is at this juncture that we will now begin to focus on Periyar's presentation of his self that could help develop our understanding of engagement as working on the inner world as it happens in *Pariyerum Perumal*.

The Crisis of the Self in Periyar

Periyar begins that speech with the following words:

> You were all calm and the leader has instigated you into asking questions. I haven't come to pick a fight. How can I run if someone comes charging at me? I am not foolhardy to think that I can resolve all your doubts. I speak what occurs to me, what I consider to be right. Accept what you consider to be right. … You don't have tell me even if you think what I say is right or wrong. Think over what occurs to you. Correct yourself. I do not have any objections, no objections whatsoever, to the fact that what I speak will be ridden with mistakes. (Ibid., p. 276)

His practice of adding cautionary statements against taking his words as the gospel truth, but to rather ponder over his ideas and bring their rational minds to bear on his words is fairly common across his works. What stands apart in this instance, however, is his drawing our attention to the inevitability of confrontation with him. In what will turn out to be an ironic twist in the speech, he begins by stating that he is not interested in a confrontation. But the kind of confrontation he is not interested in is the one where he would have to turn back and run. He gives an example of this kind of confrontation

by drawing on material immediately available to him: wall graffiti he notices at the venue. On the way to the place where food was served, Periyar says he noticed graffiti abusing him and his wife. In response to these graffiti, supporters of Periyar have responded with graffiti targeting others. He leaves this material evidence hanging and goes on to decry the sainthood conferred on M.K. Gandhi and Thiruppalakudi Masthan and warns against the misfortune that entails treatment of humans as people with divine powers. He ridicules the ritual practices of worship accorded to both and questions the relevance of their work in tangible materialist terms ('What is the benefit accrued to the country because of these people?' he says in as many words). Stating that he has dedicated his life to being an iconoclast and that it would be his misfortune if he is turned into an icon himself, he states that those who do not hold him in regard and respect are those who have helped him uphold his principles. They are his true friends because they would not rummage through their powers of rhetoric to justify the dangers and problems caused due to the words and actions of their icon. He considers such rhetorical manoeuvres 'dangerous results'. He says:

> Therefore, since my words should not suffer the respect accorded to these works, since they should receive the careful attention they deserve, all those who declaim that I am a rogue or that I am someone who accumulates a lot of money or a thief are all people who have helped me. (Periyar, 1931, p. 278)

He invites rebuke, but the actual demand he places is on the intellect of his interlocutor who must work towards developing the faculty of critical scrutiny. One may argue that Periyar was mistaken in assuming that shaking his listener into revulsion need not necessarily entail careful attention (as can be seen in the case of contemporary critics referenced earlier). Could we place this in comparison to the bait that he throws at his listeners right at the beginning of his speech, when he declares that he does not want to hear from them if he is right or wrong, but that their own thinking will inevitably lead them to correct themselves, while almost immediately maintaining that what he says will be riddled with mistakes. This formative contradiction that Periyar trains us to inhabit is crucial to understanding the potency of the resistance of his rhetoric to co-option. It is a register of speech quite distinct from the academic intonation of an Ambedkar. This is not to say that Ambedkar did not playfully work out other registers in his writing and speeches or that Periyar was not academic in his works. In fact, in this same speech Periyar urges his listeners to investigate the material forces that led to the production of such literary works as the *Bhagavad Gita*, when he says: 'It is popular because we have been told that it was spoken by god and applies to every human alive today, and we have been rendered incapable of asking the questions "Who was the man who really spoke those words? Why did he say what he said?"' (Ibid.). My intervention has been to focus rather on the mechanics of his rhetoric, the intricate weaving into an extempore speech a device that disturbs the cognitive balance of his listeners. This friction, I contend marks the first stone thrown into the field declaring that Periyar is ready to play.

Periyar finishes his train of thought on the graffiti right at the middle of his speech by explaining that he is happy that such graffiti are written on walls because he is now

sure that he is successful to a certain extent. It is here that the epigraph that began this article occurs and it is interesting that its position structurally divides the speech into neat halves. There appears in Periyar's assured tone a distinct turn marked by tentativeness. He addresses a question often posed to him as an anti-caste crusader: 'Will you marry off your daughter to a Paraiyan?' Periyar responds to this question in a way that is consonant with his practice. He says that it is the wrong question to ask because the self-respect project is against treating one's daughters 'as a thing given away in marriage' but 'to facilitate co-habitational arrangements' between a consenting woman and man. However, quickly we reach the crux of a difficulty he has to surmount. This speech is probably delivered to a largely non-Dalit audience, because it draws attention to the oppression Dalits face(d) in the region at the hands of the Shudra castes. Many to most of his supporters were drawn from the Shudra castes, and therefore, when he chastises his listeners as 'distilled idiots' if they continued to hold the belief that their 'Shudra' tag will vanish without abolishing the 'Paraiya' tag, one can get a sense of the unease that would have rippled through the crowd. Although, the central concern he seems anxious to import to his audiences is that 'efforts made for the welfare of the Adi-Dravidas are actually for the benefit of all non-Adi-Dravidas and non-Brahmins as well' (Ibid., p. 280), he immediately follows this definitive proclamation with a disclaimer about his changing stances. He addresses what could have been a pressing concern amongst his followers at that time: What do we make of a leader who somersaults in his opinions? He does not lambast consistency nor does he take the route of inevitability of change to respond to these criticisms. He places another contradiction in his rhetoric. He acknowledges that rational thinking would have to be mobilized when he exhibits any shocking reversal of position, and that they needed to figure it out for themselves if his motives are in tune with the changing times or if they are selfish. Simultaneously, however, he also asks them why it concerns them that he changes at all. He says:

> I may have changed my opinion many times in the past. I may have somersaulted many times. I may have done it for selfish reasons too. I may have been a chameleon. How does that affect you? Don't you pay for it and appreciate it when an actor puts on various guises and acts on stage? Would you consider yourself cheated? Think of us that way, come over, listen to us and leave. (Ibid., p. 281)

While demanding a kind of interaction that is abrasive and intelligent, Periyar also wants his listeners to not take him seriously. This sudden toss from a call to rationality to an obliging indulgence of the performative drama of his rhetoric comes to a moment of cognitive crisis borne out of the momentum that has built up till then and the distinctive demands of the audience when Periyar says: 'In fact, I am unsure if what I say today are conclusive to me. Anyway, given the current circumstances, and given the paucity of time—it can also be said that I am holding back—I am going to measure my speech and discuss only a few things.' This dramatic performance has come to a screeching halt a full two pages before the speech can actually end. Periyar is here on the brink of exceeding the materialist in him. He has till now given us instances of

his critical method of investigating texts and ritual practices, he has even justified his changes by citing the forces (changing times and selfish interest) that make him move. This moment, when he is holding back, however, is a moment of an inner conflict, not in the mode of incomprehension as we saw in *Pariyerum Perumal*, but in the mode of the here-and-now political action. Periyar seems to hold back and measure his speech because of something that is happening right there and then; it could be something as banal as paucity of time, but it could also be that he had whipped up the sensibility of his interlocutors to a peak beyond which even if he would be adding to his performance it would be overdone. We may never know. There is no point speculating on a particular event that could have happened, because this really is a speech that has come down to us because it was published in *Kudi Arasu* over a week after it was delivered. If it was indeed an insignificant utterance it could have been edited out of the reprint by the editor, who was Periyar himself. He seems intent on etching his uncertainty, his moment of stumble as a demonstration of the changes he has been speaking about until then—an instance of form mimicking the content. This instance of fragility appears like an invitation to his audiences, in 1931 and 2022, to confront him, to bring out their aggression in their engagement with him. He urges us to play with him. What follows this call to play is a call to action to rise in fury when someone calls them Shudras and a short critique of Gandhi's brand of nationalism. He ends the speech by quoting Rabindranath Tagore's identification of '[i]rrationality, superstition, caste divisions [and] communalism' as the primary problems the country faces, rather than subjugation by a foreign power and takes another dig at Gandhi and the Congress. His parting words in that speech draw us back to the precarity of playing, when he says: 'Our philosophy is opposed to god and religion, which are ideas that directly feed varnashrama and capitalism. I myself cannot be sure of where else our philosophy will take us. Therefore, be courageous and employ your rationality for any purpose' (Periyar, 1931, p. 283). Periyar was not calling for courage only because rationality stands opposed to structural forces of oppression that would close ranks and violently suppress the workings of the critical mind. That he was. But, more interestingly, his rhetoric also shows that when one plays as he did, one opens oneself to conflict that is directed into the inner world throwing it into upheaval and shift, in the mould of what encounter with incomprehension did to Pariyan.

We had observed a tonal shift in the speech after the utterance of what has become the epigraph of this article. When Periyar says he may have unconsciously sought respect, he isn't of course referring to the unconscious in Freudian terms. This article is not an attempt at a psychobiography of Periyar, because the unconscious is by definition inaccessible when one is alive and thinking, let alone when one attempts to unearth it through an analysis of a speech by an author long gone. What this article has been, however, is to explore the salience of the self as a site of political action, and the necessity of conflict that is not oriented outwards but into the rich complexities of the inner world. Gleaning insights of formal rupture and engagement to read for confrontation and recognition of a changing self within the parameters of the film have enabled me to read Periyar's speech as exceeding the materialist and contingent on performative and self-reflexive conditions, apart from the established Marxist

mode of reading Periyar's thought (see, 'Gramsci: Periyarai Purinthukolla' ['Gramsci: To understand Periyar'] Rajadurai and Geetha, 2017, pp. 845–94). This exercise has come to remind us that oppressive structures in place are in fact populated by people with inner worlds requiring a violent jolt, a rhetorical device crucial to Periyar's performance. This article has, therefore, studied the ways in which a film character and a social revolutionary show instances of such conflict and how these instances have been crucial to the politics they embrace and enable them to survive.

Acknowledgements

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"When I tell them my caste, silence descends": Caste-based Discrimination among the Nepali Diaspora in the San Francisco Bay Area, USA

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Abstract

Recent cases of caste-based workplace discrimination in Silicon Valley in the United States (US) have highlighted the practice of caste-based discrimination in the San Francisco (SF) Bay Area. Most documentation of caste-based discrimination in diaspora populations in the US has focused on the Indian diaspora, omitting the perspectives of Dalits from other South Asian countries. This study investigated caste-based discrimination among the Nepali diaspora living in the SF Bay Area. Twenty-seven Nepali-American Dalits in the SF Bay Area participated in qualitative research on their experiences of caste-based discrimination. Aligned with findings from studies of Dalit diaspora members in other settings, the research found that Dalits faced social exclusion, workplace prejudice, microaggressions, and housing bias in the Nepali diaspora in the SF Bay Area. To preempt or avoid discrimination, some Dalits hid their caste, and many did not feel comfortable taking action regarding caste-based discrimination because of the absence of caste as a protected category in their workplaces and in local government policies. Caste-based discrimination affected the Dalits' mental health as well. The findings highlight the need for policy interventions for Dalits living in the SF Bay Area and facing caste-based discrimination within their diaspora communities.

Keywords

Caste, Caste-based discrimination, Casteism, Dalit, Nepali Diaspora, San Francisco Bay Area, Dalit Oppression

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Literature Review

With migration from South Asia, the caste system also traveled to different parts of the world (Sam, 2017). Adur and Narayan highlight the unique experiences of Dalits in the South Asian diaspora, describing them as "a diaspora within a diaspora" (2017, p. 244). The caste system creates layers of heterogeneous experiences within the South Asian diaspora, where Dalits, besides dealing with racism in the host country, also have to negotiate caste-based discrimination within their ethnic communities, wearing caste hierarchies "as an albatross around their necks, waiting to free themselves from its oppressive weight" (Adur & Narayan, 2017, p. 259). While incidents of caste-based discrimination against Indian-American Dalits have been widely covered by US media outlets, reports of caste-based discrimination in other South Asian communities in the US, including among Nepalis, are much less visible.

Research on caste in the Nepali diaspora is scant, with only a few studies having been conducted on the caste-related experiences of the Nepali diaspora—all were outside the US. Studies from Australia and Britain reveal the overrepresentation of dominant hill castes (Brahmins and Chhetris) in the diaspora and the near cultural homogeneity of these diaspora groups (Pariyar, 2018; Pariyar, 2019). Pariyar noted that dominant castes tended to inflict psychological wounds with their words, engineer social exclusion, or manifest unsafe spaces, which in themselves are forms of violence (2019).

Pariyar (2020) noted that Nepali dominant castes in Britain observed the concepts of purity and pollution as they relate to caste, quoting the dominant caste refrain: "if we lose our money and property, we have lost something; if we lose our identity, we have lost everything" (Pariyar, 2020, p. 617). In his research, Nepali Dalit Gurkhas in Britain reported that dominant caste people barred Dalit Gurkhas and their children from entering certain areas of the home, particularly kitchens and prayer rooms (2020). In his ethnographic work, caste discrimination was also observed during housing transactions, renting, and during marriages (2020). Nepali Dalits in his study described experiencing caste slurs and caste-based social exclusion (2020). There were also instances of diaspora dominant caste children taunting Dalit children by calling them 'untouchables.' Pariyar reports that experiences of casteism caused considerable "distress, frustration, and anger" among the victims (Pariyar, 2018, p. 414).

Experiences with caste discrimination can impact victims' mental health. While we were unable to find any research on the mental health impacts of caste discrimination in the Nepali Dalit diaspora in the US, studies from other contexts are indicative of such harmful effects. Using a mixed-methods approach, Kiang et al. examined connections between social status, identity, and mental health among 295 adolescents in Nepal (2020). Analyzing quantitative surveys and qualitative ethnographic data, they found that mental health was associated with social status, with Dalit adolescents reporting the highest level of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and self-esteem compared to their moderate and dominant caste friends (2020). French

(2020) found that Dalits in Nepal have "a greater prevalence of depression and anxiety when compared with high castes," identifying the possible causes as "religious and supernatural teachings, culture, caste, and a lack of education" (French, 2020, p. 1). In a similar vein, Gupta and Coffey found that in India, Scheduled Caste (including Dalit) and Muslim individuals self-reported poorer mental health compared to dominant caste Hindus, even after controlling for education and asset gaps (2020). To our knowledge, this is the first study examining the mental health impacts of caste discrimination among the Nepali diaspora in the US.

Methods

This study conducted qualitative ethnographic research with Nepali Dalits living in the SF Bay Area to investigate if and to what extent caste-based discrimination exists among the local Nepali diaspora. The study further explored if the nature of caste-based discrimination differs based on the setting as well as various other themes including identity concealment to avoid discrimination and the impact of caste-based discrimination on Nepali Dalits' mental health.

In order to collect primary data from Nepali Dalits living in the SF Bay Area, we employed semi-structured individual interviews and a focus group discussion. These data collection strategies were chosen because of their particular appropriateness in studies of identity and power dynamics (Chiu & Knight, 2011), including among Dalit Nepalis in other diaspora settings (Pariyar, 2020).

The research investigated the following questions:

1) Do Nepali Dalits experience caste-based discrimination in the SF Bay area?
2) Does caste-based discrimination differ based on the setting in which it occurs, such as temple, workplace, community, household, etc.?
3) How do Nepali Dalits deal with caste-based discrimination in the SF Bay Area?
   a) Do they conceal their identity, as some studies have shown?
   b) How do identity concealment and other discrimination-defying strategies affect Dalits' mental health?
   c) Does identity disclosure lead to social, professional, or economic exclusion within the Nepali community? If so, how does the exclusion affect their standard of living?

The questions covered different aspects of Dalits' lives, highlighting a comprehensive picture of their interactions within their diasporic community.

Participant Recruitment

The target participants for this study were Nepali Dalits living in the SF Bay area. The lead author has been an active member of the Nepali diasporic community and was able to recruit participants through personal connections, as well as through diasporic organizations including Nepal American Pariyar Association (NAPA). Flyers for the research were also shared on social media. Nepali Dalits were asked to anonymously provide their preferred contact information via an online survey if interested in participating in the study. The lead author then connected with participants via the contact information they had provided.

Sample

Twenty-seven SF Bay Area-based Nepali Dalits participated in this study. Ten Dalits (eight men and two women) participated in a focus group discussion, while the remaining seventeen (eleven men and six women) chose instead to participate in individual interviews. Eight out of the twenty-seven participants were women, and the remaining nineteen participants were men. All Dalits participating in this research originated from the Nepalese Hills. A consent form was read and agreed to by each participant before the start of the focus group discussion and individual interviews. This study received ethical approval from the California State University East Bay Institutional Review Board (Protocol #: CSUEB-IRB-2020-241).

Data Collection

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all data collection was conducted online, with Zoom video conferencing and phone calls used to communicate with participants. For the focus group, Zoom was used, with each participant receiving a unique Zoom ID and a password to log in for the meeting. To maximize privacy during the focus group discussion, participants were requested to change their displayed names and turn off their videos prior to the start of the session. The focus group discussion lasted for two hours and fifty minutes. Each individual interview lasted between forty-five minutes to an hour.

The lead researcher, who facilitated the focus group and interviews, comes from a Nepali Dalit background, which made it easier for him to build rapport with and establish trust among participants. The facilitator used semi-structured focus group and individual interview guides to facilitate the discussion and interviews. Because most of these questions were on sensitive topics regarding discrimination, participants were informed during the recruitment process of the discussion/interview themes, and they were informed that they were free to not answer any questions if they were not comfortable doing so.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings of the focus group discussion and individual interviews were translated and transcribed into English and then qualitatively coded using a thematic analysis approach (Nowell et al., 2017) to answer the study's research questions. A summary of the main findings follows.

Findings

Twenty-seven Dalits residing in the SF Bay Area participated in a focus group discussion or individual interviews. They all came from the hilly region of Nepal and had lived in the United States for at least one year. All participants reported experiencing caste-based discrimination in Nepal, and twenty-four out of twenty-seven reported having experienced caste-based discrimination within the Nepali diaspora in the United States.

The three participants who did not report experiencing caste-based discrimination in the United States also reported being disconnected from the dominant caste Nepali diaspora community and were therefore protected from the possibility of caste-based discrimination. However, they reported hearing of caste-based discrimination against their Dalit friends who were more integrated into the Nepali diaspora. The participants reported experiencing caste-based discrimination during conversations, in housing, at the workplace, from older members of the Nepali diaspora, at religious gatherings, and when pursuing romantic relationships. Despite caste-based discrimination, some participants have chosen to live openly as Dalits among the diaspora, while others continue to conceal their caste identity. Many participants described ways that caste-based discrimination in the Nepali SF Bay Area diaspora has affected their mental health and well-being.

Experiences of Discrimination

"I have experienced discrimination in Nepal, India, the U.S., wherever there is a Nepali diaspora," one male participant said, highlighting the ubiquity of caste-based discrimination. Below, we outline the six main types of caste-based discrimination described by participants.

Casteism in Conversation

Participants described dominant caste Nepalis obsessively inquiring about individuals' caste identity, which they then used to rank people. One male participant said, "when I tell them [dominant caste Nepalis] my caste, silence descends, which makes me uncomfortable." Participants also pointed to the ubiquitous use of slurs. One female participant said, "they would pick on my traits such as skin color or eating habits and humiliate me, saying I looked like *Damai* [the name of a sub-caste of Dalits in the hilly regions of Nepal whose occupations include tailoring and playing music] or a *Kami* [another sub-caste of Dalits with occupations such as blacksmith]." Mitra Pariyar found similar caste-targeted slurs in England (2019). Another female participant described how a dominant caste man, upon learning that she was a Dalit, diminished the respect level of the pronoun he used to address her. The man changed the pronoun from "*Tapai*" [higher-level, used for elders, strangers] to "*Timi*" [mid-level, friends] after learning of her caste, signifying a decrease in his respect for her.

Participants reported that dominant caste Nepalis perceived Dalits as destitute with no future. One male participant shared that, upon meeting a successful Dalit, "dominant caste people would gasp, surprised that Dalits can also be successful." A male participant concurred and shared how his US-based dominant caste friends would showcase their superior status by "talking about their possessions, power, and people [who were in high posts in Nepal] to show Dalits their positions." Participants said that dominant castes would discount successful Dalits' merits, with one male participant giving as an example how dominant caste Nepalis sarcastically said of him, "despite being a Dalit, he is a good singer."

Discrimination in Housing

Nearly all participants reported personally experiencing or knowing other Nepali Dalits who faced caste-based discrimination in housing in the SF Bay Area. One male participant shared that his Dalit friend was evicted when his roommates learned of his caste. "The roommates' behavior instantly changed," he shared. A woman participant shared that she was also evicted when the dominant caste house owner learned of her Dalit identity, which she had concealed when arranging the housing for fear of discrimination. In another instance, a woman participant reported an instance of a dominant caste woman refusing to rent a room within her house, saying, "I think it happened because of caste. She did not want to live with a Pariyar [a Nepali Dalit surname] family."

Discrimination at Work

Participants also shared incidents of workplace caste-based discrimination in the SF Bay Area. "My workplace canceled a planned picnic when they discovered [I] was a Dalit," one male participant shared. Another male participant shared that his colleagues socially excluded him at the workplace after discovering that he was a Dalit. He complained that "solidarity against caste-based discrimination does not translate to policy changes at the workplace," and his dominant caste coworkers who had previously stated their opposition to the caste system still remained silent after his caste identity was revealed and he was impacted by caste-based discrimination. A female participant noted that in organizations with Indian and Nepali employees and non-South Asian bosses, caste-based discrimination occurred amongst the South Asian workers without the boss's full understanding, stating, "discrimination is common between workers and not between the worker and the boss." Participants recounted how, at their jobs, casteist slurs were common, such as *"sano jaat ko sanai buddhi* [small caste, small brain]." Caste-based discrimination affected participants' prospective employment. A Dalit photographer said dominant caste people would not hire him for family shoots. "I feel inferior around them," he said, explaining his reluctance to work with the Nepali diaspora after experiencing these instances of caste-based discrimination.

Intergenerational Discrimination

Participants reported ways in which dominant caste young adults in the Nepali diaspora who acted friendly with Dalits would change their behavior when their older parents were visiting. One male participant said "When their parents were not around, dominant caste friends would come and mingle with us. However, when their parents arrived, they would give excuses to not come to our place." If the dominant caste young adults were to invite Dalits over while their parents were visiting, they would ensure their parents ate first.

The concept of purity and pollution was a recurrent theme in the interviews and the focus group. A male Dalit participant shared an incident of caste-based discrimination during a celebration of *Tihar* (*Diwali*), saying, "Once when I went to see a [dominant caste] friend and she put a *bhai tika* [colored powder traditionally placed by a sister on

her brother's head] on my forehead, her mother became angry with her and instructed her to clean the entire house. Her mother made a loud scene saying how her daughter brings *ANY* people to her home." The incident demonstrated the reigning purity and pollution binary concept of the caste system in the diaspora, in which close friendships spanning caste boundaries are not accepted. One participant narrated how despite his offering aid to a dominant caste friend whose father had died recently, the friend refused to accept his help because by "tradition" a Dalit's presence would "pollute" his father's last rites:

"My upper-caste friend's father had died in Nepal. I felt sad for him and extended my support and sympathy. However, because I was a Dalit and in his caste's funeral tradition my presence around him would be considered polluting, he preemptively left our shared apartment to prepare for the rite by himself."

Discrimination at Religious Gatherings

Caste-based discrimination in religious affairs was common, and each participant had heard of it or personally experienced it. "Dominant caste families have not invited me for a *puja* (worship) ceremony even though they have invited mutual dominant caste friends," a female participant shared, describing her exclusion from religious events due to her caste. One mother shared an incident where a dominant caste individual prevented her daughter from joining a *Panchakanya* (the league of five girls) for a Hindu festival, even when this exclusion required the ceremony to proceed with an incorrect number of participants:

"I was asked to take my daughter initially in the Nepali ceremony to be a member of *Panchkanya*. But when we were there in the ceremony, my daughter was not included in the group and only four daughters from the dominant caste group were approved. I was very embarrassed at that time. I realized how caste discrimination exists in the Nepali diaspora even in the US."

Another mother noted that "in diasporic gatherings, my kids were only allowed to worship after everyone else had." Participants described a similar barring from entering places of worship or touching holy objects. "During festivals, they wished we had not come to their place," a man said. Similarly, another male participant recounted how a visiting Nepali priest refused to shake his hand at a diasporic gathering, considering him polluted:

"A very popular Nepali priest had come to see the diaspora community leaders during a *Dharmic Mahotsav* [Hindu religious festival event] in the San Francisco Bay Area. In one of the meetings with the community leaders, he was shaking hands. When my turn approached in the queue, a friend introduced him to me by stating my full name. After the [priest] heard my name, he refused to shake my hand. I felt humiliated and an inferiority complex surrounded me. After that day, I decided not to join that *Dharmic Mahotsav* ever."

Discrimination in Romantic Relationships

Caste-based discrimination also affected participants' romantic relationships. One male participant who had married another Dalit recounted that "before marriage, I dated two dominant caste girls, whose families rejected me because of my caste."

Participants had mainly married Dalits so there were very few experiences of inter-caste marriage to share. The only participant who was in an inter-caste relationship with a non-Dalit described facing caste-based discrimination from his wife's family, saying "I still cannot visit my in-laws' house because of my caste position."

Coming out as Dalit in the Diaspora

Individual interviews revealed that many Dalits chose to conceal their caste as a strategy to evade caste-based discrimination. Many who began the practice when they lived in Nepal maintained it after moving to the SF Bay Area. In contrast, some participants chose to disclose their caste identity despite the high likelihood of facing caste-based discrimination.

"People have changed their identity, severed ties with their families, and become contactless [to fit among the dominant castes]," one male participant said. Multiple participants described their fathers changing the family name they used in Nepal from a Dalit name to one that belonged to a dominant caste, in order to avoid caste-based discrimination and pursue better opportunities. A female participant described the practice thus: "we did not show our citizenship cards, and we called ourselves [another dominant caste name] in our rented apartment." In her recounting, she also shared that the experience of constantly concealing her identity led her to be constantly fearful of being discovered and lowered her self-esteem.

Multiple participants have chosen to openly disclose their Dalit identity while living in the SF Bay Area, despite the existence of caste-based discrimination among the Nepali diaspora. The same female participant who lived in fear in Nepal of being uncovered as Dalit embraced her identity after coming to the US with her Dalit husband. While she was finally able to take pride in her roots, the new Dalit family name reduced her privilege and opened pathways for caste-based discrimination in the form of microaggressions and social exclusion by dominant caste Nepalis:

> "In Nepal, I used to hide my identity. I had a uniquely upper caste-sounding last name. My friends were curious and always wanted to get to the bottom of what my identity was. I could not fully express myself. Even on Facebook, I had a fake name. I felt caged by this false identity and always feared tribulations that would come with identity disclosure. Even after coming to the United States, I hid my identity. Only after my husband, a Dalit, gave me confidence did I accept my identity. Later, I also changed my Facebook name to my real Dalit name. While this helped me own my identity and take pride in it, this new identity disclosure also brought microaggressions and social exclusion. People would hear my name and instantly use non-respectful pronouns. I could hear the disrespect in their tone."

Another participant disapproved of identity concealment, even though he admitted that many Dalits felt they had no other safe options. He declared "I am proud of my caste," demonstrating how narratives around caste are shifting in the diaspora.

Mental health impacts of caste-based discrimination

Participants reported how the impacts of ongoing social exclusion and the daily struggles caused by caste-based discrimination accumulated over time, affecting Dalits' mental health. One male participant shared that "caste-based discrimination has pained me immeasurably. In my childhood, I constantly wondered why I was born into a Dalit family." He further expressed, "dominant caste Nepalis do not consider Dalits as humans. Their behavior pains me a lot. I am ashamed of identifying myself as Nepali." Another male participant also spoke of the pain caused by caste-based discrimination, saying, "we have a lot of *pida* [pain] that emotionally breaks us [...] dominant castes, through actions and words, find ways to torture us psychologically."

Participants focused on the pain and distress that caste-based discrimination caused them. One participant critiqued the Nepali diaspora for not having made progress, saying "in our [Dalit] hearts, there is a lot of *pir* [pain]," he said. Another participant recounted having trouble sleeping the night before meeting a dominant caste Nepali house owner from whom he hoped to rent a room, saying, "I had a restless night. I feared if she [a dominant caste woman] would ask my name and [what would happen] if I should tell her my real name." Finally, some Dalit participants carried with them traumas that had roots in caste-based discrimination and violence which they had experienced in Nepal. One male participant said on this topic, "the [caste-based] trauma I experienced earlier [in Nepal] did not leave when I arrived in the U.S."

No clear recourse for caste-based discrimination

Dalit participants did not know whom to approach if they were confronted with caste-based discriminatory incidents. Most of them said they would come to Nepali American Pariyar Association (NAPA), a Nepali Dalit organization in the SF Bay Area. Some favored informing the police if such incidents occurred. However, one male participant also pointed out that people feared registering complaints with the police. "If we do, we will be socially excluded, and we will lose a lot more than we will gain," the participant remarked. Without caste as a protected category under the local policy, participants feared that complaints to local officials would fall on deaf ears.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate if Nepali Dalits experience caste-based discrimination in the San Francisco Bay Area and if so, to what extent, and with what impact on their mental health. A majority of participants said that they had experienced caste-based discrimination in the U.S. The types of caste-based discrimination described included social exclusion, workplace discrimination, challenges in pursuing inter-caste relationships, intergenerational prejudices, and discrimination in religious gatherings. Caste-based discrimination affected Dalits' mental health, with participants describing these incidents as traumatizing and hurtful.

Policy Context

The question of caste discrimination among the South Asian diaspora in the US and the potential role for policy interventions has gained momentum in the past few years. While systematic national evidence for the scale of the problem is not readily available, one study conducted by community-based organization Equality Labs found that a significant proportion of surveyed Dalits reported experiencing caste discrimination in their place of work, educational institutions, and social interactions (Zwick-Maitreyi et al., 2018). Sixty percent of Dalits surveyed reported experiencing caste-based derogatory jokes or comments in the United States (Zwick-Maitreyi et al., 2018). While the study is based on a snowball sample and therefore proportions reported may not be easily generalizable across the U.S, the snowball sample used indicates that caste discrimination, as reported by participants, *is* present in the diaspora.

Several other significant developments also attest to the fact that the issue of caste discrimination in the South Asian diaspora deserves attention. In June 2020, California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing filed a landmark lawsuit against Cisco Systems for allegedly discriminating against an Indian employee based on caste (Dutt, 2020; Elzweig, 2021; Narayan, 2020). The lawsuit charged that Cisco, citing the lack of caste as a protected category under US law, refused to take corrective action even after the employee filed complaints with the Human Resources department (Dutt, 2020; Elzweig, 2021; Narayan, 2020). American institutions of higher education have also started to amend their anti-discrimination policies to include caste. In 2019, Brandeis University became the first US university to change its anti-discrimination policy and recognize caste as a protected category (Liebowitz, 2019; The Office of Human Resources at Brandeis University, 2019). The Department of Social Work at California State University (CSU) East Bay adopted caste as a protected category in 2020 (CSU East Bay Department of Social Work, 2020), and the Academic Senate of CSU East Bay passed a resolution urging the chancellor of the CSU system to recognize caste as a protected category in March 2021 (20-21 FDEC 3: Resolution in Support of Providing Protection to Dominated and Oppressed Castes at California State University, East Bay, 2021). The Associated Students at the University of California, Davis Senate also unanimously passed a resolution to recognize caste as a protected category in February 2021 (Duley, 2021; ASUCD Senate Resolution #8, 2021). The Cal State Student Association (CSSA) representing the nearly half a million students across all twenty-three campuses of the California State University (CSU) system (the country's most extensive four-year public university system) unanimously passed a resolution in support of adding caste as a protected category in April 2021 (Naik, 2021; Cal State Student Association, 2021). Finally, in January 2022, the entire CSU system added caste to its antidiscrimination policy (California State University, 2022).

The findings of this study and the social phenomenom described within it are not simply academic in nature and must be taken in the context of a sweeping expressed need in the diaspora to address the issue of caste. Unlike Mitra Pariyar's findings in which certain diasporic Nepali Dalits accepted caste-based discrimination as part of the social order (2018, 2019, 2020), participants in this study were vocal in their

opposition to caste-based discrimination and named its existence as a reason that they avoided engaging fully with the wider, multi-caste Nepali diaspora in the SF Bay Area. Many participants said that they felt ashamed to call themselves Nepali because they felt that the Nepali identity had been monopolized and appropriated by dominant caste members of the diaspora.

The individual interviews and focus group discussion helped determine that caste-based discrimination occurs in the San Francisco Bay area. As many participants recounted, caste-based discrimination was visible, and many dominant caste individuals still looked down on members of oppressed castes. Caste-based discrimination was present across multiple settings including workplaces, family interactions, and diasporic gatherings. While not all the participants concealed their caste identity, some used identity concealment as a strategy to deflect caste-based discrimination. This strategy had a downside as it affected their mental health and lowered their morale, self-esteem, and confidence. On the other hand, disclosing their caste identity in some instances cost Dalits housing, employment, and social opportunities.

Most Dalit participants did not know whom to reach out to if caste-based discrimination were to occur. This may be because much of the caste-based discrimination that Dalits face abroad is in the form of microaggressions, which are so normalized that Dalits let them pass. Additionally, as one participant stated, there are downsides to complaining about caste-based discrimination to the local police station. Nepali Dalits who come forward about discrimination they have faced by other Nepalis in the close-knit diaspora community may face social exclusion or a decrease in their social standing. Even if someone chose to issue a complaint to a police station in the Bay area, the police might not fully understand the gravity of caste-based discrimination because caste is still not recognized as a protected category in local anti-discrimination laws.

This study confirms and validates other ethnographic studies highlighting the overt and covert caste-based discrimination that Dalits in the Nepali diaspora go through every day (Pariyar, 2018, 2019, 2020). Additionally, it provides a unique contribution as the first study to examine this phenomenon among Nepalis living in the United States.

Study Strengths and Limitations

There are limitations to non-ethnographic research that relies on secondary data and fails to incorporate people's lived experiences. Additionally, given the historical power gap between dominant castes and oppressed castes, Dalit participants may police their words in front of dominant caste scholars, thereby limiting the findings and contributing to a narrow understanding of the impact of caste. Led by a Nepali Dalit scholar, this ethnographic study aimed to erase those potential pitfalls and contribute to filling the literature gap.

Thus, a main strength of the study was that it was embedded in the Nepali Dalit community in the SF Bay Area. The lead researcher/facilitator comes from a Nepali Dalit background, which made it easier to build rapport and establish trust among

participants. This may have been more difficult if the researcher were from a dominant caste. As one female participant put it, "in our heart, we had kept things secret, but now we can share these secrets on this platform." One limitation was the low recruitment of women to the study, with many married women who were approached expressing that they believed their husbands' experiences were the same as their own. This limitation might be addressed in future research on this topic by including female Dalit researchers in the study team, who might be able to recruit women separately and facilitate gender-matched interviews and focus groups to understand the unique experiences of Nepali Dalit women in the diaspora. The study only had Dalit participants who originated from Nepali hills, and not from the plains. Plains-based Dalits belong to one of the most marginalized communities in Nepal and future studies should incorporate their experiences.

Conclusion

This study confirms that caste-based discrimination exists within the SF Bay Area Nepali diaspora in the United States. Dalits reported experiencing caste-based discrimination in multiple settings, including in the workplace and when seeking housing. Caste-based discrimination in the SF Bay Area affects Nepali Dalits' mental health, with many participants saying that they had sleepless nights thinking about caste in the US. Many participants did not know whom to approach after incidents of caste-based discrimination occurred. The absence of caste as a protected category under US and local laws made them hesitant to reach out to law enforcement and others who would enforce such a policy if it existed.

There needs to be more research on how caste-based discrimination affects Dalit-Americans in the US. Dalits continue to be one of the most marginalized and oppressed groups in the world. Future studies focusing on Nepali Dalit communities need to be conducted and should include the voices of more Dalit women and *Madhesi/Terai* Dalits from the southern Nepali plains. In addition to gathering more evidence on the unique experiences of Nepali Dalits in the diaspora through research, policymakers in areas with large South Asian diasporic populations such as the SF Bay Area need to move to include caste as a category protected under non-discrimination laws. Only with these initiatives can caste-based discrimination become a figment of the past.

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Memory, Grief, and Agency: A Political Theological Account of Wrongs and Rites

Author: *Sunder John Boopalan*
Publisher: *Palgrave Macmillan*
Year: *2017*
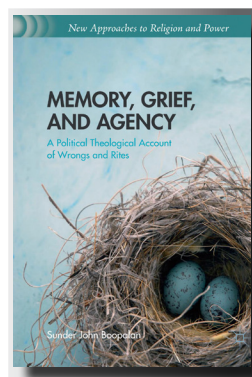
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Juxtaposing racial and caste-based discrimination, evidenced in "brutal" and "ordinary wrongs," Sunder John Boopalan traces the intricacies of discrimination and humiliation faced by Dalits in India and the African Americans in USA. Relying on incidents and experiences in India and the USA, Boopalan exposes the violence meted out to individuals from Dalit and African American communities for ordinary human actions. *Memory, Grief and Agency* challenges the dominant theological articulations of the processes of grief and elevates the agential role of memory and grief in transforming structural wrongs. It argues that "rituals of humiliation" can be redressed through "rites of moral responsibility." The pragmatic framework of the book offers critical lenses to any reader to interrogate implicit violence in uncritical and ordinary human behavior.

The foundational claims that advance the thesis of *Memory, Grief and Agency* are fourfold: first, "wrongs have ritualistic character"; second, wrongs can be categorized as "brutal wrongs and everyday 'ordinary' wrongs"; third, wrongs emerge from "uncritical examination of social conditions"; fourth, "wrongs are socially conditioned corporeal habits" (21). The first step towards the goal of arguing for an agential and transformative role of memory and grief is a discussion around social conditioning and violent identities. By establishing a theoretical foundation for the "rituals of humiliation," Boopalan unfamiliarizes the familiar and familiarizes the unfamiliar.

Identifying racism and casteism as structural wrongs, the book first delineates the ways in which such wrongs are systematically and socially conditioned. Violence is perpetrated against bodies that move "out of place" yet find sanction in religious, cultural, legal, and social logics. This legitimization allows such wrongs to permeate into all domains of life without punitive consequences. Employing the category of "rituals of humiliation," the author exposes the historicity and the problematic continuity of violence faced by the racial and caste oppressed communities. Avoiding abstraction in the definitions of caste, the text describes the several "rituals of humiliation" experienced by Dalits that are often glossed over as ordinary. The "ordinary" and uncritical human behaviors and actions give rise to "violent identities," normalizing and continuing the "wrongs."

Second, the text shifts from a discussion on the theorization of caste to theorization of the grammar of bodies. It demonstrates that just as rituals which are often external, perpetuate or give rise to violent identities, so do corporeal habits. Racialized experiences of Dalit and Black bodies are often understood as "inviting." "Racialized outbursts" (65) are claimed to be triggered by racially marked bodies. The text terms the 'triggers' as "socially conditioned corporeal habits" (65). These habits, rather than being triggered by the targeted bodies, are rooted in the "logics of domination and discrimination" (83). In the absence of discriminatory words, "bodies communicate a message" (85). To claim unintentionality is to be uncritical to the inherent logics derived from the impulse to maintain a power dynamic between the dominant and dominated communities. Corporeal habits are inherited, adopted, learned, and performed. Spontaneous bodily performances prevent critical evaluation to inform the body to perform consciously in the presence of different bodies. A conscious attention to the bodily impulses can evoke ethical responsibility to transform "violent identities." By carefully examining the ways in which violence is perpetrated by bodily responses that are inherited and adopted, the text suggests that such socially conditioned habits can only be transformed by fostering "life-affirming corporeal habits" (107). Third, the text draws attention to the *theological unease with remembering wrongs*. Engaging the work of Miroslav Volf and Oliver O'Donovan, the text challenges the dominant articulations of grief over wrongs as a weak bodily action that continues the vicious cycle of violence. The text reclaims grief as a theological or perhaps spiritual act (my emphasis) that enables the memory of wrongs possible. The wrongs of the past are the lenses to understand the wrongs of the present. 'Knowing' should be accompanied by "*grieving* over remembered wrongs [for, it] engenders positive agency and the transformation of violent identities" (115). Miroslav Volf and O'Donovan challenge the "active remembrance of wrongs" (115) and suggest that such remembrance have adverse consequences. The text contests their theological reluctance to acknowledge the "positive agential role of grief" (157). O'Donovan's theological claims are centered around the limitations of human memory, the "vengeful" nature of human beings, the rejection of human vulnerability, and the need to view justice as an eschatological vision. The text identifies the several ways in which victims and sufferers are "vilified" for remembering wrongs that need redressal. Volf posits that

in memorializing 'memory' victims can turn violent and resort to violence rendering "evil for evil" (132). He proposes that memory should lead to reconciliation; if not for reconciliation, "memory" can turn to hatred and violence. Engaging the scriptures superficially, O'Donovan and Volf oppose the agential role inherent in memory. The text questions the loopholes in their theological arguments and uplifts 'memory of historical wrongs' (143) as agential. The text articulates the importance of an active memory of wrongs of the past in preventing such wrongs in the present. "An active memory of wrongs" (145) benefits the survivors in promoting solidarity, challenges the perpetrators to ethically evaluate their actions, and facilitates onlookers of their role in forming violent identities.

Fourth, the text counts on the knowledge and "common" experience of grief to emphasize its transformative role. Defying the dominant definitions of grief that are understood primarily in "stages" which is expected to be overcome, the text proposes a "continuous" grief. Boopalan uplifts "continuous" grief of the vulnerable against structural wrongs as an epistemological site that can help the privileged to interrogate the violent identities they perpetrate. The text resorts to the "goodness of human being" (150) to extend oneself to understand and grieve for others. By grieving, the dominated communities seek "redress and not retribution or vengeance (153)." The "multi-dimensional" grief is categorized as having an "internal work" (170) and "external work" (156). While the *internal work* enables individuals to pay attention to the formation of violent identities and be cognizant of the social conditions that perpetuate wrongs, the *external work* erases binaries and promotes solidarities between communities irrespective of differences. Although the text elevates the significant role played by both internal and external grief work, it is conscious of the ambiguities of grief and doesn't undermine the "devastation" that grief causes to people. It elevates grief as a positive "agential work [that] has a theological force" (173). It disallows articulations of hope and justice as otherworldly expectation and suggests redressal of injustice and wrongs in earthly time and space.

Fifth, the text demonstrates that the continuous presence of "in-group/out-group identities" (186) hinder the formation of solidarity beyond differences. Many resort to religion to justify and legitimize the articulation of in-group/out-group differences. The complicity of religion in acts of humiliation against the marginal groups should be rectified by locating theological imagination in the grief of the survivors. Boopalan suggests, "a liberative political theological imagination critically remembers dominant racialized and casteist plots that are violent and offers in their violent in-group/out-group differences via agential grief (201)."

The theological task is to affirm the agency of grieving bodies. The grieving bodies, when conscious of the social conditions that caused the grief, resist forces that humiliate and discriminate. Such resistance to the "rituals of humiliation" enables communities to "move out of place" and defy the casteist and racist structures. The task of "moving out of place" applies to all categories of people: to survivors, to the perpetrators and everyone in-between. The theological action of "moving out" transforms casteist and racist impulses into conscious and critical "re-ordering."

Addressing a wider theological audience in India and the USA, Sunder John Boopalan's book provides a framework to address "structural wrongs," be it casteism or racism as discussed in the book, or sexism, ableism, totalitarianism, etc. The text systematically and creatively presents the agential role of memory and grief and exposes that "rituals of humiliation" are manifested both in "brutal" and "ordinary" wrongs. Although Boopalan provides a clear distinction between the dominant and dominated, oppressor and oppressed, privileged and peripheral, he does not undermine the "rituals of humiliation" perpetuated by those occupying the in-between spaces. The task of resistance and grief pertains to all groups—to survivors, perpetrators, and the bystanders. While he describes an overall account of "rituals of humiliation," the intricacies and power dynamics within the marginal communities and the "rituals of humiliation" within those have not been addressed. An engagement with the "ordinary wrongs" experienced by women within the suffering communities would make this book a methodological resource for feminist theologians engaged in the struggles of minority groups globally.
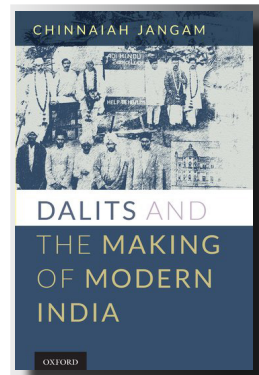
Dalits and the Making of Modern India

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Colonialism and nationalism serve as vantage points to understand the historicity of modern India. Many celebrated leaders of modern India, such as M.K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, presented the mainstream notion of nationalism to counter colonialism or colonial rule in India. They represent the ideology of Hindu elites to signify an underlying unity of Hindu consciousness. In the twentieth century, the only real challenge to this "mainstream" nationalism came from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's imagined nationalism through his philosophy of *Prabuddha Bharat* (enlightened India) and the nationalist discourse through the Dalit resistance to Hindu (Brahmanical) hegemony. Ambedkar, one of the founding fathers of modern India, offered a thesis to annihilate the caste system. The debates with his political opponent, M.K. Gandhi, have served as popular texts that are highly cited sources in academia. Drawing upon Ambedkar's conception of nationalism, the book, *Dalits and the Making of Modern India* (2019), by Canada-based Indian historian, Chinnaiah Jangam, critically challenges the unitary notion of nationalism and colonialism. One of his key arguments is that particularised understandings of "nationalism" are undoubtedly susceptible to change. Drawing upon archival sources on the Madras Presidency and Andhra region, the volume draws from several untold narratives and shines light on the contribution of Dalits to the formation of a unique nationalist discourse.

With his lucid writing style, Jangam divides the volume in three sections concluding with an epilogue: 1) *Dalits and the Colonial Conjuncture,* 2) *Making of the Self and Political Identity,* and 3) *Dalit Imagination: An Egalitarian Ethics.* Each section centers on the Dalit experience and unfolds the historical realities that failed to document the untiring struggle of Dalits for social justice. This struggle coincides with the colonial developments in India affecting every walk of life. For example, for centuries, Brahmans had a monopoly over education. The British government opened schools in villages to all castes without discrimination is evidence of democratisation of education that directly benefitted the socially marginalised groups especially Dalits who were victims of untouchability practices. The volume offers a historical analysis of these democratic shifts that led to anti-caste resistance. Jangam challenges the dominant narrative by documenting the stories of democratic, egalitarian Dalit consciousness that has been excluded from the mainstream Hindu narrative. Thus, the author challenges a unitary construction of the nation and its imagination. In his words, "Dalit imagination of the nation and nationalism significantly altered the meaning of nation" (204). The book provokes the reader to critique the idea of nation. "From ancient times to the postcolonial present, Dalits have been articulating anti-caste ideologies, and aspiring to an egalitarian, ethical society based on principles of social equality and human dignity (5)".

    "Dalit" has been the most researched category in contemporary Indian social sciences. Until the late 1980s, Dalit was primarily used as a category of reference for caste, yet caste as a category did not gain much critical reflection by scholars. With the rise of Dalit literature in the 1990s, the interests of understanding the epistemology and ontology of caste started gaining ground in Indian academia as well as in the West. Jangam critically presents the history of nationalism in the Telugu public sphere and justifies how Dalits remained a solid contributor of nationalism through their anti-colonial struggle at the grassroot level. In this context, the author makes an important point that Dalits developed a different concept of nation and nationalism, and made securing a commitment to social equality, human dignity and egalitarian democracy–a pre-condition for the independence of the country (11).

    While explaining the complexities of caste and class in colonialism, Jangam claims that "no South Asian scholars has to date employed the concept of internal colonialism…"(137). This is an important observation. However, my own study on the formation of Telangana state was published at the same time using this concept to demonstrate how Telangana served as an internal colony to Andhra. The First State Reorganisation commission in 1955 also pointed out the same danger of Telangana subjugation by the "Andhra settlers" (see Pathania, 2018).

Erasure of Anti-Caste Epistemology

The political resistance of Dalits can be measured in terms of how successful they have been in expanding the meaning of democracy; in other words, in forcing civil society to acknowledge their presence and agency, and to embrace their agenda. Dr. Ambedkar in his writings on the origin of untouchability (1948), traces the historical

legacy of Dalits' resistance and anti-caste tradition. Centuries of oppression and material deprivation institutionalized by religious scriptures articulated Dalit's sense of self-worth. The abuse left a deep "ontological wound of self-negation and self-esteem," which the author refers to as "self-doubt" (6). The book connects the pre-colonial, anti-caste cultural memory with the ideological forms, which were used by Dalits to counter the colonial Brahmanical trajectory of modernity (5).

Historians who eulogise Gandhi's non-violent struggle often overlook Ambedkar's *satyagrahas* (peaceful non-violent protests)*.* He led the most popular *Mahad* satyagraha. Jangam portrays how Dalits have tried to mobilise themselves by organising political rallies, public meetings, and temple entry *satyagraha*. The most significant contribution of this chapter is that the author views Dalit consciousness as a continuum rather than fragmented between precolonial and anti-colonial struggles. The author carefully presents the details of Ambedkar's struggle to secure civil and political rights for untouchables by organising them into a political community (188). He briefly mentions the Ambedkar-Gandhi debate on Hinduism and concludes that "Gandhi refused to accept equality as a religious and ethical necessity" while addressing the untouchables' claim of rightful status as equals (189).

These movements represented a fundamental cultural revolt against the caste system. A prominent caste scholar, Gail Omvedt (2011), notes that the cultural revolution that had begun in colonial India—and been heralded in struggle and dialectic process long before that—remained incomplete (312). The mainstream Hindu narrative served to erase their precolonial heritage of anti-caste consciousness, thereby rendering Dalits rootless. Dalit imagination and politics are very much in tune with the nationalist imagination (204). In the epilogue, Jangam suggests that the "roots of contemporary Brahmanical Hinduism became entangled with the structural foundation of the state, thereby threatening to undermine the ethical and egalitarian principles…"(213). In short, what Dalits have been struggling with in their daily life today is their political struggle to establish modernity as opposed to deeply entrenched Brahmanism in India.

Jangam duly highlights the critical role played by the vernacular political actors and unfolds the linguistic politics of Telugu-speaking regions of the erstwhile Madras Presidency. This region had witnessed the presence of Dalits in the politics of nationalism that ran counter to both the colonial and Brahmanical project of nationalism. Jangam views it as "upper caste Brahmanic nationalism" (211) bringing forth the untouchables' culture as counter to the ongoing Brahmin dominance. Through the experience of several Dalit activists in early twentieth century Telugu-speaking Madras Presidency, Jangam underscores the ongoing ideological tension between Gandhians and the Ambedkarites on the question of untouchability.

The book devotes significant attention to the politics and ideology of Bhagya Reddy Varma, who was the founder of the Brahmo Samaj Movement in Hyderabad. Reddy was a social worker, journalist, publisher and writer who made a tremendous contribution in the area of education during the Nizam rule. Reddy started the most popular magazine *Bhagyanagar Patrika*. He proposed that the medium of instruction should not be Urdu but rather the mother tongue of the students. Reddy was a flagbearer of Telugu nationalism and further, defined lower castes as *Adi-Hindus*. Jangam, in his

historical analysis, critically evaluates the content of this publication. In his words, "The *Patrika* reveals the contradictions in the cultural and ideological articulation of Bhagya Reddy, especially the way in which he oscillates between the construction of a separate identity and history for untouchables, and attempts to integrate them into the Hindu social and cultural processes within in the reformist framework (149)." The author also highlights Reddy's leadership contribution in the modernization of the capital city of Hyderabad that brought education and employment opportunities to the untouchables (163). This eventually led to Dalit resistance to Brahmanism from the nineteenth century onwards. Amidst this, Bhagya Reddy who accepted the reformist Hindu agenda, was accepted by the Brahman reformers (164). With the aid of extensive archival work of *Krishna Patrika* and *Reform Committee* reports, Jangam demonstrates the political articulations of Dalits in Telugu-speaking areas (140) and concludes that the pre-colonial counter-cultural memory is rooted in anti-caste ethics and anti-caste imagination of Dalits.

The insightful analysis of India's colonial history makes *Dalits in the Making of Modern India* a valuable resource for the scholar exploring modernity, nationalism and anti-caste movements. In this probing and thoughtful work, Jangam establishes several claims on the basis of the comprehensive and exhaustive archival work. The work is even more relevant in contemporary India which is undergoing ideological churning. The meaning of communal and secular are manipulated by the ruling class who have mastered sectarian politics. It is a time when India needs more "imaginative power" or "invincible imagination" which Jangam claims can serve as an "antidote to communal nationalism."

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