New Alphabet in Sight: Representation and the Reframing of Dalit Identity

by

Divya Ramakrishna Rao

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in English and Comparative Literature

University of Warwick

Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies

November 2019
Table of Contents

List of Figures..............................................................................................................i
Note on Transliteration..........................................................................................ii
Acknowledgements..................................................................................................iii
Abstract.....................................................................................................................v

INTRODUCTION........................................................................................................1
I. A Word With You, World!.....................................................................................1
II. Edicts of Manusmrīti and Dharmaśāstra: Chaturvarna, Jāti, Untouchability, and Caste ......9
III. The Anti-Caste Struggle and Its Critical Thinkers...........................................11
   III.1. The ‘Ambedkarism’ of Ambedkarite Dalits: The Singularity of Ambedkar ............12
IV. From ‘Untouchable’ to ‘Dalit’: An Historic Journey ........................................14
   IV.1. The Polemics in Nomenclature .....................................................................16
V. The Multi-Faceted Gradations in Dalit Subject-Formation..................................18
VI. Knowledge Formation, Cultural Production, and Intellectual Traditions that Disbar ..24
VII. Dalit Literature Speaks ....................................................................................28
VIII. The Conflicting Debates on Caste, Class, and Marxism ..................................31
IX. A Note on Translation, Teaching, and Dissemination of Dalit Literature .............35
X. The Chapters .......................................................................................................40

CHAPTER 1: Precedents to Dalit Discourse in Medieval Vīraśaivism.........................47
I. Manteswamy Kāvya: An Oral Epic of Untouchability .........................................51
II. The Nodes of Bhakti, Vīraśaivism, Basavanna, and Vachana-Sahitya ..................52
   II.1 Bhakti..............................................................................................................53
   II.2 Vīraśaivism ................................................................................................55
   II.3 Basavanna .....................................................................................................62
   II.4 Vachana-Sahitya .........................................................................................65
III. Counter-Hegemonic Form and Oral Poetics of the Vachanas .............................66
   III.1 Counter-Structures of the Vachanas: “Defiance is not Discontinuity” ..........69
   III.2 Counter-Hegemonic Thematic Content of the Vachanas .............................71
IV. Can a Radical Moment Outlive its Movement? Reflections on the Impact and Relevance of Vīraśaivism.................................................................82
IV.1 Modernity and Virāśaiva Bhakti ................................................................. 82
IV.2 Formation of a caste on the basis of an anti-caste movement: The Liṅgāyata Case ........................................................................................................ 85
V. Closing Comment ..................................................................................... 89

CHAPTER 2: The Ambedkarite Paradigm in Modern Dalit Writing .................. 94
I. The Poona Pact (1932): A Watershed Moment for Dalit Discourse on ‘Representation’ .. 95
II. In Search of the Ambedkarite Paradigm within Modern Anglophone Literature .... 101
III. An Overview of the Ambedkarite Paradigm in Modern Kannada Writing .......... 104
IV. Navodaya Literature and the Dawning Ambedkarite Horizon ....................... 106
V. The Pragathisheela Writers ........................................................................ 117
VI. Dalit-Bandaya (Dalit-Radical/Dalit-Rebel) Literature and Ambedkar’s Philosophy ... 122
VII. The Ambedkarite Paradigm and Contemporary Contentions of Self-Closure .... 129
VIII. Closing Comment ................................................................................. 137

CHAPTER 3: Writing Gender: Silence, Graded Difference, and Solidarity ............. 143
PART I: The Feminist Impasse: Three Contexts ............................................ 143
  Context I: Karnataka ................................................................................. 143
  Context II: Tamil Nadu ............................................................................. 145
  Context III: Andhra Pradesh ................................................................. 147
PART II: ‘Silence’ and ‘Silencing’: Theoretical Formulations of Dalit Gender Discourse .. 148
  II.1 Theoretical Frameworks and Silence by Lacunae ................................ 148
  II.2 The Silence on Love, Desire, Pleasure .............................................. 151
  II.3 Silence and Silencing: The Tale of Two Feminisms ....................... 153
  II.4 The Question of ‘Lived Experience’: Silencing Solidarities ............. 157
PART III: Constructing the Gendered Dalit Woman ........................................ 161
  III.1 Constructing the Gendered Dalit Woman through the Dalit Male Gaze .... 161
  III.2 Constructing the Gendered Dalit Woman through the Non-Dalit Male Gaze ... 167
  III.3 Constructing the Gendered Dalit Woman by the Dalit Woman Writer .... 177
PART IV: Closing Comment ....................................................................... 185

CHAPTER 4: Ways of Seeing Dalit Narratives in Other Media .......................... 191
List of Figures

Fig. 4.1 (Reproduced from Tartakov) *Sister Mysore*, Navaratri 1981, Photograph by Gary Michael Tartakov .................................................................................................................. 191

Fig. 4.2 Help by G. Renuka Devi .................................................................................................................. 206

Fig. 4.3 Wounded by C. Porkodi .................................................................................................................. 207

Fig. 4.4 Steps by Chandru .......................................................................................................................... 208

Fig. 4.5 X-ray by Chandru .......................................................................................................................... 209

Fig. 4.6 Photograph of a multimedia installation. Artist Unknown ......................................................... 210

Fig. 4.7 (Above and Below: Screenshots of *Papilio Buddha*) Opening scenes from *Papilio Buddha* of the dramatic landscape of the Western Ghats, captured in long shot .......................................................................................................................... 221

Fig. 4.8 (Above and Below: Screenshots of *Papilio Buddha*) Closing scenes from *Papilio Buddha* of the evicted Meppara dalits walking, seemingly towards no place, in a soundless exodus, captured in long shot .......................................................................................................................... 223

Fig. 4.9 (Screenshots from *Papilio Buddha*) The scene, in sequence, in which Kariyan looks wordlessly, at length, upon the framed pictures of his three idols on his mantel, before replacing the photograph of EMS with that of the Buddha .......................................................................................................................... 226

Fig. 4.10 (Screenshot from *Papilio Buddha*) The Yab-Yum position, a common symbol in Buddhist tantric tradition .......................................................................................................................... 233

Fig. 4.11 (reproduced from Johannes Beltz) *Life Moments of Ambedkar*. Chromolithograph on paper acquired in India in 1994 by Johannes Beltz, artist unknown .......................................................................................................................... 241

Fig. 4.12 (all three reproduced from Johannes Beltz) ....................................................................................... 242

Fig. 4.13 (Reproduced from Gary Michael Tartakov) Painted cement statue of B. R. Ambedkar in Harsul, Maharashtra, by Ramachandra Bandu Sasamkar, 1962 .................................................................................................................. 245

Fig. 4.14 Top Left: (Web Photo, Rajya Sabha website) Bronze sculpture of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on the lawn of the Rajya Sabha, by Brahmesh V. Wagh, 1967 .................................................................................................................. 246

Fig. 4.15 (All three images reproduced from Melia Belli) ....................................................................................... 250

Fig. 4.16 (Reproduced from web) Sculptures of Mayawati and Kanshi Ram flank a frieze that depicts them inaugurating the Ambedkar statue [see below]. Bronze sculpture and bronze frieze, commissioned by Mayawati, Ambedkar *stupa*, Ambedkar Memorial, Lucknow. Artist unknown .......................................................................................................................... 251

Fig. 4.17 (Reproduced from web) Dr. B R Ambedkar modelled after Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial; inscribed on the base in Hindi: ‘My life struggle is my message’. Bronze sculpture, commissioned by Mayawati, Ambedkar *stupa*, Ambedkar Memorial, Lucknow. Artist unknown .......................................................................................................................... 252
Note on Transliteration

The transliteration system used for Kannada names and words in this thesis (Chapter 1) is very close to the accepted Sanskrit transliteration system (IAST). The only difference is in marking length for the mid-vowels e ē o ō, whereas Sanskrit has only ē ō. I have also translated the anusvāra by the appropriate nasal which one hears in Kannada pronunciation: e.g. for līṅga, I write līṅga. Lastly, there are long (or double) consonants in the middle of Kannada words. English has them only across words: hot tin, seven nights, sick cow, etc. They are indicated in the chapter by double letters, as in Kannada, Basavanna, Akkamahadevi, and so on.

1 International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration.
Acknowledgements

There are only too many incredible people to thank and too little space to do them justice. Needless to say, the guidance, support, critique, attention, and care of my two super supervisors, Prof Neil Lazarus and Dr. Rashmi Varma, over the past four years have made this research project possible. And to do so in a manner that has always valued and nurtured ‘my voice’ in the work, is something precious to me. I thank them for all of this and more; although, I owe so much to both of them a mere thank you can never suffice. I also wish to thank Prof Francesca Orsini and Prof Pablo Mukherjee, who I was fortunate to have as my examiners, for their invaluable comments at my viva voce.

I have been a fortunate recipient of the helpful academic support of so many wonderful, kind, and generous people at Warwick, and beyond Warwick as well. The critiques of Prof Mukherjee and Dr. Ross Forman, when they first read a portion of my work in its formative stage three years ago, have certainly impacted my work for the better. Prof K Satyanarayana, Prof Abhaya Gurumurthy, Prof Anil Pinto, Dr. Nicole Thiara, Dr. Chantal Wright, Dr. Judith Misrahi-Barak, Dr. Rahul Rao, Dr. Sarah Hodges, Ruby Hembrom, Dr. Frauke Matthes, Dr. Gopika Jadeja, S. Ramakrishna, Prof Shoma Sen, S. Anand, and Dr. Joshil Abraham have all been incredible in their helpful advice, encouraging support, and interest shown in my work. Prof Peter Dayan, since as far back as 2012, has played a crucial role in giving shape and discipline to my obsession with poetry-music-translation and the Kannada vachanas. To my peers at Warwick who have easily been my most brutal critics and my fiercest champions through their generous proofreading efforts, I thank you Dr. Shrikant Botre, Dr. Jenny Mak, Dr. Michael Tsang, and Dr. Roxanne Bibizadeh.

I do not know how I might have managed if it were not for the support of my family and friends, in the UK and back in India, old and new. I have much to thank for in having them in my life. Nina Gir (my home always-and-forever), Shwetha Ajgaonkar, Te-Anne Robles, and Ritika Ghosal, this thesis would quite simply never
have materialised without you to keep me sane, well, and strong. Sweth and Sandy: in your own keenly lampooning yet oddly affectionate ways, you both have been my hugest cheerleaders from the very beginning of this journey (indeed, even before that too). I can’t wait to sit you down and read you my entire thesis as thanks, ha ha ha! Jayanth Randhwa, who alternates between ‘ideological dushman’ and ‘intellectual dost’ but always steadfast ally the way good old friends are: this thesis has repurposed some of our most heated arguments and they have emerged in a surprisingly sane light. Roxanne Douglas, the woman who gives simply the best hugs in the world, you’ve been exactly that friend that every person should be so lucky to have: all the unashamed and unapologetic eating and drinking, laughing and dancing, faffing and theorising turned out to be the perfect concoction needed to ward off, if not cure, those PhD blues.

My incredibly supportive family—both my siblings Chitra and Shamu, and my siblings-in-law Chandu bawa and Smitha, my two smart(ass) nephews, Aakash and Prahalad, and two feisty nieces, Amritha and Pavani, all my wonderful assortment of madcap cousins (a special shout out to Radha, Shruithi, Nethra, Ravi, and Ganesh), my inspiring aunts and cool uncles, and well-wishing elders—scattered all over and beyond Bangalore have in one way or another, at one stage or another, walked alongside me in this PhD journey. I am only too happy to share the credit, along with the joy, for this project’s fruition with them. Amma, I can’t begin to tell you what your unwavering faith in me has meant to me and this project; your unique generosity of spirit is unmatched and I treasure you. Appa, Amma, and Ajja, my three foundations, my three idols: I wholeheartedly, with much respect, gratitude, and love, dedicate this work of mine to you. I hope I have done you proud Appa.

And finally, but most importantly —

To Dalits in India:

This is your time, my friends. Pick your song and sing it loud. There are many of us who will join in chorus.
Abstract

Dalit literature offers fertile grounds for testing the triumphs and shortcomings of postcolonial discourse in a twenty-first century that is well into its second decade. The Subaltern Studies Project, for instance, has both inspired and angered dalit scholars and activists. They have credibly argued that the subaltern historiographical project, in its inability to accommodate dalit voices and caste realities, has failed to conscientiously graft dalit history within its discourse. Nor has the subaltern project attentively addressed the figures and modes that implicate history in the strategies of caste power. Beyond such healthy critique of postcolonial debate, perhaps more crucially, the essentially anti-casteist nature of dalit discourse and scholarship offers a counter-hegemonic discourse that has a vital role to play in contesting the Hindutva populism currently gripping India today. Traditionally, it can be acknowledged, dalit literature has been a reductive representation of the dalit condition, limited largely to works of lament and victimhood—of ‘conventional victims’ of caste oppression. But with political reforms implemented to protect dalit interests since India’s independence, increase in transnational and global dalit activism and scholarship, and the theorisation of the dalit within academia, there is an urgent need to reframe dalit apperceptions within literature and the arts. My thesis attempts to execute such a reframing, through the lens of ‘representation’ in literature. While primarily a literary study, my ‘texts’ also include works in other media such as film, statues and sculpture, chromolithographs, and autoethnographic art works, where suitable for a comparative study.
INTRODUCTION

I. A Word With You, World!

This thesis springs from one simple plane of inquiry: the question of ‘representation’ vis-à-vis Dalit Literature. The problematic of inside and outside has been a contentious one and continues to grip dalit literary discourse to date. The issue of writing on or from a dalit experience and/or perspective is reminiscent of other debates that have taken place in the context of other literatures – postcolonial or African American literatures comes foremost to the mind here. Some critical, but also highly contestable, questions that recur in these fields include: Who speaks? Who has the right and opportunity to speak? For whom? In what mode and medium? To which audience? To what purpose? Through which means of production? While these questions are in some contexts interrogations of a sincerely ethical persuasion, they also speak to notions of entitlement, authorship, legitimacy and voice, and appropriation and reclamation in other contexts. Both, the politics, and to a lesser degree, the ethics, of questions on representation are exactly what is at stake in this work. As part of the title of this thesis suggests, the preoccupation with the question of ‘representation’ and identity politics in dalit discourse has engendered a reconfiguration of dalit identity. At the same time, the emergence of Dalit Literature as an emerging field of study within academia, spells a new(er), counter-hegemonic language and literature on the horizon; hence, ‘New Alphabet in Sight’, which is also a

---

2 This is the title of Kannada dalit writer and intellectual Siddalingaiah’s autobiography, Ooru Keri (Kannada: 2006) in the English translation (2013).

3 Throughout this thesis, where capitalised, ‘Dalit Literature’ indicates the emergent field of literary study in academia and curricula. Where not capitalised, ‘dalit literature(s)’ merely indicates dalit writing.

4 Title of this thesis: New Alphabet in Sight: Representation and the Reframing of Dalit Identity

Today, a formidable body of Dalit Literature—especially in the sense of literature as produced by dalits in a conscious, defined, modern sense with an awareness of what it is to be ‘dalit’, and (more often than not) about dalit lives—is slowly, but steadily, creating a distinct space for itself. The coming about of this self-representational mode of modern Dalit Literature, however, has not been easy. In the Anglophone literary world in particular, the portrayal of dalits by non-dalits in literature has remained the norm (likewise in cinema and the arts). The exigent need now is to engage with what dalits are writing: the autonomous voice and mode of self-expression of the hitherto excluded. The urgency here is not to signal a preponderance of ‘authenticity’, nor is it a concession to the clamour of identity politics. Rather, the urgency is one of attention needed towards the aesthetic and political value of this body of writing, and the insights it offers into a caste-riddled social reality. These factors, and the nuances (of graded difference) in their manifestation, have otherwise eluded representations of ‘caste’ and ‘the dalit’ in non-dalit writing, for the most part.

A critical analysis of what literature written by dalits seeks to accomplish must first address the criticism levied at representations of dalits by non-dalit writers. The takeaway from such critiques of representation is certainly not that non-dalit writers do not have the right to portray dalits; there cannot be any literary policing on such a

---

In this regard, two volumes of dalit writings from South India, both edited by K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, come in for a special mention early on in this “Introduction”: *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India – Dossier I: Tamil and Malayalam* (2011) and *Steel Nibs are Sprouting: New Dalit Writing from South India – Dossier II: Kannada and Telugu* (2013). Painstakingly collected, collated, and translated (by a host of translators, most of whom are significant dalit scholars and activists in their own right), with a breath-taking range of thinkers, writers, and genres in the dalit movement in India covered in approximately 800 pages within each dossier, the two volumes are invaluable as sources of, as their contents would reveal, vastly heterogeneous dalit writings from colonial and post-colonial South India.
subject. But as K. Satyanarayana observes, “Despite their serious commitment, non-dalit writers miss the dreams, desires and visions of dalits and objectify them as either victims or romanticise them as great people. This continues to be a serious problem” (qtd. in Anand 16). Cho Dharman shares this view as well. The son of a professional oyil kummi (Tamil: ‘artist-performer of folklore’), and the author of the novel Kukai (`owl’), a novel rich in the idiom of dalit lore, Dharman asks in vexation:

Why are dalits always portrayed in stereotypical ways, as landless, easy to anger and so on? Dalits own land, they work, they tend cattle, they are playful, artistic, know how to get along, have a good moral life.8

The recent interest shown by the mainstream and conventional cultural institutions in Dalit Literature and Dalit Art can be read as mostly an attempt to preserve the conservative institutions from de-centring and disassembling. For, as dalit scholar Sadanandan has argued,

[i]t is not coincidental that the people who are engaged in the kind of arguments that bracket off and define Dalit literature/art as ‘this’ or ‘that’ appear to be interested only in alienating the life condition of the dalit from its contemporary location, and constructing it as something that is of the Chaturvarnya time [thus, as if of a bygone antiquity]. (Sadanandan 315)

In other words, the historical memories of dalits are often sedimented in their cultural forms and social practices that are not amenable to investigation under the auspices of discursive reason of hegemonic institutions.

A reading of even the smallest sample of works by dalits from different regions would reveal that dalits are not the two-dimensional persons and communities as typecast in most well-recognised Anglophone literary works by non-dalit writers.

---

8 K. Satyanarayana, an academic and an Ambedkarite critic, has pioneered the teaching of a Dalit Studies course (running successfully since the year 2000) in the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) in Hyderabad.


The tropes of the solely ‘poor’ and/or ‘oppressed’ dalit are tired ones, where the dalit subjects are merely passive victims awaiting paladins and benevolent regimes to emancipate them. And tropes apply for the one who emancipates the dalit as well. They are typically of the upper caste persuasion, doling out a distinctive version of *noblesse oblige*, whilst the dalit subject is unequipped with anything other than some mode of rudimentary proto-materialist, quasi-historical, primitive forms of scientific and technological sensitivity.

In particular, realist novels have typically succumbed in this regard where the dalit as the ‘passive sufferer’, with no consciousness of caste politics, has persisted as a recurring trope. And it can almost always be relied on that things never end well for the dalit protagonists in these novels. By the end of the story, their dreams, aspirations, hopes, and resistance have all been, remarkably, as if an unwritten rule were being followed, seriously compromised, if not entirely sacrificed, to service gritty realism. As will be elaborated upon in Chapter Two, celebrated Anglophone writers, who for all intents and purposes ‘present India’ to the world, have been susceptible to such typecasting (albeit in varying degrees and manner) and/or have written in a fashion that *contains* rather than *expresses* dalit experience.

Of course, the ‘susceptibility’ as such needs to be read as historically contingent and sensitive to the context in which it was produced. What may chafe from an early twenty-first century perspective may well be explicable and fathomable when located historically. The works of early writers such as Shivaram Karanth’s *Choma’s Drum* (Kannada, 1933; trans. 1978), Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935), Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938), and the like, while certainly open to critical reading, require the judicious contextualisation they are due. Anand’s *Untouchable*, for instance, published in English as early as 1935, may portray Bakha as solely disenfranchised and bared of agency, but this can be substantiated to some extent; the 1930s were such that no protections were sanctioned by law or society against untouchability, and the anti-caste movements challenging caste hegemony were still in their
formative phase. Read against this backdrop, there is no denying that Anand’s novel broke new ground in the Anglophone literary world. Not only in how it introduces an untouchable as the main protagonist but also in how the focalisation of the narrative was done entirely through him all along the twenty four hours that constitute the time span of the novel.

Where Anand’s portrayal of the ‘passive dalit’ may be accounted for, Rohinton Mistry’s, for instance, is much harder to justify or to let pass. Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1995), in its chronicling of a chamar family’s story through the characters of uncle and nephew, Ishvar and Om, remains rooted in a mode of empathy-realism à la Anand, or Premchand⁹ before him. Written in the mid-1990s, it is yet the same combination of fatalism, compassion, and good intentions of Premchand; in effect, trapping dalits in abjection petrified since the 1930s. The historical setting of the ‘past’ in the novel quite simply ignores an unmissable figure like Ambedkar while writing on Gandhi and the Indian National Congress within the historical narrative of pre-independence India. It also remains remarkably oblivious to the formations of dalit political consciousness and the rise of various dalit movements, both decidedly relevant to the context of its other historical setting, the ‘present’, set in Bombay – the very city that saw the birth of the radical Dalit Panthers in 1972 – during the Emergency years. Such historical elisions within a ‘realist’ novel open the debate for what it is that such writers do with their representations of dalit characters and the dalit community in their constructions of history and the nation. Likewise, while Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1996) remains a trailblazer in that Velutha, as a former Naxalite, is perhaps the first dalit protagonist to be written into Anglophone fiction by a non-dalit writer who is unmistakeably political, it has been the recipient of criticism as well. It has been argued that Velutha’s perspective is not really taken into account or given value – the reader gets a perspective on Velutha, not from him (Abraham and Misrahi-Barak 9). In such ways, a scrutiny of who writes and how they

---

⁹ Ishvar’s father in *A Fine Balance* is named Dukhi; an homage to the equally pitiable Dukhi in Premchand’s famous short story in Hindi, “Sadgati” (1931).
write ‘the dalit’ calls for a discussion on whether non-dalit writers can raise their (i.e. the dalit protagonist’s) voice, along with the dalit writers.

It also leads to another set of questions: Does the caste-identity of a writer define them as a writer? Would Anand, along with such writers as V. S. Naipaul, R. K. Narayan, A. K. Ramanujan, U. R. Ananthamurthy, and the like, then be put in the category of ‘brahmin writers’ writing Brahmin Literature? Are dalit writers restricted to writing Dalit Literature? Cannot they simply write Literature? Cho Dharman, for instance, despite having no objections to identifying, or being identified, as someone belonging to the dalit community, takes special care never to describe himself as a ‘dalit writer’. He is a writer. What he creates is Literature, not Dalit Literature.10

As Dharman’s outlook demonstrates, these considerations are important for a questioning of the very category of ‘Dalit Literature’ itself; at what point, if at all, does taxonomy decline from an expedient self-assertion and regress into an isolating self-closure? Chapter Three pays particular attention to the debate by opening up the selected texts to a questioning of the binaries of in and out. Through the intersectional lens of ‘caste-gender-class’, the chapter examines the question of ‘solidarity’ in the construction of a ‘dalit politics’ and whether this politics can be consciously adopted by the non-dalit who writes about dalit subjectivity.

But this thesis is interested in going beyond the question of whether Dalit Literature can only be written by dalits. If Chapter Three examines the binaries of in and out, Chapter Four is dedicated to the scrutiny of the beyond: this chapter is very much invested in encouraging the reader to look beyond Literature per se – towards the visual arts, for instance. For, in studying a variety of dalit narratives in other media, it encourages us to go beyond simple categories of Literature as narrative.

As this thesis attempts throughout to accentuate, the dalit communities, multifarious as they are, have a rich repertoire of diverse cultures and memories. Their systems of knowledge, the contraband worldviews (as the caste-reality of the

10 For an excerpt of Dharman’s views on the same, see No Alphabet in Sight, p.60.
world they inhabit deems it) that their works commemorate, their technological skills, are all themselves statements of dissent; legitimate in themselves (Nandy: 2010). As Chapter One illustrates through analyses of the Vīraśaiva literary traditions, their stories, music, gods, goddesses, ghosts, and spirits all come to the fore in their writing and seek to be grafted within collective memory and discourse.

In order to address the significance of dalit society and culture, critics have called for a necessary re-orienting of one’s hermeneutic interest: away from pre-digested models of linguisticality, discursivity, and textuality (Nandy: 2010; Sadanandan: 2016; Thankappan: 2016). I would expand on this and suggest that we orient our hermeneutic interest towards what Paul Gilroy, elsewhere, has called the “phatic and the ineffable”¹¹, but not to the ends of what Neil Lazarus has identified as the tendency towards “fundamental alienness”¹². Dalit culture and subjectivity, in all their complexity, comprise ‘another’¹³ set of analytic categories, forms of ingenuity

¹¹ Gilroy calls for this with respect to black Western subjectivity, but it is applicable to dalit subjectivity as well. Gilroy posits black diasporic cultural and intellectual production in the critique of cultural nationalism via his formation of a black Atlantic utopianism, which he maintains, emerges from transnational black experience that transcends both the nation and ethnicity. In Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1993) p.73.

¹² Lazarus identifies a tendency within postcolonial criticism on ‘representation’ that leans towards such ‘alienness’. Signalling the signature critique of colonialist (mis-)representation in the consolidation of postcolonial studies in the late 20th century, he writes: The struggle over representations gave way to the struggle against representation itself, on the ground that the desire to speak for, of, or even about others was always shadowed by a secretly authoritarian aspiration. The theoretical resort has then often been to a consideration of difference under the rubric of incommensurability… I suggest that the vast majority of ‘postcolonial’ literary writings point us in a quite different direction, towards the idea not of ‘fundamental alienness’ but of deep-seated affinity and community, across and athwart the ‘international division of labour’. (Lazarus 19; emphasis in original) This is further elaborated upon in the chapter entitled, “‘A Figure Glimpsed in a Rear-View Mirror’: the Question of Representation in ‘Postcolonial’ Fiction” in The Postcolonial Unconscious (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011) pp. 114-160.

¹³ In preference to the ‘other’. For, as M. N. Srinivas, (and Ambedkar*, at least forty years before Srinivas) has identified in his exhaustive study on ‘caste and Sanskritisation’, the dalit subjectivity taken for granted today is, of course, composed of a long and intricate historical hybridization of inter-caste interactions and cross-culturalisations. For a further reading on ‘Sanskritisation’, see two of M. N. Srinivas’s most influential works: Religion and Society Amongst the Coorgs of South India (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), and Caste in Modern India: And Other Essays (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962).
and creativity, a robust imaginary that while including the records of their suffering and humiliation also encodes a spirited agential pursuit of resolution, their constructions of the past, and what have even been called the “algorithms of dalit resistance”\textsuperscript{14}. The dalit imaginary can be read as both a technology of self and a means of political intervention. From this then flows the continuous and unapologetic refusal to strictly cleave ‘politics’ from ‘aesthetics’ (as the Sanskritic traditions were wont to) in their literature.

\textit{The untouchable weaver’s son warps and wefts you a pattern in which the lines between art, craft, and life have dissolved. – unknown vachana poet}

A Kannada saying that has travelled since the times of the medieval Vīraśaiva saints, it speaks to the point of ‘politics as aesthetics’ that is being made here. Certainly, the conviction that instead of being something different and separate, literature actually does politics and implements it, is not unheard of in the Western literary sphere\textsuperscript{15}. And such a conviction is one that is widely shared within the contents and sensibility of this thesis.

In a rapidly developing nation in which dalits still struggle to be recognised as equal, rights-bearing citizens; in a culture that continues to be inured (if not entirely indifferent) to the everyday violence and targeted atrocity against dalits; in a society that does not hesitate to voice its displeasure on the anti-reservation discourse but remains silent on the unmistakable ghettoisation of dalits in various socio-cultural

\textsuperscript{*As Christophe Jaffrelot notes, “Ambedkar advanced the basis of one of the most heuristic of concepts in modern Indian Studies—the Sanskritization process—that M. N. Srinivas was to introduce 40 years later,” in Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2005), p. 33.

\textsuperscript{14} See Ashis Nandy’s foreword to the second edition of D. R. Nagaraj’s work on the dalit movement in India, The Flaming Feet (2012, 2nd ed.), in “Beyond the Politics of Rage”, p. xii.

\textsuperscript{15} For instance, in The Politics of Literature (2011), Jacques Ranci\`ere explains that: The expression ‘politics of literature’ implies that literature ‘does’ politics simply by being literature. It assumes that we don’t need to worry about whether writers should go in for politics or stick to the purity of their art instead, but this very purity has something to do with politics. It assumes that there is an essential connection between politics as a specific form of collective practice and literature as a well-defined practice of the art of writing (Ranci\`ere 3).
spaces of activity; against such a backdrop, the study of Dalit Literature can offer a
critical intervention into writing ‘the subjects’ of ‘the nation’ and ‘the world’.

Driven thus by such critical questions, this thesis canvasses a host of genres
including medieval vachanas, myths and folktales, poetry, autobiographies,
testimonies, novels, short stories, statues and sculpture, dalit art, and cinema. In the
hands of autobiographers, novelists, poets, artists, filmmakers, and the like, Dalit
Literature has spawned new literary canons. The thesis examines various ‘texts’ –
literary, mythic, lyric, pictorial, filmic – for their close and complex connections with
the context they have emerged from; and their relation to their political goals have
also been detailed. The new “literary yardsticks” that Limbale calls for (Limbale 113)
take into account both the universality of these literatures and their absolute
specificity of context. All the textual choices made within the chapters have a
political dimension; one cannot separate the purpose of the text from the way it has
been delivered.

A brief digression here to delineate a few key concepts of ‘caste’,
‘untouchability’, and ‘dalit’ – if for no other purpose than to establish a, hopefully,
shared understanding of the same – may be useful at this point.

II. Edicts of Manusmr̄ti and Dharmaśāstra: Chaturvarna, Jāti,
Untouchability, and Caste

Arun Prabha Mukherjee, the translator of Om Prakash Valmiki’s
autobiography, Joothan (Hindi: 1997; trans.: 2003) (celebrated as a milestone in the
publishing of dalit autobiographies in Hindi), offers a concise historicisation:

The phenomena of caste and untouchability evolved over a period of time, as a
result of conflicts over land, resources and cultural practices between a people who
called themselves Aryans when they began arriving in India about the beginning
of the second millennium BC, and the various communities of indigenous people.

(in Valmiki xv)

According to B. R. Ambedkar, in The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables? (1948), untouchability possibly dates back to around 400 A.D.

and

[j]It is born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism which has so completely moulded the history of India and the study of which is so woefully neglected by students of Indian history. (Ambedkar 397)

While historians studying ancient India have speculated on the origins of ‘untouchability’ and ‘caste’, very little historical information of either textual or archaeological nature about these two institutions exists. However, there is general consensus that these conflicts (as mentioned by Mukherjee), born out of a struggle for political supremacy and control over land, eventually produced a social system based on the **chaturvarna** (four-varna) classification. The **chaturvarna** was a top-down hierarchy comprising Brahmins (the priests) at the apex, then Kshatriyas (the warriors), followed by Vaishyas (the traders), and lastly Shudras (the unskilled workers). Those belonging to these four groups are sometimes also referred to as **savarna** (‘of the varna’). Each **varna** (a broad classification) was further divided into thousands of **jātis** (a sub-classification), and subsequent divisions and sub-stratifications developed into modern-day castes. The moral and social behaviour that was attached to the **varnas** was codified in the ancient Sanskrit text, **Manusmṛti**. The Shudras were denied the **Upanāyana**, the coming-of-age sacred thread ceremony for males (which allowed the first three **varnas** to ‘be born again’), and were prevented from studying the sacred texts of the Vedas. The Panchamas, the ‘fifth category’, were those who fell entirely out of this four-part **chaturvarna** system, and are also referred to as **avarna** (‘without varna’). They were the ‘untouchables’ and had to live outside the boundaries of the villages, subsisting on **asprushyas**, the flesh of dead animals whose carcasses it was their **dharma** (‘duty’, as it was defined in the **Manusmṛti**) to dispose of.
III. The Anti-Caste Struggle and Its Critical Thinkers

Sharankumar Limbale, in his ground-breaking work on the modes and practices of dalit literary criticism entitled, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Writing* (2004), notes a number of factors that “loosened the stranglehold of Brahmanism and feudalism”:

European colonialism, the establishment of an English public education system, the advent of industrial capitalism, the emergence of a bourgeoisie, the rise of a working class, contact with ideas of rationalism and Enlightenment, on the one hand, and a nationalist anti-struggle movement, which was accompanied by the recognition in certain liberal circles of the need for social reform. (Limbale 5)

If the oppression of the dalits has a long history, the history of their protests is also a very long one. It is nearly impossible to pinpoint the precise origins of this protest; nor is it particularly desirable to do so. Even so, the anti-caste struggle is usually associated with Ambedkar. While no doubt, Ambedkar is justifiably hailed today as one of modern India’s foremost revolutionaries and as a dalit icon, some caution is warranted in the degree of his privileging.

It would be inaccurate, and misplaced, to seek the genesis of dalit writing entirely in Ambedkar’s thoughts alone. Likewise, crediting the Dalit Movement only to Ambedkar’s works and, in effect, ignoring the efforts of other thinkers, reformers, leaders, and activists the likes of Jyotirao Phule (1827-90), Savitribai Phule (1831-97), Pandit Iyothee Thass (1845-1914), Ayyankali (1863-1941), Poikayil Yohannan (1879-1939), and Periyar E. V. Ramasamy (1897-1973), among so many others, would not only be an unforgivable historical blunder but also a political one at a time when there is need for forming a larger dalit unity, along with other deprived sections. Indeed, there have been entire literary traditions and historical periods, dating back to pre-colonial antiquity, dedicated to the revolutionary critiques of brahmanical
doxa that have certainly impacted (albeit for differing reasons) the rhetoric of the anti-colonial nationalist struggle and the revolutionary strands of Phule-Periyar-Ambedkar anti-caste thought. Chapter One is an attempt at illuminating such counter-hegemonic precedents dating back to the medieval Kannada vachanas as promulgated by the Vīraśaiva saints. As the chapter illustrates, if Dalit Literature today has established itself as a “new mode of the literary-aesthetic” and “a dissenting counter-hegemony” in imagination and writing that challenges traditional aesthetic criteria and practices, it can trace the precedents that have spawned this journey to, at the very least, the twelfth century. That being said, Ambedkar, for many a reason – some of which this thesis unpacks – remains one of the most influential forces pivotal to the activation, mobilisation, and (to some extent) unification of Dalit Movements, to date. And the adherents of this movement centred on Ambedkar are referred to as ‘Ambedkarites’.

III.1. The ‘Ambedkarism’ of Ambedkarite Dalits: The Singularity of Ambedkar

Popularly also known as Babasaheb, and easily the most recognisable dalit figure in India and the world today, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (14 April 1891 – 6 December 1956) was an Indian political leader who worked tirelessly – and crucially, in contrast to today’s leaders, worked consistently – against the caste system in Indian polity. Born into the Mahar caste himself, a caste historically treated as untouchable, Ambedkar experienced first-hand how untouchability segregated, excluded, and dehumanised the untouchables. Nonetheless, against all odds, he went on to win a

---


17 While considered untouchable in the Hindu caste order, Mahars were socio-economically well above most other untouchable groups because their traditional role had been important in the village administrative system, and had necessitated that they had at least a rudimentary education. This frequently brought them in contact with upper-caste Hindus and, arguably as a result, this allowed their dominance over other untouchable communities to find purchase.

See Dipankar Gupta’s “Understanding the Marathwada Riots: A Repudiation of Eclectic Marxism” for an historical insight into the Mahar community.
scholarship from the Raja of Baroda which led him to Columbia University in the United States (1913), and then to the London School of Economics (1916) and Gray’s Inn (also in 1916) to acquire the degrees of Ph.D., M.Sc., D.Sc., and Bar-at-Law. On his return to India, he spent most of his political life working for the emancipation of the untouchable communities. His unrelenting fight for the cause of the dignity and self-representation of the untouchables led to the historical stand-off with Gandhi in 1932, in what would come to be known as the ‘Poona Pact’. In the later part of his life, he converted to Buddhism (in 1956), simultaneously leading a mass following in Maharashtra that did the same.

“‘Ambedkarism’ is today a living force in India, much as Marxism is: it defines the ideology of a dominant strand of the dalit movement and, to a large extent, an even broader anti-caste movement. Yet, just as Marxism as a trend in the working class movement has to be distinguished from the actual theorising of Karl Marx, so too Ambedkarism as the general movement-ideology of dalits must be distinguished from the complex grappling of an individual activist-theoretician” that is Ambedkar (Omvedt 169). This hardly ever happens, unfortunately, and ‘Ambedkarism’ tends to be conflated with everything ‘Ambedkar’, so to speak.

The people, communities, and movements that follow Ambedkar’s political philosophy and self-identify as ‘Ambedkarite’ have, since the late 20th century onwards, worked towards carving a visible and audible space for themselves in the mainstreams of India’s public, intellectual, and visual spaces; a space they do not hesitate to zealously guard from being encroached upon, assimilated, or appropriated. This (re)claiming of space in visual culture via an Ambedkarite assertion is explored in Chapter Four. Chapter Two, on the other hand, details the Gandhi-Ambedkar encounter during the Poona Pact, and examines how an Ambedkarite vision has helped shape literary modernity in dalit writing. Ambedkar as a dalit icon, justifiably or not, remains the singular most strategic representative
that drives and, to a limited extent, unifies otherwise vastly decentralised and diverse pan-Indian dalit movements.

IV. From ‘Untouchable’ to ‘Dalit’: An Historic Journey

The 1930s saw the emergence of a set of colonial euphemisms floated by the British for the untouchables, such as ‘Depressed Classes’, ‘Exterior Castes’, and ‘Scheduled Castes’. About the same time, during the independence movement, Gandhi popularised the term ‘Harijan’\(^\text{18}\) (‘child of God’) to refer to the untouchables. Ambedkar, on the other hand, largely preferred the use of ‘untouchable’ or the borrowed colonial term of ‘depressed classes’; his conflict with Gandhi was at least in part concerned with terminology. Ambedkar contested Gandhi’s promotion of ‘Harijan’\(^\text{19}\) on the grounds that its paternalistic, infantilizing condescension was oppressive to the untouchable (Omvedt 29).

After India’s independence in 1947, the legal abolition of untouchability was instituted within the newly adopted Constitution on 26 November 1949, at the very early stages when the Constitution was still in the making.\(^\text{20}\) The administrative classification of ‘Scheduled Castes’ (as first drawn by the British) was then re-enacted within the Scheduled Caste Order (SCO) of 1950, when the writing of the Constitution was completed. The SCO outlines the schedule, or official list, of the former untouchables. This SCO was prepared for the purposes of affirmative action benefits and protections for such groups, particularly instrumental in the reservations of government jobs and education seats in central universities.

\(^{18}\) Gandhi traces the term ‘Harijan’ to the fifteenth century Gujarati Bhakti poet-saint Narasimha (also known as Narsinh or Narsi) Mehta.

\(^{19}\) ‘Harijan’ continues to be used within certain Gandhian groups of today; equally, it continues to be considered pejorative and strongly objected to among many dalit communities as well.

\(^{20}\) The law ending untouchability was further honed and defined in an amendment to the Constitution of India, thus coming to be Article 17, “Abolition of Untouchability”, under the “Protection of Civil Rights Act” of 1955.
As the former untouchables engaged in the newer battles for equality and dignity, the names they had been given by the upper castes – achut, panchama, asprushya, paraiah, to name a few; most of which were traceable to antiquity – became oppressive reminders of their hitherto untouchable status. Eager to discard them, the former untouchables adopted newer names, some of which were in assertion that not only were they outside the (Aryan-introduced) *chaturvarna*, indeed, they were the ‘original’ inhabitants of ancient India. In adopting such names as Adi-Dravida, Adi-Andhra, Adi-Hindu, Adi-Karnataka, they were unmistakably staking a claim to an aboriginal identity; the Sanskritic prefix *adi-* meaning ‘from the beginning’. Such claiming of aboriginal status and a distinctly non-Aryan identity was, of course, an attempt to set their new identity apart from, and in agnostic rejection of, the Hindutva norm that secured the *Vedas* (the texts of the Aryans; the very ones sanctioning the *chaturvarna* system) to the source of India’s civilization. Other terms that came about indigenously include, but not limited to, Periyal, Atisudra, Antyaja, Balmiki, and Namasudra.

Though Ambedkar did not popularise the nomenclature of ‘dalit’ *vis-à-vis* the category of identity adopted by the former untouchables, his political philosophy was instrumental to its emergence and circulation, and has remained a key reason for its widespread popularity in usage today. ‘Dalit’ comes from the Sanskrit root *dal*, meaning to crack open, split, crush, grind, and so forth; *dal* has generally been used in verbs to describe the manner of processing food grains and lentils (Valmiki: 2003). ‘Dalit’, therefore, acquires the meaning of being ‘crushed’ or ‘ground down’. Its first usage can be traced to the 1930s when it was found in Marathi and Hindi translations, in the search for a term corresponding to the colonial ‘Depressed Classes’ 21. ‘Dalit’ gained popular currency as an identity-marker from the 1970s

---

21 For a detailed study on the genealogy of the term, see Christophe Jaffrelot’s *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (London: Hurst & Co., 2003)
onwards with the formation of the Dalit Panthers\(^{22}\) in 1972 in Maharashtra, and the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS) in 1974 in Karnataka. ‘Dalit’ became a symbol of these new movements of the oppressed that were often involved in struggles against atrocities, at times in violent and open clashes with caste-Hindus. ‘Dalit’ then took on a new militancy, an open proclamation of oppression, and soon became generalised across media.

**IV.1. The Polemics in Nomenclature**

Although ‘dalit’ is the most widely used among terms that refer to the former untouchables of today, it is not without contestation. Gail Omvedt notes that there has been some apparent unease attached to the usage of ‘dalit’ owing to the overtones of militancy that shade it – sediments of a radical time harking back to the Dalit Panthers\(^{23}\). For instance, certain politicians in the recent past have opted to discard the term ‘dalit’ owing to its reactionary connotations and replaced it with the category of ‘Bahujan’. Kanshi Ram, for one, declined the use of ‘dalit’ while forming his Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in 1984, even though his party’s primary constituents were comprised of dalits. ‘Bahujan’, meaning ‘many’ or ‘majority’ (with Buddhist echoes of *bahujana hitaya-bahujana sukhaya*: ‘the welfare and happiness of many’), was meant to encompass not just the SCs, but also the Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and all other persecuted minorities.

\(^{22}\) The Dalit Panthers movement, founded by Namdeo Dhasal, Arun Kamble, and J. D. Pawar on 29 May 1972 in Bombay, Maharashtra, was inspired by the Huey Newton-led Black Panther Party (BPP) in the United States. Chapters of the Dalit Panthers were subsequently established first in other parts of Maharashtra, and then in other states such as Karnataka (most famously, the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti) and Tamil Nadu. The Dalit Panthers led the way to a renaissance in Marathi literature and arts. They advocated for and practised radical politics, fusing the ideologies of Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule and Karl Marx. Crucially, the Dalit Panthers helped invigorate the use of the term ‘dalit’ to refer to lower-caste and other disenfranchised communities. The radical, and staunchly socialist, *Dalit Panthers Manifesto* (1973), among other things, is a work that repurposes ‘Black Power’ in order to construct ‘Dalit Power’.

Furthermore, the ambiguous, unstable contours defining the somewhat amorphous category of ‘dalit’ invite their own set of problems within caste identification. For instance, the inter-caste clashes between the larger, more powerful SCs and the smaller SCs – such as the Malas and Adigas in Andhra Pradesh, the Chamars and Valmikis in Northern India, the Mahars and Matangas in Maharashtra – is indicative of rivalry and conflict rife within and across caste-lines in the struggle for upward mobility, and the (often violent) contestation for which among these caste groups could ‘truly and properly’ be categorized as ‘dalit’ (as evident in the ‘creamy layer’ discourse). Such disputes also reflect the larger issue of whether a pan-Indian, collective dalit unity is ever realistically possible.24

The polemics in nomenclature has manifested recently as well, in a most disquieting incident that carries worrying implications for the very fundamental rights as guaranteed by the Constitution of India. On 7 August 2018, The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (M-I&B) issued an ‘advisory’ (a euphemistic disguise for ‘directive’) that urges the media, especially all the satellite and TV channels, to use only the term Scheduled Castes (SC) and not ‘dalit’, in order to comply with a Bombay High Court’s orders. The Bombay High Court order25 that M-I&B is

24 At the same time however, such contestations of nomenclature need to be understood as only inevitable within the larger developments and formations of dalit identity. Anupama Rao, in The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India (2009), writes that the significance of ‘dalit’ lies in its ‘politics of naming’. Rao argues that in such politics of naming, ‘dalit’ gains both an analytic and a prescriptive value: [the politics of naming generates] new relationships between words and bodies, between new ways of being and ways of seeing and speaking within the social field[...].It defines the historical structures and practices of dispossession that experientially mark someone as Dalit and simultaneously identifies the Dalit as someone seeking to escape those same structures (Rao 16)

This process of naming signals the search for an identity with strong political content. It can at once indicate a membership into a collective movement of solidarity that deliberately recalls a history of oppression, and at the same time be an assertion of rights for equality that opposes any further exclusion, degradation, and exploitation. And such changing nomenclature should hardly be surprising. Just as in the United States there were shifts from ‘Negro’ to ‘Coloured’ to ‘Black’ and the ‘African American’ of today, so too with the dalits, the term was bound to constantly change along with their struggles in building a dignified dalit identity.

25 Citing the Bombay High Court order (PIL no. 114/2016), the M-I&B ‘advisory’ states: “As central Government has issued necessary directions to its officers, we find that it can also issue suitable directions as per law to the respondent No 2 and the media to refrain from using the same word. Various institutes in the field are not before us and hence, we direct respondent No 1 to consider the question of issuing such action to the media and take [a] suitable decision upon it within next six weeks.”
referring to, misleadingly at that, is one that was issued solely for administrative purposes of the central and state governments. In using it as precedent to police the media’s usage of ‘dalit’, the advisory is, quite simply, a flagrant misappropriation of the court order to suit the M-I&B’s own highly questionable – indeed, unconstitutional, in that it amounts to banning speech and categories of thought – agenda. In the light of this, the advisory to refrain from using ‘dalit’ in media and broadcasting amounts to a blatant abuse of governmental powers in how it has politicised the polemics of the nomenclature.

V. The Multi-Faceted Gradations in Dalit Subject-Formation

Ambedkar and his political philosophy, among precursors such as Phule, Ayyankali, and Periyar, helped shape the newer knowledge and community formations that began to identify themselves as dalit. It is imperative to begin by mentioning here that this newer community formation is not merely the unification (limited as they may be in real conditions) of oppressed castes against the oppressive castes. “Dalit formation is not the traditional liberal view of interaction of different preconstituted communities. ‘Dalit’ as a newer formation resists this traditional liberal view because ‘dalit’ is to be understood as something other than the sum or the relation among castes. This is similar to individuals and their relations with communities because both individuals and communities are not preconstituted entities. In fact, becoming dalit is an act of positioning oneself against the ‘graded inequalities’” that constitute and sustain the caste hierarchies among and betwixt various castes and sub-castes (Thankappan 198).

---

The High Court’s order indeed advises “the Central Government, State Government and its functionaries to refrain from using the nomenclature ‘Dalit’ while referring to members belonging to Scheduled Caste,” but as is evident, it is directed at administrative bodies of central and state governments, and not, as deceptively purported by the M-I&B, meant to include bodies of media & broadcasting. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/using-word-dalit-in-media-information-and-broadcasting-ministry-scheduled-caste-5342034 [accessed 05 September 2018]
It is important to engage with the complexities inherent in caste in order to understand the significance of ‘dalit’ as a new community formation and its social, political, and historical relevance. The operative of the caste system is primarily predicated upon its ability to continually produce divisions among caste groups, and reproduce these micro level hierarchical distinctions within and among caste groups as a part of ‘natural’ (or normalised as thus) social formation. Ambedkar’s observations regarding the complex nature of the caste system, and his analysis of the technologies of power which produce the operative-ness of caste as a system, may be useful here.

Ambedkar proposed a category termed as ‘graded inequality’, distinct from existing categories of equality and inequality, in order to explain the structure of the caste system. For Ambedkar, inequality is not half as dangerous as ‘graded inequality’. In a state of inequality – like in the case of class divisions, for instance – the working class can challenge the domination of the bourgeoisie by organising themselves as a group. But in the caste system, the oppressed are deeply divided so as to be unable to form a singular group against the oppressors. Ambedkar elaborates on this structural peculiarity of the caste system:

[I]t may not be an exaggeration to say that not many people understand the significance of this principle [of graded inequality]. The social system based on inequality stands on a different footing from a social system based on graded inequality. The former is a weak system which is not capable of self-preservation. The latter, on the other hand, is capable of self-preservation. In a social system based on inequality, the low orders can combine to overthrow the system. None of them have any interest to preserve it. In a social system based on graded inequality, the possibility of a general common attack by the aggrieved parties is non-existent … [because] the aggrieved parties are not on a common level. This can happen only when they are only high and low. In a system of graded inequality, there are the highest (the Brahmins). Below the highest are the higher (the Kshatriyas). Below the higher are those who are high (Vaishya). Below the high are the low (Shudra), and below the low are those who are lower (Untouchables). All
have a grievance against the highest and would like to bring about their downfall. But they will not combine. The higher is anxious to get rid of the highest, but does not wish to combine with the high, the low and the lower lest they should reach his level and be his equal. The high wants to overthrow the higher who is above him, but does not want to join hands with the low and the lower, lest they should rise to his status and become equal to him in rank. The low is anxious to pull down the highest, the higher and the high, but he would not make a common cause with the lower for fear of the lower gaining a higher status and becoming his equal. In the system of graded inequality, there is no such class as completely unprivileged class except the one which is at the base of the social pyramid. The privileges of the rest are graded. Even the low is a privileged class as compared with the lower. Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the social system.

(Ambedkar: 1989; 101-102)

This lengthy citation from Ambedkar’s writing sheds light on the complex nature of self-preservation in the caste system, and the graded privileges and inequalities of those that such a system impacts. Further, each of the varnas, and the untouchables, if we recall, are comprised of various castes and sub-castes, all ordered in graded inequalities. Especially within the ‘low’ (shudra) and ‘lower’ (untouchable) castes, such subdivisions have worked as the major hindrance against possibilities of a newer, unified community formation.

The newer identity formation under the nomenclature ‘dalit’, in fact, was/is a political strategy to transgress the pregiven and preconstituted caste identities in favour of a new social, political, and cultural formation, whose foremost goal is a struggle for equality. Any larger revolutionary impulses it may carry can only accompany this struggle. The humanity of the dalit thus came to be predicated on arduously resignifying the apparently consensual order of caste; and here ‘caste’ needs to be read as the socio-cultural practice of sanctioned discrimination and violence, legitimised as an ancient ‘traditional practice’ by Hindu scriptures such as the dharma texts.
The dalit self-identity and subject-formation can also be read analogously if situated transnationally and transculturally at a time when similar struggles for emancipation were gathering momentum in other parts of the world. For instance, it can be read in comparison, albeit not perhaps in equivalence, to Frantz Fanon’s model of subject-formation as famously outlined in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Anupama Rao has undertaken such a comparison in *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (2009).

Rao draws attention to how Fanon and Ambedkar have each creatively interpreted Hegel’s narrative of subject-formation through historical particularity (slavery or caste) and situational possibility (revolution or postcolonial transition). Fanon and Ambedkar, it becomes evident, saw subject-formation as violent per se but also as the creative basis of society. That Fanon’s response was to exacerbate violent antagonism to the point of revolutionary violence as political creation, is well documented and vigorously analysed in postcolonial discourse. Rao too, in a reading of Fanon’s *Black Skin* and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), charts the response to the psychic wound of racialisation where Fanon’s solution to colonial dehumanisation lay in the spectacular violence of the colonised: revolutionary violence as both necessary and purifying (Rao 264-284).

In comparison, there was no endorsement of anti-state violence in Ambedkar’s scheme of dalit liberation, insofar as Ambedkar stood against revolutionary violence and spoke for a territorially dispersed minority within the nation. On Ambedkar’s pragmatic response to the colonial-national context, and his faith in the state (via the law as a habit-changing technology that could effectively transform social relations and behaviour), Rao assesses Ambedkar’s position as such: “The impossibility of converting Dalit minority status into the principle of nationality meant that it was

---

26 Ajay Skaria, has this to say on Ambedkar’s thinking of the ‘minor’ (the figure who is less than equal, but claims equality):

"Ambedkar's thinking of the minor re-orient[s] Marx's simultaneous critique, articulated most forcefully in 'On the Jewish Question'*, of religion and secularism...The concept of minority that organises the figure of the Dalit is quite different from that which Marx..."
the revolutionary act of constitution making that imagined a new social contract between Dalits and Hindus, between oppressors and oppressed. It was a pragmatic response to the colonial-national context within which he worked to resolve the Dalit question.” (Rao 274)

This is where the dalit question takes a detour from the demand for a purifying violence to counter the violence of its architects. Rather than instigating violent separation, the permanent antagonism between dalit and non-dalit became a structuring contradiction of state practice. Rao argues that Ambedkar’s attempts at political separation, though they failed at the level of the realpolitik, underlined the fact that dalits were a territorially dispersed minority. “From then on, a principle of separation would inhere as a permanent reminder of the impossibility of justice for dalit’s historic suffering within the normal terms and conditions of political discourse.” (Rao 276)

The second axis of identity, resting on the rewritten dalit history – the Phule-Periyar-Ambedkar trajectory of historiography – of enduring conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism, allowed dalits to claim the political identity of ‘non-Hindu’. This challenged the dalit’s centrality to a reformed Hinduism and a recuperated upper-caste self “premised on a shared concept of humanity which means that the other is a perverted version of the self” (Nagaraj 40). Instead, for dalits, the right to religious belief was also the right to assert an agonistic identity counterposed to the hegemonic embrace of a predominantly Hindu history of India. If the maximal act of conversion – i.e., the opting out of Hinduism – also purposively reminded Hindus of the intimate violence of untouchability, it was considered a happy bonus.

---
Such trajectories emphasise the dual problematics of dalit emancipation: to overcome religious discrimination and political inequality simultaneously, rather than transcending religious distinction by substituting the rule of the state for the rule of the religion. The tension between the ‘religious’ and ‘political’ resolution of the dalit corresponds to the paradoxical duality of a dalit identity balanced between a purely relational and historical identity, on the one hand, and a more essentialist or embodied one, on the other. The problem of dalit essentialism captured in the ‘Buddhism versus Marxism’ debate (first propagated through Ambedkar’s “Buddha or Karl Marx”27 (1956) – an attempt at a synthesis of the ideas of Karl Marx into the structure of ideas by the Buddha28) after national independence, the cultural politics of dalit liberation, the symbolic violence of speech and word in dalit literature, and the continued vulnerability of dalits to ritualised structures of political violence, each

“Buddha or Karl Marx” is also available online: http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/20.Buddha%20or%20Karl%20Marx.htm (accessed 7 Sept. 2018)

Ambedkar worked feverishly and obsessively to complete the The Buddha and His Dhamma right until his death. Given that Marx and the Buddha had so preoccupied his thoughts in that period, each offering a unique version of emancipation, it was his attempt to radically ‘make’ the two encounter each other notwithstanding the 2300 odd years that separate them. The manuscripts – one of which was “Buddha or Karl Marx” – were collated as a book and published posthumously in 1957. The work is an intense textual engagement with Buddha’s teachings and its contextualisation within the ongoing dalit struggle nearly a decade into India’s independence. It suggests that while Ambedkar’s conversion is nothing if not deeply political, he is of course aware of the ‘material aspect’ and even instrumental dimension of conversion. The full text of B.R. Ambedkar, The Buddha and His Dhamma, is available online at http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/ambedkar_buddha/, accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

28 What may be of additional interest here: In his now-famous conversion in 1956, Ambedkar does not convert to a pre-existing Buddhism, but “to a Buddhism that he receives in the process of writing The Buddha and His Dhamma. If we are to get a sense of the late Ambedkar’s politics, we must get a sense of his religion, this Navayana (new) Buddhism, that seizes him. And in order to do so, we must attend to his engagement with Marx and Marxism. Ambedkar’s most extended formulations on Marx occur in one very brief essay, “Buddha or Karl Marx”. The essay reveals the stakes of this engagement for Ambedkar”:

Society has been aiming to lay a new foundation [which] was summarised by the French Revolution in three words, Fraternity, Liberty and Equality. The French Revolution was welcomed because of this slogan. It failed to produce equality. We welcome the Russian Revolution because it aims to produce equality. But it cannot be too much emphasized that in producing equality society cannot afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. Equality will be of no value without fraternity or liberty. It seems that the three can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha. Communism can give one but not all. (ibid. p. 462)

Both Marxism and his Buddhism work, in other words, towards the promise of a world organised by equality, liberty, and fraternity, with equality as the key term. And Marxism is a particularly intense moment of the striving to keep that promise, even the most intense moment he is familiar with.
reflect the delicate balance of conceiving ‘dalit’ both as an essentialist identity (close-ended) and as political potentiality (open-ended).

This newly emerging dual cultural politics – of essentialist identity and political potentiality – is not simply oppositional either; it does not merely aim to contest the mainstream for inclusion. Indeed, as the Ambedkarite paradigm shows,

it recognises the politics of inclusion as a politics of subjugation: the becoming of a group is no longer conceived of as open but as the becoming of some specific essence”. This new cultural politics is also not transgressive in an avant-garde sense of shocking the bourgeoisie culture. Rather, it attempts, through distinctive practices and by collective insurgency, to target the de-centring of the very premise of logocentric thought itself (Abraham and Misrahi-Barak 314).

VI. Knowledge Formation, Cultural Production, and Intellectual Traditions that Disbar

Neil Lazarus, in a chapter entitled, “The Politics of Postcolonial Modernism”, in The Postcolonial Unconscious (2011), has argued that the epistemological and ideological tendencies, the assumptions and investments, that have been foremost in postcolonial studies from its inception and still predominate today, include:

an hostility towards ‘holistic forms of social explanation’ (towards totality and systemic analysis); an aversion to dialectics; and a refusal of an antagonistic or struggle based model of politics (Lazarus 21).

Oppressed peoples worldwide now, and beyond the field of Postcolonial Studies from within which Lazarus makes his point, are increasingly sceptical about the dialectical oppositional modes of thought of the ‘higher’ socio-political cultural practitioners – for the dalits this would be both, the vanguard progressives of India and of the Euro-American West. This is primarily because these discourses, despite what they may claim, hardly ever consider the subaltern as a discursive agency. The
section on ‘The Dalit Critique of Marxism’ in Chapter Four needs to be read as relating this sense of scepticism. The emergence of newer subject groups (and dalit writing definitely represents a corresponding emergence in the field of Literature) and newer populace discourses (‘other’, ‘opposite’, ‘alternative’, ‘queer’, ‘parallel’, ‘dalit’) indicates that the doubts raised by these groups are valid and must be attended to. Simultaneously, it confirms that the proscription (in the sense of an epistemological ‘untouchability’) and absenteeism constituted by the native elite is now increasingly being challenged. Indeed, these newer populace discourses indicate that such absenteeism is in the process of being destabilised, if not dismantled. A critical survey of the discursive fields of knowledge formation reveals this unmistakable absenteeism – of the scrutiny of caste, the dalit subject, and the dalit intellectual – as constituted by the intellectual elite, thereby affirming the legitimacy of the scepticism and doubts raised by the likes of those subject groups as mentioned above.

Dalit Literature has historically found no space in the classical Sanskrit, Brahmanical traditions of Sahitya (literary legacy). While the reasons for this may appear self-evident, Chapter One nonetheless does examine the same further. However, what is perhaps not as self-evident – what may seem counterintuitive even – is the stark absence of the dalit subject or key historical dalit thinkers and leaders in the strands of ‘official’ nationalist, philosophical, and postcolonial discourses.

One of the serious charges directed at the Ranajit Guha-led Subaltern Studies collective was that, despite setting out to write ‘histories from below’ and construct a critical theory of subalternity, the “Subaltern Studies launched itself with an act of rejection, denying South Asia’s ‘history from below’” (Ludden 15). David Ludden, tracking the gradual vanishing of Antonio Gramsci’s influence on the collective until it is rendered nearly unrecognisable in its eventual morphed state, observes that, “the project made itself original by divorcing itself from Gramsci to invent a distinctively Indian subalternity” (Ludden 15, emphasis in original). In a similar vein, Robert
Young argues that, “[i]n a sense, it was Spivak, not Gramsci, who invented ‘the subaltern’” (Young 31). Young is referring here to the manner in which Spivak stresses the subaltern as ‘individual’, thus introducing “the singular figure of the subaltern woman” (Young 32) as opposed to, at least for Young, the original Gramscian “political possibilities offered by the construction of hegemony through articulation of the subaltern classes” (Young 32). Yet, nowhere within such constructions of a distinctly ‘Indian subalternity’ – the imperativeness of which apparently required the vanishing of Gramsci from its framework to make room for a distinct ‘Indian-ness’ – do we see either the presence of the dalit (as ‘subject’ or ‘intellectual’) or an interrogation of intersecting structures of ‘caste’. In an early critique of Partha Chatterjee’s influential work on Indian historiography, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993), Sumit Sarkar identifies this very shortcoming:

> There is not much interest in how women struggled with a patriarchal domination that was, after all, overwhelmingly indigenous in its structures. Even more surprisingly, the book tells the reader nothing about the powerful anti-caste movements associated with Phule, Periyar or Ambedkar. No book can be expected to cover everything, but silences of this magnitude are dangerous in a work that appears...to serve as a standard introduction to colonial India... (Sarkar 96).

Sarkar quite rightly categorises this elision as ‘dangerous’. For indeed, any number of such ‘official’ historiographies record the nation as if the contradictions of ‘caste’ (in all its intersectional complexity) and ‘the dalit’ were not really there.

---

29 Cosimo Zene, in the edited volume, *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B. R. Ambedkar: Itineraries of Dalits and Subalterns* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), disagrees with Young’s assessment: “Notwithstanding the difficulty, if not impossibility, of recovering individual subjectivity from a deconstructionist – and at time Lacanian – perspective, Young seems first to fail to recognize the difference between the concepts class/individual within Gramsci’s heterodox Marxism, particularly when applied to ‘subaltern groups’ (Q3 and especially Q25), and second to appreciate Gramsci’s original discussion of concepts like individual, individualism, etc. [here, he is referring to entries of ‘classe’, ‘coscienza’, ‘individuo’, ‘individualismo’, ‘persona’, and related entries in Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks]” (Zene 3)

30 Chatterjee was one of the founding members of the *Subaltern Studies* collective.

31 Sarkar too was one of the early contributors to the collective, but later distanced himself from the group.
In a recent critical edition of Ambedkar’s *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (2011) (Ambedkar’s original was published posthumously in 1957), the editors, Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma, dedicate their entire introduction to a discussion on Ambedkar’s exclusion and silencing from academic Buddhist discourse in India. The grounds on which this silencing was justified, according to the editors, was that Ambedkar’s writings “deliver a ‘political message’ (‘theologising his own political view and politicizing Buddha’s views’), thus assuming that ‘religion’ is inherently apolitical” (Singh Rathore and Verma xi). The editors denounce the sarcasm of some who have derisively dismissed Ambedkar (with an emphatic censure reserved for Arun Shourie’s *Worshipping False Gods*, 1997) and condemn others for their silence:

> Here, the ‘subtle’ strategy is *silence*. It would be nice to be in a position to cite references regarding the justification for excluding Ambedkar’s work from the academic canon, *but the whole point is that there are no examples to cite*…

(Singh Rathore and Verma x; emphasis in italics in original, emphasis in bold added)

Ambedkar’s silencing in such manner has far-reaching implications when extended to the historically, but also disconcertingly contemporaneously, ‘silenced dalit’. Chapter Three discusses this subject in detail in the context of the multilayered and plurimodal ‘silencing’ of dalit women. Such invisibility, and silencing, is rendered in strands of ‘official’ literary discourse as well.

Dalit literatures have long been absent from what Lazarus, drawing on Raymond Williams³³, has unerringly identified as “the selective tradition” (Lazarus 27) of Postcolonial Literature that is often reduced to the triumphant pan-Indian blockbuster of the Rushdie-like Indian novel in English (Lazarus 21-88). And while Lazarus’s observation that such selective tradition “whose selectivity remained

---

³² In *Worshipping False Gods* (1997), Shourie essentially calls Ambedkar a sworn enemy of Gandhi and the nationalist movement because of his various conflicts with Gandhi on the subject of caste.

invisible to modernism itself” and “…construed itself in universalistic terms as ‘the literature of modernity’” (Lazarus 27) was in keeping with William’s critique of literary modernism, it lends itself ever so appositely to the context of Dalit Literature’s conspicuous absence within ‘the Postcolonial Literatures of India’. Here is the dalit poet, N. D. Rajkumar, alerting us to precisely such exclusive, and excluding, tradition which, for Rajkumar, has thus far failed to represent them –

The songs that are blessed
on the world’s stage
that you hear now
they are not ours. (Rajkumar 34)

VII. Dalit Literature Speaks

While the history of dalit literatures can be traced back to centuries, the hegemonic nature of caste in the field of literary production precluded dalit literary and cultural expressions from being taken into consideration. The crystallization of a dalit socio-political category and identity coincides with the emergence of dalit literatures as ‘Dalit Literature’. Current research by scholars reveals the widespread presence of dalit writings in various parts of India; incredibly diverse in culture and fascinatingly plurilingual in tongue, they often switch from one language system (and thereby, knowledge system) to another in the same text34. It also reveals that dalit literatures acquired a distinct language through their heterogeneous and plural character much before the crystallization of the ‘Dalit’ identity. Scholarly essays, for instance, have drawn attention to a Punjabi dalit poetic tradition in the 18th and 19th centuries35, and to dalits writing from Bengal in the 19th century as well36. Chapter

34 Again, the two edited dossiers of dalit writing from South India, No Alphabet in Sight (2011) and Steel Nibs are Sprouting (2013), are excellent sources illustrating this very literary richness of dalit writing.

One too, on the twelfth century anti-caste Kannada vachanas, can be read as an accounting for such traditions and the literary imaginary predating not just an historical dalit subject-formation, but predating British colonialism as well.

In 1958, a Dalit Literature Conference, the first of its kind, dedicated its entire discussion towards constituting dalit literatures as a field of literary study. It passed a resolution (Resolution No. 5) that,

the literature written by Dalits and that written by others about the Dalits in Marathi [should] be accepted as a separate entity known as ‘Dalit Literature’ and realizing its cultural importance, the universities and literary organizations should give it its proper place. (Prabudha Bharat, 4 March 1958)

While this resolution was restricted to the field of dalit literatures written in Marathi, it opened the door to a definition of dalit literatures as being ‘written by others about the dalits’. That was in 1958. Move forward to the year 2004, and we see Sharankumar Limbale, at the very beginning of the touchstone text in dalit literary criticism, Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations, define “Dalit Literature” as “writing about Dalits by Dalits with a Dalit consciousness” (Limbale 9). This rather strict metarule posing as a definition is then somewhat tempered many pages later in the same book when Limbale allows that “another perspective has become possible these days”: a non-dalit writer can also write dalit literature with the use of imagination, and if their adopted politics and perspective is dalit (Limbale 105).

Dalit Literature, as a literary field to be reckoned with, being hitherto invisible in the institutional establishments (of academia and print circulation especially), emerged in Maharashtra in the 1970s. With the formation of the Dalit Panthers in

---

36 See Sipra Mukherjee’s rich charting of dalit deities and myths in Bengali writing from the 19 century in, “Creating their Own Gods: Literature from the Margins”, *ibid.*, pp. 128-143.

37 Aspects on all of these terms – ‘dalit’, ‘dalit literature’, ‘dalit poetics and imagination’, ‘dalit consciousness’, ‘dalit politics’, ‘dalit aesthetic’, etc. – are presented in great detail in Limbale’s work. The editors’ introductions to the anthologies may also be extremely useful to the newcomer to Dalit Literature in understanding the contexts and the stakes within which these literatures are being written and disseminated.
1972, and the subsequent mobilisation of dalit writers from other states who were
drawn towards the Dalit Panthers movement, Dalit Literature gained a distinct
visibility and a radical, assertive voice. The imaginary and the power of fantasy have
been most radically repurposed in the works influenced by the Dalit Panthers
movement. The imaginary (re)conceptualisation and (re)formulation of the world is
powerfully – at times startlingly so, in the use of unfiltered language and enflamed
idiom – depicted in the poetry of Namdeo Dhasal, S. Joseph, Ravikumar,
Mathivannan, N. D. Rajkumar, and Arjun Dangle, among others.

In the post-Ambedkar centenary period (1991—), political awareness of the
specificity of dalit experiences came to be articulated across the country after the
writings and speeches of Ambedkar were made available in various Indian
vernaculars. Even the dalits who had not directly encountered Ambedkar’s political
philosophy, or had not even read his works, wakened to a certain dalit consciousness
that was quickening within and across state lines and linguistic regions; a
consciousness that was traveling and transmuting Ambedkarite ideas that were at
once heterogeneous in their particularised local landing and uniform in their
universal anti-caste, counter-hegemonic impulse.

The debates that raged at the time of Gandhi and Ambedkar, as they came to be
crystallised in the Poona Pact of 1932, continued well into the 20th century and have
shaped modern India; reaching its peak in the fraught times following the Mandal
Commission report in 1990 and morphing into the public discourse on ‘reservations’.
These debates have constantly raised questions linked to the emergence of
democracy in relation to caste. If Chapter Two delineates the history of the
Ambedkar-Gandhi encounter that was to engender a framework of critique for
assessing how writers have tended to represent dalit characters (i.e., Ambedkarite
versus Gandhian), Chapter Three unpacks the paradoxes and contradictions entailed
in the intersectional caste-class-gender nexus, and Chapter Four presents the
intricacies of the inevitable tug-of-war between caste, class, and democracy.
VIII. The Conflicting Debates on Caste, Class, and Marxism

The writings of the *Subaltern Studies* collective, which began appearing alongside translations of Ambedkar’s works into regional languages in the early 1990s, have both inspired and angered dalit historians, who, following Ambedkar’s work on caste, class, and religion, were already charting dalit histories in various parts of India around the same time.

Can the present form of history accommodate dalit lives and experiences? What are the figures and modes that implicate history in the strategies of caste power? Is it possible for historiography to rise to the challenge of dalit history? These were some of the immediate and urgent questions raised in the 1990s by dalit historians such as Raj Gouthaman and Ravikumar (founders of the Tamil Journal *Nirapirikai*) and K. K. Kochu (an early contributor since the late 1970s to the intellectual strand of one of the earliest dalit groups in Kerala, SEEDIAN, and current president of the Kerala Dalit Mahasabha). These thinkers called for a break not only with earlier modes in

---

38 Much of the new dalit writings between the 1960s and the early 1990s in Tamil Nadu appeared not as books, but as articles, folktales, serialised stories, poetry, and short story publications in little magazines started either by dalits themselves, or Left-oriented print establishments. The earliest and perhaps the best known of these dalit magazines is *Nirapirikai*, which was set up by dalit leftist intellectuals such as Ravikumar, A. Marx, Raj Gouthaman, and Prof Kalyani, who, disillusioned by the apathy shown towards caste-realities of the Tamil dalits within the Left-Dravidian movements that they previously belonged to, were exploring alternative ideologies in the early 1990s. M. S. S. Pandian describes *Nirapirikai* as “a social science journal which is a product of the dalit literary movement. [It] carries, among other things, high-quality literary criticism, local history with a subaltern perspective and translations from English social science journals. A distinct genre of dalit writing was a creation of the activist-writers associated with the group.” (Pandian 294) in “Stepping Outside India? New Dalit Writings from Tamil Nadu” (in *Wages of Freedom*, ed. Partha Chatterjee, New Delhi: OUP, 1998. pp. 293-309)

39 The contemporary dalit movement in Kerala is marked by small group initiatives in the intellectual domain, with a focus on the recovery of important historical figures, struggles for equality, and dalit assertion. In many ways, they can trace their genesis to the activities of the ‘Socially Economically Educationally Depressed Indian Ancient Natives’ (SEEDIAN), formed in late 1970, immediately following the post-Emergency period. In the 1970s itself, SEEDIAN was trying to develop a new theoretical perspective for India, drawing extensively on Marxism and Ambedkar. The group, in its nascent form, comprised dalit intellectuals such as Kochu and Sunny Kapikkad, among others. Nearly all of them were associated with the Left and were interested in reinterpreting Marxism in the context of caste in India. SEEDIAN represented the initial break of Ambedkarite dalits from the mainstream Left in Kerala, and later, from Marxism itself.
which world history (and by extension, nationalist and Marxist history) is conceived and practised but also with the aims and goals of that history.

The very real gap that exists between Marxism’s (and the Marxist intellectual’s) ethical idealism and how it is often (mis)interpreted, arguably even reduced, within Marxist practice in India, paves the way for a Dalit and/or Ambedkarite critique of Marxism. Where such obfuscation of ethics has occurred, dalit critics have called for a criticism of Marxist practice – and at times, this has perhaps consciously combined or unconsciously conflated with a criticism of Marxism itself. The section on ‘The Dalit Critique of Marxism’ in Chapter Four is an attempt to convey such a dalit counteractive rationale.

Contrary to the hopes of seeing caste vanish in the contact with democracy, caste has been written into democracy in India. Similarly, it has been part of the Marxist doxa that caste would be dissolved in the class struggle. Karl Marx wrote:

Modern industry, resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labour, upon which rests the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power.

However, modern industry has not been instrumental in annihilating caste; in fact, it has been quite the opposite. Caste struggle and class struggle do not always necessarily go hand in hand, and caste is not something that can be withered away by class. Caste works in renewed and updated forms and has morphed as a modern

---

\(^{40}\) For instance, in his perceptive critique of those Indian Marxists who were wholly preoccupied with a ‘correct’ interpretation of Marx, which could then be mechanically ‘applied’ to social realities in India – which is to say, nearly all of the early Indian Marxists – Dilip Menon calls for the need to historically evaluate those individual Marxist historians who have been ‘transmitters’ and those who have been ‘translators’ of Marxist ideology in India.

Towards such an attempt in scrutinising Kerala’s Marxist historiography, he draws on Arif Dirlik’s* evocative phrase that they had ‘walk[ed] backwards into Marxism’ to argue that Kerala’s Marxists, at the nascent phase of communism in colonial India, “became ‘communists’ first and then discovered Marxism” (Menon 3; emphasis added) in Dilip M. Menon’s “Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: EMS Namboodiripad and the Pasts of Kerala”, in Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia. ed. Ali Daud. Delhi: OUP, 1999. pp. 55-90.


phenomenon. It structures social relations and, unavoidably, also state action. As Chapter Four highlights, the Kerala model of (brahmanical) caste being assimilated within Marxist intellectualism and the historical materialism this has spawned on the one hand, and the state communism as shaped by these Marxist thinkers in its formative stages on the other, is a case in point in how this functions.

K. K. Kochu’s argument in this regard in his critique of Marxist literary practice is worth highlighting here. In “Writing the History of Kerala: Seeking a Dalit Space”, Kochu has argued that a critical analysis of the dominant historiography is essential before dalit pasts can be meaningfully represented. Marxist historiography, for instance, sets up a framework and outlines the themes and procedures of Indian history. But, for Kochu, “Modern Marxist historiography does not deconstruct the hegemony of communities in the nationalist historiography” (Kochu 45; emphasis added).

An equally important line of dalit critique is that of the norm of the secular citizen. This normative figure, and the assumed neutrality with which it occupies the public domain, is shown up in dalit criticism as marked by caste and as reaping the benefits of caste power and privilege whilst disentitling the lowest in the caste order to the same, only now, in the name of that watchword of globalisation: ‘fair competition’. And since this ‘secular’ normative figure is foundational for modern institutions – law, education, knowledge production, formation of public culture – it is also the principal modality through which these institutions now practise caste. In the unique, and peculiar, conditions prevalent in India, caste informs class, and class in turn serves to preserve caste.

These various arguments explain why many dalit critics consider the Indian Marxist view incomplete, if not entirely incommensurate, vis-à-vis real conditions of caste: it does not take into consideration the specific graded social inequality created by Hinduism. For Ambedkar and many Ambedkarite dalits, to annihilate this ‘graded inequality’, which they firmly believe is the bedrock of Hinduism, it would
require: not reform (which Ambedkar rejects as a meaningful option, arguing that reform is anathema to the very nature of caste, and thus can never be fruitfully taken to its logical end); nor merely an adoption of the secular ideals (caste is the permanent obstacle blockading the realisation of the third ideal of secularism: equality); but a dramatic ‘exploding of caste’ (as the Dalit Panthers are wont to say). Which, of course, is impossible to achieve; thus, Ambedkar’s resolve to exit Hinduism. As Ambedkarite historian Sunny Kapikkad sums it up in his critique of Marxism, “We realised that Marxism was not suitable for an analysis of Indian society [because] caste was not a behaviour pattern that could be set aside as the Marxists have done; it was [in Malayalam] soththu adhikaram, that is, social, economic and cultural capital” (Kapikkad 33).

Such critiques reveal that the Marxist variant in major Marxist states such as Kerala – and Chapter Four relies particularly on the Kerala model of Marxism for its literary analyses – has led dalits to feel that Marxists have ignored the structural roots of caste-based oppression. For the Ambedkarites, Marxism can, and has, gone awry somewhere in India; (the précis being that) Marxist practice has not lived up to its ethical ideal. While this may be perceived as a knee-jerk, wholesale rejection of Marxism itself and thus be construed as ‘anti-Marxist’, it still does not invalidate the criticism itself. The necessity of seeing how, why, and where it went wrong is what prompts the dalit critique of Marxism and not necessarily, as perhaps is more often than not assumed, a preconstituted anti-Marxist agenda. Indeed, it is worth noting that some Ambedkarites consider themselves to be Marxists, and some do not, but all univocally raise the caste question, which they believe has been problematically processed in Marxist practice. The reception of such Ambedkarite critique has, however, hitherto remained regrettabley fractious and polarising, and typically been framed as ‘Marxist versus the (anti-Marxist) Ambedkarite’.

42 See Namdeo Dhasal’s “Man, You Should Explode” from Golpitha (1972).
43 Kapikkad was also a former communist party member of Kerala’s CPI(M) and one of the founding members of SEEDIAN.
Though Ambedkar was conversant with English and his body of work in the language is remarkable for its range and volume, not many rural dalits have had access to English. However, their creativity has been thriving in various Indian languages. In a nation where, in general, good translations are hard to come by, the effort to render dalit writings into English was hardly ever made in the mid to late twentieth century.

In 1992, Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot’s *An Anthology of Dalit Literature* (Gyan Publishing), featuring Marathi dalit poetry was the first of its kind. In the same year, Arjun Dangle, one of the founders of the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, edited *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (Orient Longman), which featured excerpts of prose, poetry, fiction, and autobiography. *Poisoned Bread* in fact, went on to acquire the status of a textbook. In 1993, D. R. Nagaraj introduced a collection of critical essays, considered a landmark text today, on dalit literature, dalit cultural memory, and the now-infamous attempt to posthumously reconcile Gandhi and Ambedkar⁴⁵, in *The Flaming Feet: A Study of the Dalit Movement in India* (South Forum Press; 2nd ed., Permanent Black, 2010). Then there was a lull, till Bama’s autobiographical work, *Karukku*, originally published in Tamil in 1992, was translated by Lakshmi Holmström into English in 1999 (Macmillan). Mainstream recognition for *Karukku* came in the form of the Crossword Award in the following year. Around the same time, the Sahitya Akademi issued the

---

⁴⁴ I am indebted to S. Anand, founder-editor of the Delhi-based anti-caste publishing house *Navayana*, and S. R. Ramakrishna, senior-editor at the Indian daily *The Deccan Herald* and the translator of Siddalingaiah’s memoir (*Kannada: Ooru Keri*, 1996), *A Word With You World* (trans. 2013) for sharing their valuable insights into the publishing industry and the dissemination of dalit texts. This section draws most, if not all, of its ideas based on primarily two sources: Anand’s *Touchable Tales* (2003), and personal conversations on the subject with Anand and Ramakrishna during a Dalit Literatures conference at The University of Delhi in December 2015.

Marathi autobiographies of Laxman Mane (Upara: The Outsider, 1997), and Laxman Gaikwad (Uchalya: The Branded, 1998), works which narrativised the experience of denotified tribes.

The turn of the new millennium saw a sudden spurt in mainstream publishers' interest in Dalit Literature. Not just in the Anglophone sphere, Dalit Literature was being sought out in other European languages as well. The year 2003 alone saw the release of Narendra Jadhav’s memoir Outcaste: A Memoir (Aamcha Baap Aan Mahi by Penguin), Sharankumar Limbale’s autobiography Akkarmashi (OUP), both from Marathi, and Joseph Macwan’s Gujarati novel Angaliyat (also by OUP), all in a span of a few months. Jadhav’s work was, in fact, first made available in French! The success of Bama’s Karukku in France ensured that her second work Sangati was hastily translated into French even before it was rendered into English. In 1995, Une Vie Paria, the auto-ethnographic rendition of the life of Viramma, an unlettered Tamil dalit woman of the parayar caste, was published in French (Plon), and only later in English as Viramma: Life of a Dalit (Verso). And the print run in European languages far exceeds the limited numbers in India. Jadhav’s Untouchable (Aamcha Baap Aan Mahi), published by Fayard, who control its non-Indian language rights, sold 20,000 copies in French in less than a year. (In India, the print run for an English work of fiction or nonfiction is in the range of 700 to 1000.) Consequently, Bama, Jadhav, and Kishore Shantabai Kale (author of Against All Odds, an autobiography; 2000) were invited to Les Belles Etrangeres in 2002, a literary festival in France, attended by 17 other Indian writers.

A trend is evident here. Either the allure of dalit autobiographies and life-stories has proven irresistible to the market, or, as is most likely the case, dalit life-stories have found themselves as the commodities of a ready niche market. Omprakash Valmiki’s Hindi autobiography, Joothan: A Dalit’s Life was published by Kolkata-based Samya. In 2007, Orient Longman published Aravinda Malagatti’s
autobiography, *Government Brahmana*, a modern classic (the Kannada original, 1994). And so the trend continues strongly today.

On the level of production of dalit literatures, one possible explanation for this preoccupation with life narratives is that, because of the realist drive in which dalit literatures were engaged, the genre of autobiography seemed to be a self-evident choice for literature whose urgency was to be first and foremost a testimonial. This is similar to the slave narratives written by Africans during Atlantic slavery between 1760 and 1865—dalits have perhaps felt that they could only attain their goal through autobiography and testimony writing. Poetry, drama, or fiction, may have as a result been perceived as having a lesser political impact. This would explain the preponderance of autobiographies in dalit writing.

Dalit Literature is slowly emerging as a discipline of academic study as well. The Departments of English at both, the University of Pune and The English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad, have included Dalit Literature along with the literature of African Americans as electives (optional courses) since 2000. Jamia Milia Islamia has received support for an endowed chair in Dalit Studies from the Ford Foundation. Recently, a Research Network Series on ‘Writing, Analysing, Translating Dalit Literature’ funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), organised a series of conferences and workshops on Dalit Literature, both in the UK and in India, between 2014 and 2016.

While it does appear that this is all very promising news for dalits, and helps in gaining national and international attention on pressing issues regarding real conditions of dalits across India, just the same, there is also the need to be alert to some questions: Who decides what gets published? Who are these interlocutors – the publishers, the translators, and the editors? Why are only certain kinds of literary

---

46 Organised by Principal Investigator, Dr Nicole Thiara, lecturer in English at Nottingham Trent University’s School of Arts and Humanities, and Co-Investigator, Dr Judith Misrahi-Barak, lecturer in English at Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier, France.
productions – most conspicuously, the autobiography – being prioritised? Who are the ‘consumers’ of this literature? Why has autonomous dalit publishing not emerged in English? Does non-dalit-controlled publishing of Dalit Literature lead to affirmative action in well-established publishing houses – say, in the recruitment of dalit editors? The independent Delhi-based publishing house, Navayana, for instance, which describes itself as an ‘anti-caste publishing house’, drew controversy a few years ago when it issued an advertisement for an editorial job opening with the tongue-in-cheek caveat that “Gandhians need not apply”, and “those unable to make a clear distinction between the politics of Ambedkar and Gandhi can stay away as well […] Preference will be given to Dalit candidates and beefeaters.”

And while the progression of Dalit Literature into the academic curricula, strictly rationed and on a tight leash though it may currently be, should not be cynically diminished, and indeed, calls for celebration, it is just as important to reflect on this: while far too many non-dalits, in India and abroad, have remained oblivious or indifferent to the ground realities of a form of apartheid practiced in India, how and why is it that they seem comfortable ‘consuming’ Dalit Literature and treating it as an accretion (limited only to the status of an appendix) to a canon which, in its broadest spectrum is predominantly composed of dead white Anglo-Saxon male authors, and in its narrower strands is predominantly barricaded from the very type of dalit it studies?

---

47 See “Navayana Looking For an Editor” [Accessed 30 November 2015]
The “Gandhians need not apply” is, on the one hand, a reflection of Navayana’s consciously adopted Ambedkarite position, and on the other, symptomatic of the divide in Gandhian and Ambedkarite ideologies that, ever since its crystallisation in the historical stand-off in the Poona Pact (1932), has remained irreconcilable.
The “beefeaters” here is a pointed reference to the proscription in caste-Hinduism to the consumption of beef. The edificial strength of the caste system lies in its demarcation of the sacred and profane and the adherence of it by the people in its fold. This extends to all walks of life including food. Since the Modi government has come into office, a law prohibiting the slaughter and consumption of beef has been enacted in nearly all the states of India, with the State now openly defying secular principles in enforcing the caste-Hindu view, ‘the cow is sacred, therefore eating beef is profane’, onto all of Indian society. In contemporary dalit movements, food and food-culture, and especially the eating of beef, have become the metaphor of dissent conveying both, contestation of the caste edifice as well as assertion of a pre-Sanskritised existence (according to which belief, brahmans certainly did eat beef).
The silencing of Ambedkar within national historiography, mainstream discourse, and academic engagement; the exclusion of dalits and dalit representation from means of social, cultural, and knowledge production – and certainly, the rendering of dalits as disentitled to the modes of capital in these three domains; and the continued discrimination against and persecution of those dalits who remain far removed from the contexts in which their literatures are ‘consumed’; these are all ground realities that call for the need to remember that Dalit Literature is being produced, and received, against such a backdrop.

In the new perspectives that are being delineated in this early twenty-first century, the importance of translation needs to be underlined, both within India from one Indian language to the next, and outside India, towards other international languages. And how vital a practice translation is in communicating the languages and the voices that have too often remained unheard, cannot be overstated here. However, translation, and the critique of translation, has received very little attention in this context within dalit literary criticism. A translated work, as a text in itself – in addition to and not as the source text – is necessarily the story of a majority of the works under consideration in this project. Being attentive to how it contributes to the transformative value of dalit literatures, and to how they are passed on, benefits the vigilant reader. More generally, the issue of translation concerns the accessibility, reception, and dissemination, as well as regional, national, and international distribution. And here, the questions of ‘who writes what for whom, who reads whom, and in what language?’ are ever relevant to our critical understanding of how dalit literatures get disseminated in the global context. It is interesting to examine how texts, genres, and arts live at home or travel abroad. Hidden within the ‘translation and dissemination’ question is the issue of globalisation of dalit literatures: this is not only about whether dalit literatures should become global or not; it also has to do with the possible impact of globalisation on dalit literatures and their foremost goal (of why they are written). Chapter Two alerts the reader to this
issue, and to the risk, of dalit literatures being self-consciously written and/or translated into the vocabulary of ‘global modernity’.

X. The Chapters

To return to Neil Lazarus for a final time, in Postcolonial Unconscious, Lazarus has suggested a reorganising of methodological approaches to postcolonial literature in order that we may “reorganise our thinking about ‘postcolonial’ literature” in terms of the following set of rubrics (Lazarus 35):

i. Mode of production and class relations: the superimposition of capitalistic class relations via colonialism on to pre-existing relations (38-39) – this methodological approach is explored in Chapter Three

ii. Land and environment: ecology; ‘land’ as a site of material and representational contestation (56) – this methodological approach is pertinent to Chapter Four

iii. State and nation: the staging of texts “very explicitly and self-consciously in terms of the nation’s experience…all of which evoke and examine the links between private and public realities, the familial and the national” (71) – this methodological approach is very much relevant to Chapter Two

iv. Structures of feeling: “the phenomenological dimension” in literature (79) – this methodological approach lends itself appositely to Chapter One

Lazarus’s proposed rubrics, and he does not intend for them to be taken as exclusive or exhaustive or prescriptive, springs from the conviction that the disjuncture between (postcolonial) ‘criticism’ and (postcolonial) ‘literature’ – between ‘critic’ and ‘text’ – is all too real. This is ever so true, and can be sorely lamented. Literary criticism as practiced vis-à-vis Dalit Literature too succumbs to this failing. An undue preoccupation with debates on the origin of Dalit Literature, about its
status, and the ways it should be approached, loses sight of the scope and impact of
the textuality of the literatures—even indeed, of the literatures themselves—and
consequently, have not been as far-reaching as they perhaps should have been. The
four-rubric schema Lazarus proposes thus addresses the need for the bridging of this
gap: “on the grounds that the ‘world’ has to date typically been more adequately
registered, and rendered, in ‘postcolonial’ literature than in postcolonial criticism”
(Lazarus 36; emphasis in original). And this reasoning holds just as aptly in the
context of the ‘world’ of dalits, and the caste-reality of this world, as registered and
rendered in Dalit Literature.

In many a way, the subsequent chapters have taken up Lazarus’s invitation to
undertake the four rubrics, albeit varyingly sited and weighted across the four
chapters, in order to systemise the analyses of dalit texts within their purview. Each
of the four headings does indeed lend itself in a practical sense to the focalisation of
the question of ‘representation’ central to the objectives of this thesis. If there is
perhaps the risk of ‘theory’ seeming sparse within the chapters, it is one consciously
weighed and willingly shouldered, in the efforts towards a bridging of that gap
between ‘literature’ and (pregiven, predigested) ‘criticism’, and aimed at coaxing the
texts themselves to ‘speak more’.

Chapter One: “Precedents to Dalit Discourse in Medieval Vīraśaivism”, looks to
the twelfth century Vīraśaiva saints of Karnataka and their lyric poetry (vachanas) as
the earliest precedents of a dalit discursive rhetoric in Karnataka. While the
nomenclature of ‘Dalit’ as a socio-political category of identity has been in use only
from the mid-twentieth century onwards, the reality of the ‘outcast’ (women,
menstruating women, the disabled, the queer, and so on) and ‘out-caste’ (the low-
caste, the untouchable) has always existed alongside the varnāshrama dharma itself. As
such, it follows that any literature that addresses hegemonic, brahmanical structures
– of not just caste, gender, religion, and untouchability but also hegemonic language
and Sanskritic traditions – may be integrated within the umbrella corpus of anti-
caste, and thus in that sense, Dalit Literature. The chapter attempts to call for a renewed emphasis on the literariness of the movement and challenges the dominant understanding of it being primarily a movement of bhakti.

**Chapter Two:** “The Ambedkarite Paradigm in Modern Kannada Writing”, studies the rise in a ‘dalit consciousness’ fuelled most strongly by an ‘Ambedkarite vision’ that impacts modernity and constructions of dalit subjectivity in early to late modern Kannada literature. A significant portion of the literary analyses closely engages with how non-dalit writers who write on the nation and India’s history have represented dalits and their communities within their works. The chapter also argues for a new framework of critique of modern Kannada dalit literature and examines the potential of the Gandhi-Ambedkar paradigm towards such a goal.

**Chapter Three:** Entitled “Writing Gender: Silence, Graded Difference, and Solidarity”, it attempts to unpacks the complex nexus of caste-class-gender in an effort to study how they might challenge the binaries of *in* and *out* that have so firm a grip over dalit discourse today. In addition, the chapter also examines the question of ‘solidarity’ in the construction of a ‘dalit politics’ and whether this politics can be self-consciously adopted by the non-dalit who writes about dalit subjectivity. While the previous chapter has engaged with the exclusion of dalits from mainstream and academic discourses, and the silencing of Ambedkar within the same, this chapter pay particular attention to the silencing of dalit women, and how this has been represented within writing about them and writing by them.

**Chapter Four:** the largest chapter of the four, “Ways of Seeing Dalit Narratives in Other Media” addresses the sparsely researched area of dalit and/or caste visibility in interdisciplinary narrative avenues beyond the literary. It explores how the different spaces of film, painting, chromolithographs, statues, and sculpture frame individual and collective experiences of caste and untouchability in contemporary India. These questions also get addressed: how do visual artists conceptualise and construct spaces of ‘belonging’? To what extent are these spaces contested, or at least
conducive to contestation? What can we draw from constructions of identity in visual culture towards their contributions to ideas of the nation, modernity, and indeed, the world? Finally, via an analysis of the filmic text, the chapter addresses the rift widening between the socio-political and cultural Left in India (as represented by Kerala’s prominent communist leaders and thinkers) and a growing section of Ambekarite dalits, in the section entitled, ‘The Dalit Critique of Marxism’. The main ‘texts’ under study are: statues and sculptures of Ambedkar and Mayawati as significant dalit leaders in the visible public domain, the pictorial depictions of atrocity in the autoethnographic works of a collective of dalit artists, and Jayan Cheriyan’s Malayalam film, *Papilio Buddha* (2013).
Works Cited


CHAPTER 1: Precedents to Dalit Discourse in Medieval Vīraśaivism

What made the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab so popular among dalits was that it remained at its core a struggle against the local structures of social domination rooted in the exclusive ownership of land and related resources. But more significantly, it was the movement’s emphasis on a separate dalit identity based on the teachings of the radical sants of the medieval north-Indian Bhakti movement that clinched dalit following and participation. The radical image of Guru Ravidass48, one of the several dalit nirgunī sants49 (‘a devotee of god without attributes’) of the medieval North-Indian Bhakti movement, was projected meticulously to concretise the newly conceived dalit cultural space in the state. Ravidass’s struggle against the system of untouchability in medieval India, anchored in an enlightened vision of egalitarian social order (Begumpura, i.e. ‘Land without sorrow’), resonates deeply within the Punjabi dalit community50. The fact that dalits of Punjab, especially those belonging to the Chamar caste, consider Ravidass their guru made the movement instantly popular among them. By clubbing together with the Ad Dharmis of Punjab (recognised as a Scheduled Caste in Punjab), it was a politically strategic move (and some may well call it cynical) that saw their combined community comprise 42 percent of the Scheduled Caste population in Punjab.51 The fact that 40 hymns and one couplet of the sacred bani (‘poetry’) of Guru Ravidass are included in the Adi Granth (the holy scriptures of the Sikh faith; also known as Guru Granth Sahib) speaks volumes of his immense popularity in the region. Consequently, the Ravidass

---

48 The mystic poet-sant Ravidass (circa 15th to 16th century) himself belonged to Kutbandhla (chamar caste), one of the Scheduled Castes in current day Uttar Pradesh.

49 For a detailed account of nirgunī tradition, see John Stratton Hawley’s “The Nirgun/Sagun Distinction in Early Manuscript Anthologies of Hindu Devotion” (1995).

50 For a further reading of Ravidass and his life-works, see David Lorenzen (1995), Ravindra Khare (1985), and Winnand Callewaert (2000).

phenomenon, in the form of the Ravidass cult or Ravidass Deras movement, became the epicentre of the emerging dalit agenda and an emergent alternative dalit philosophy in modern Punjab.

Bhakti scholars such as Uma Thukral (2007), John Hawley (1994), David Lorenzen (1994), and Milind Wakankar (2003) (among a rich plethora of scholars) are perhaps some of the most recognisable among contemporary critics to have written extensively on bhakti and religion in north India on the Hindi-speaking regions with a mass-following of Kabir (or Kabir panthi) and the Ravidass deras in Punjab. They examine the various ways in which devotion is expressed and conceptualised as a dominant mode of worship for both Sikhs and Hindus in northern India. They offer an historical overview of the two major currents of bhakti worship in northern India, the nirgunī and the saguni. By identifying the bhakti tradition as the basis upon which modern and contemporary religious and social identities are grounded, they question its role in the contest of religious communalism within modern India. Hawley argues that, with the formation of the Khālsā order under Gobind Singh, earlier ambiguities regarding Sikh religiosity were codified through a highly complex cultural repertoire of ritual, classificatory codes of conduct, and mythical narratives articulating a broader quest for an exclusive Sikh identity. Hawley questions the validity of the nirguni/saguni dichotomy in the devotional period itself. In doing so, he opens up for revision the historical background against which his entire study was cast. By examining the internal evidence in the poetry of sants and bhaktas, the hagiography and the scrapbooks, he investigates whether this binary might not function as a result of sectarian definitions. Hawley concludes that historically there did exist differences in theological slant, social perspective, and literary emphases between nirgunī/sagunī poets. These distinctions were not yet determinative, although later they became enshrined through sectarian influence. Lorenzen identifies the patterns of bhakti legends in Indian hagiography that contain ideological message. He proposes that the patterns of life stories are akin to
archetypal life stories of legendary heroes and saints with some narrative elements specific to nirgunī saints. Lorenzen shows how hagiographies provide a thematic mode of expression for women and subalterns to fulfil their own equal humanity while at the same time make it recognisable to others. Uma Thukral examines how Kabir, an ardent opponent of the doctrine of avatār has become an avatār himself by writers of the Kabir Panth. Wakankar shows how bhakti figures such as Kabir appear in the Hindi public sphere prominently. In this public sphere, bhakti can be integrated into ideas of what it is to be ‘Indian’: that is, into a discourse of nationalism, of desh-bhakti, both a devotion to the nation and a commitment to the public that comprises the nation.

And on the relatively less-extensively written about bhakti movements, at least two scholars warrant a mention for their insightful work on the role of bhakti in current political action: Mark Juergensmeyer examines the Rādhāsoāmī Satsang as a movement mirroring the social attitudes of the middle-class and providing an alternative to the operative organization of society based on caste. Philip Lutzendorf provides an astute analysis of the medieval background to communalism in Tulasidas’s Rāmcaritmānas, the locus classicus of Rāmrāj. He shows how the Rāmrāj paradigm has been used within political organisations of the early twentieth century, and how this paradigm has only gathered strength under the influence of the televised Rāmāyana interpretation and VHP/BJP ideologues.

There is undoubtedly a rich excess in bhakti scholarship in all its facets, including in dalit discourses of the north, when it comes to the long-standing bhakti traditions of the north, and a large enough following – most recognisably the Kabir panth and Ravidass dera – to keep this scholarship thriving. In comparison, there is arguably a lack of not so much as wealth as visibility in the breadth and variety of scholarship on southern bhakti traditions in general, and Kannada in particular. This is possibly due to the fact that much scholarship on the less generic and more specific Kannada traditions of bhakti is yet to make its way into English (and thereby the
global market) and flourishes instead in the vernacular. This is not a problem per se, except that it allows this thesis the opportunity to contribute and build on specific (linguistic, cultural, political) bhakti positions and contexts vis-à-vis dalit discourse from Karnataka and expand on the currently limited scholarship available in English.

The passionately anti-caste Vīraśaiva vachana practice is a twelfth century literary movement that produced a multiplicity of distinct voices, from all sections of society, high and low, within a period of half a century. That it should happen in a caste-ridden twelfth century society, in which all shudras, untouchables, and women, were denied the right to literacy makes such a literary movement all the more extraordinary. This chapter looks to the medieval Vīraśaiva saints of Karnataka and their lyric poetry (vachanas) as the earliest precedents to a dalit discursive rhetoric in the region.

While the nomenclature of ‘dalit’ as a socio-cultural category of identity has been in use only from the mid-twentieth century onwards, the reality of the ‘outcast’ (women, menstruating women, the disabled, the queer) and ‘out-caste’ (the low-caste, the untouchable) has always existed alongside the varṇāshrama dharma itself. As such, it follows that any literature that addresses hegemonic, brahmanical structures (of not just caste, gender, religion, and untouchability but also hegemonic language and Sanskritic traditions) may be integrated into the umbrella corpus of anti-caste dalit literature. As one of the earliest precedents for such a self-reflexive protest literature, the medieval Vīraśaivism movement, and its expression through its most important text, the vernacular vachana, come under focus in this chapter. Four significant saint-poets provide the lens for study: Basavanna, Dasimaiyya, Allama, and Mahadeviyakka. As the most influential of the four, and heralded as the founder of the movement, Basavanna’s vachana-sahitya drives this chapter more actively than the other three. By engaging closely with the form and poetics of the Vīraśaiva vachana practice through a close reading of the same, the chapter also considers
whether there is merit in de-emphasising the practice as a bhakti movement, and instead, re-orienting our understanding of it as a, primarily, literary movement.

I. Manteswamy Kāvya52: An Oral Epic of Untouchability

The legendary city of Kalyana lay ruined, desecrated. To redress the sins of the city, the saintly couple Basavanna and Nilāmbike decided to go into penance in the hope that a great saviour [who is Śiva in the Vīraśaivaite tradition] would eventually appear and save them. They posted gate-keepers at the city gate with the instructions to keep an alert eye on the holy people passing through, one of whom they hoped could be the saviour in disguise. So began the vigil by the watchmen for the holy personage to appear whilst their master and his wife went into penance. Weeks passed by, but no saviour was in sight. After a distressing number of days, a crooked-bodied, mangle-limbed old man, a dead ox on his shoulder, a toddy pot in hand, irreverently smoking ganja, appeared at the gate. The gate-keepers were horrified. Certain that such a disgraceful creature could only disturb their masters’ penance, they set about to dispatch the filthy vagrant from the city gates. But the dirty-looking old man stood his ground and insisted that he be allowed to go in to meet the saintly couple: he had not come on his own; they had sent for him; they had been praying for his advent. The loyal gate-keepers were determined not to be fooled by the foul-smelling tramp. Their trained eyes observed the absence of any marks of holiness about him: that carcass of the ox blithely piggy-backing over his crooked shoulder was a certain testament to his untouchable caste; the unholy toddy pot swinging unashamedly beside the dirt-smeared body, a horde of street flies dancing about him, was anathema to the unpolluted bodies of saints. Surely, his crossing the city gates would only destroy what little purity was left of the city? They did their best to talk him out of getting in. But he would not listen: he had to attend to his children’s call and prayer. The watchmen were infuriated. How dared this squalid creature claim to father the saintly couple! So to teach him a lesson for his audacity, they ridiculed his claims of sainthood, beat him mercilessly, and rendered him a public spectacle. The humiliated old man crawled towards a heap of dung and lay there, wounded and dejected. Not long after this brutality,

52 H. S. Shivaprakash has also shared his adaptation of Manteswamy Kāvya that is one of many versions of the epic in, “HERE AND NOW: The Out-Caste at the City Gate”. Indian Literature. Vol. 43, No. 5 (193) (Sept-Oct, 1999). 5-11
bizarre things began to occur: the hammerless bell hung at the city centre began clanging furiously on its own; the stone bull began to bellow, enraged and belligerent.

The saintly couple deciphered the signs as an indication that the Lord had arrived. They broke their penance and reached the city gate only to gather from the watchmen that no saint had appeared, only the mangle-bodied, foul-smelling old man claiming to be a saint. They rushed to the dung-heap in search of the saint and found him lying face-down. They invited him home; no answer. They tried to lift him by the arm; the arm came off. They tugged at the leg; the leg broke away. The old man’s body was now a stinking heap of dismembered limbs and torso. An anguished Nilāmbike and Basavanna bundled up the mangled bits of his body in the cloth of Basavanna’s turban and took the bundle home. Placing it on the altar, they reverentially, repentantly, worshipped and prayed to it, day and night, sacrificing food, water, and other bodily comforts. At long last, the saint of the dung-heap, the out-caste sage, emerged whole from the wreckage, glowing in the Supreme Light that is Śiva.

The above rendition is from my personal experience of growing up with the legend of Manteswamy Kāvya, a popular oral epic in the state of Karnataka. It is one of numerous accounts of the magical, spiritual exploits of the untouchable saint, Manteswamy, who is, to date, proudly claimed by the dalits of Karnataka to be their saintly dalit ancestor. There are countless variants of this theme: of the ‘out-caste at the city gate’. Several retellings with the same plot recur in oral epics about Rēvana Siddha (the untouchable shepherd saint), of Rudra Muni (the untouchable weaver saint), of Nāgaliṅga (the untouchable blacksmith saint), or of Mādaiah (the untouchable cobbler saint). Apart from suggesting ways to bolster the collective self-dignity of the exploited castes and peoples (women, the disabled, the homeless, and so on), these variants of the same theme express an indomitable hope typical of the bhakti traditions of the South, and Vīraśaivism in particular.

II. The Nodes of Bhakti, Vīraśaivism, Basavanna, and Vachana-Sahitya
II.1 Bhakti

Bhakti saints, like the vachanakāras\textsuperscript{53} to be discussed in this chapter, have been called the “great-integrators”, bringing the high to the low, the esoteric to the common (wo)man, transmuting ancient and abstruse ideas into live contemporary experiences; at the same time, finding everyday symbols for the timeless.\textsuperscript{54} They also travelled within and across regions, and claimed kindred spirits of other regions in their genealogical tree of gurus. Thus the Kannada Vīraśaiva saints name 63 Tamil saints among their forebears\textsuperscript{55}. Śaivism knits faraway Kashmir with South India, and within South India the saints of Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu. Both Kabir of the Hindi region, and Caitanya of Bengal, were inspired by southern precedents. Chronologically from the seventh century on, century after century, bhakti movements have arisen in different regions and languages, spanning the whole Indian sub-continent, in Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, Assamese, and Punjabi, roughly in that order. Like a lit fuse, the passion of bhakti seems to spread from place to place, century to century, quickening and revolutionising the religious impulse. Whilst arising in particular locales, speaking the local tongues, it is yet inter-regional – curiously both localised and universal.

Yet, it should not be imagined that such common stock was used in exactly similar ways. While the components were the same, the functions, the emerging meaning, were often startlingly different. For instance, the image of the insect weaving a web out of its body is an ancient one. The Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad uses such a description for the Brahmān, the Creator:

\begin{quote}
As the spider emerges (from itself) by \\
(spinning) threads [out of its own body]…
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{53} The Vachana-creators.

\textsuperscript{54} In V. Raghavan’s The Great Integrators: the Saint-Singers of India (Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1966), p.113. Raghavan’s work also offers a comprehensive discussion of saints from other regions of India, as well as their relation to each other and the Indian heritage.

\textsuperscript{55} See S. C. Nandimath’s A Handbook of Vīraśaivism. Dharwar: L. E. Associates, 1942
so too from this self do all the life-breaths,  
all the worlds, all the gods, and all contingent  
beings rise up in all directions\textsuperscript{56}

The Vīraśaiva woman-saint, Mahadeviyakka refashions it as such:

Like a silkworm weaving  
her house with love  
from her marrow,  
\text{and dying}  
in her body’s threads  
winding tight, round  
and round,  
I burn  
desiring what the heart desires.

Cut through, O lord,  
my heart’s greed,  
\text{and show me}  
your way out,

\textit{O lord white as jasmine} (Ramanujan 41)\textsuperscript{57}

There is a telling difference in the feel and tone of the two passages, the  
coolness of the Upaniṣad and the woman-saint’s heart-rending cry for release. The  
classical text describes the object, the cosmic creator; the vachana describes the  
subject, the speaker’s feelings towards herself. The Upaniṣad speaks of the birth of  
the cosmos; it is awe-inspiring, and non-human; Mahadeviyakka’s appeal speaks of  
death; it calls for compassion, and is all too human.

In such ways, the vachanakāras did use common stock phrases and proverbs  
commonplace of the time. As the scholar specialising in Dravidian linguistics, Kamil


\textsuperscript{57} Of interest is that the medieval Kannada manuscripts show that the vachanas used no punctuation, no  
paragraph—word—or phrase divisions (though modern editions of the vachanas in Kannada print them with all  
modern conventions).
V. Zvelebil, illustrates through his study on Basavanna, “this stock shared by Southern and Northern saints, the Upaniṣads and the folk alike, included figures, symbols, and paradoxes often drawn from an ancient and pan-Indian pool of symbology”.\footnote{See Zvelebil’s *The Lord of the Meeting Rivers: Devotional Poems of Basavanna* (Paris: UNESCO, 1984), p.140.} Furthermore, there are other noticeable parallels of, and influences on bhakti, like the esoteric cults of tantra and yoga in their Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain versions, as well as the Muslim Sufi mystics. So too should we bear in mind the gifts of bhakti poets to modern India, in poetry (Tagore in Bengal, Bharati in Tamil), in politics (Gandhi), in religion and philosophy (Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Aurobindo).

**II.2 Vīraśaivism**

The address of reform, caste, gender, and untouchability in the oppositional strands of the Bhakti traditions of Karnataka\footnote{Karnataka as a distinct state within independent India, of course, came into being only from 1956. And even then, it was still referred to as Mysore State as identified during British colonialism, and renamed as Karnataka only in 1973. While attentive to these historical facts however, ‘Karnataka’ is used throughout this chapter to denote even the historical Kannada-speaking region, pre-dating even colonialism, for the sake of convenience.} are best exemplified in the medieval (arguably, tenth to fifteenth centuries A.D.) \textit{vachana-sahitya}\footnote{The literary legacy of Kannada vachanas.} and its parent philosophy, Vīraśaivism\footnote{The early history of Vīraśaivism is so obscure that it is tempting to assume Basavanna himself founded it in the twelfth century, owing to the substantial amount of literature we have on Basavanna as compared to his Vīraśaiva predecessors, as well as the lack of epigraphic evidence for Basavanna or Vīraśaivas before 1162. See Blake Michael (1982) for a further discussion.}.

Vachanas (also spelled as ‘vacanas’) are a form of readily-intelligible prose texts in rhythmic writing, originally meant to be sung rather than written, and developed within the framework of the philosophy of Vīraśaivism. Vīraśaivism has survived through the centuries and has come to be the Liṅgāyata\footnote{Liṅgāyas are members of a Kannada-speaking “caste-sect” (McCormack 175) who emphasise qualified monism and \textit{bhakti} (loving devotion) to Śiva and are often referred to as \textit{Sharanas} (denoting egoless surrender and refuge in Śiva). Orthodox Liṅgāyas wear the liṅgā, a stone emblem of Śiva, in a small silver casket round their necks from the time of birth to death, symbolising personal and near presence to Śiva.} movement of today\footnote{Liṅgāyas are members of a Kannada-speaking “caste-sect” (McCormack 175) who emphasise qualified monism and \textit{bhakti} (loving devotion) to Śiva and are often referred to as \textit{Sharanas} (denoting egoless surrender and refuge in Śiva). Orthodox Liṅgāyas wear the liṅgā, a stone emblem of Śiva, in a small silver casket round their necks from the time of birth to death, symbolising personal and near presence to Śiva.}.

\textit{vachana-sahitya}
Vīraśaivism, the philosophy driving the vachanas, translates to “the brave, intrepid or heroic form of Saivism” (Samartha 335). It is often considered a reform movement within the Saiva branch of Hinduism, of which the Kannada vachanas are the most important texts. Championed by a host of fervent worshippers and devotees (called ‘Sharanas’ or ‘Bhaktas’) of Śiva, the Vīraśaiva movement gained unprecedented momentum in medieval Karnataka; the term vira (‘heroic’ or ‘militant’) suggests the strength of their devotional experience. The concept of kāyaka, labour dedicated to god, was central to their movement (in particular, they upheld the dignity of manual labour). As their motto goes,

*Kāyakave Kailasa* [literally, ‘Work itself is Heaven’; or loosely, ‘Work is Worship’]

~ Maraiah, the rice gleaner (Shivaprakash lxv).

The Kannada word, kāyaka, has a general meaning of ‘performance’, both ritual and occupational. Nandimath, in *Handbook to Vīraśaivism* (1942), unpacks both meanings of kāyaka as follows:

~ wearing and worshipping the īstalinga

Śiva, ‘the auspicious one’, is elsewhere one of the Hindu trinity of gods: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, Śiva the destroyer. In Vīraśaivism and its vachanas however, Śiva is the supreme god.

While today the terms ‘Vīraśaiva’ and ‘Liṅgāyat/Liṅgāyata’ are often used interchangeably, there is a tendency for the former to describe the philosophical or historical context while the latter denotes the modern social group.

Scholars do not often agree with each other on whether Vīraśaivas/Liṅgāyatas fall within the general category of Hinduism. For example, definitions include: “a peaceable race of Hindu puritans, though it may be questioned how far their rejection of many of the chief dogmas of Brahmanic Hinduism leaves them the right to be styled Hindus at all” (Enthoven 69); “an unorthodox śaiva sect” (Nandimath xv); “revived, regenerated and revolutionary Śaivism, [...] the religion of a Hindu community numbering about seven million” (Zvelebil vii); “a reformist Śaiva sect in Hinduism” (Padoux 12); and “a group of South Indian Śaivabhaktas common in Karnataka State” (Michael 1).

However, as Ishwaran forcibly points out, “Liṅgāyats do not label themselves as Hindu. They see their religion as more democratically based, and as deriving from a populist movement” (Ishwaran 2). Indeed, since 1950, the Indian Constitution has listed the Liṅgāyats as a category distinct from ‘Hindu’.

But while Ishwaran’s meaning is quite clear, it is worth heeding Zydenbos’ cautionary words: “...to write that VīraŚaivism has been ‘democratic’, ‘feminist’, or ‘egalitarian’ from the beginning, as some modern writers do, is somewhat like writing that nuclear weapons were used in the Ramayana, as some other authors do” (Zydenbos 535).

The personal Śiva-linga; a small stone-emblem at times worn around the neck on a chain, often tied around the bicep or wrist with a thread.
~ worshipping only Śiva
~ acting as a servant to one’s society and fellow believers
~ dedicated labour in one’s profession (Nandimath 80)

Thus, at the heart of Vīraśaiva practice stands a set of kāyaka-based mandates, which pertain to ethically directed work, labour, and one’s whole-hearted and willing service in a worldly vocation. Kāyaka then differs from the brahmanical concept of karma in which religious action or labour is pre-eminently ritual action or labour.

In their fight against the tyranny of the caste system, and in boldly insisting on the equality of men and women, these Vīraśaivas spearheaded a hitherto unseen (or at least, that we know of) social revolution. Indeed, in addition to according equal social and ritual status to women, their inclusiveness is marked by an unconventional make-up of social groups: weavers, washermen, tanners, prostitutes, untouchables, brahmins, cowherds, tavern-keepers, and even a burglar among others. In gathering at Kalyana – the city of their rallying place, in Anubhava Mantapa66 – the saints communicated with each other in short, colloquial, dialogic67 free-verse lyric (vachanas) in Kannada. They fiercely questioned and ridiculed classical belief systems, social customs and superstitions, the Vedic ritual of yajña, image worship and temple-going, pilgrimage, offerings to god and priest, and even animal sacrifices – all of which they felt were performed. Such performance, for the Vīraśaivas, strove only towards getting results in the name of ‘god’ and ‘salvation’;

66 The Anubhava Mantapa is held as an inclusive public academy (as well as an actual place of gathering) of commoners, mystics, saints, and philosophers, notwithstanding their caste, gender or vocation. A fountainhead of all philosophical and religious thought pertaining to the Lingāyatas, it was where the oral vachanas presided as the singular mode of communication. Although it was founded by Basavanna in the twelfth century, it was presided over by Allama Prabhu. The mantapa consciously worked towards building a casteless, creedless society and paved the way for an egalitarian ‘space’ propagating reflection and dialogue on ethics, bhakti, social and religious freedom, among other things.

67 As in ‘dialogue’. One of the general meanings of vachana is ‘prose’. The vachanakārās did not think themselves as poets, in fact, had a robust suspicion of poesy, for Poetry was part of court, temple, and punditry.
but in truth served as a means of manipulating and managing carefully the world around in the service of one’s own ulterior motive. Salvation, like prosperity, it would seem, has a price. And the non-inclusive, classical, brahmanical belief-systems served to make available such a price-list to a select, entitled few. In direct opposition to such exclusionary systems, the Vīraśaivas not only scorn the effectiveness of Vedas as scripture, they reject the pantheon of Hindu gods in favour of a starkly monotheistic alternative – Śiva as supreme.

The Vīraśaiva poets all speak of Śiva, and speak to Śiva in their body of works. Four saint-poets stand out in this tradition: Devara Daasimaiyya (circa mid-10th century), Basavanna (circa 1110 AD), Allama Prabhu (circa 1115 AD), and Mahadeviyakka (commonly referred to as ‘Akkamahadevi’ outside Karnataka) (circa 1150 AD). Many thousands of vacanas are attributed to each of these saints. In addition, over 300 such vacana saint-poets, albeit perhaps less popular, are known thus far. Many more are being discovered. Several thousand vacanas are in print and on palmleaf. Scholars at the university in Dharwad have to date been engaged in the task of collecting, collating, and editing the manuscripts.

Two noteworthy English translations, among a spare handful, stand out today that detail Vīraśaivism, its most important text – the vachana, and the influential saint-poets mentioned above: A. K. Ramanujan’s *Speaking of Śiva* (1973) and H. S. Shivaprakash’s *I Keep Vigil of Rudra* (2010), both of which are available as Penguin Classics. My analyses of the philosophy of Vīraśaivism and the vachanas throughout this chapter make extensive use of these two translations, amongst select others. Shivaprakash’s translations are quantitatively more expansive in how far they embrace not just Basavanna’s own oeuvre but also various Vīraśaivaitc saints apart

---

68 L. M. Menezes and S. Bhoosnurmath have jointly published selections (of English translations and textual criticism) from the four Vīraśaiva saints mentioned in this chapter, in *Sūnyasampādane* (Dharwar, 1968).

Further, Kamil Zvelebil, known well for his scholarship on Dravidian linguistics, has selected 126 of more than 1,400 poems of Basavanna for translation into English in his book, *The Lord of the Meeting Rivers: Devotional Poems of Basavanna* (1984); originally published by UNESCO collection of representative works: Indian series, and distributed today by South Asia Books.
from the popular four who are not covered quite as exhaustively by Ramanujan. But my chapter draws heavily from Ramanujan’s translations of the philosophy of Vīraśaivism itself, which is far more comprehensive than in Shivasprakash’s book69.

II.2.a The Six-Phase System70 (Ṣaṭsthala Siddhānta) of Vīraśaiva Philosophy

The vachanas of the Vīraśaiva saints, especially Basavanna, speak of a rather esoteric mystical system (Ramanujan calls it an “intellectual system” in Speaking of Śiva, p. 169) through which the sharana’s71 soul attains salvation (becoming one with Śiva). Though not strictly necessary for the appreciation of the vachanas, more pertinently, such a system is one of the many ‘contexts’ of vachana-sahitya, traversing the twelfth-century Basavanna to the twentieth-century Da. Ra. Bendre72. Six (Ṣaṭ) phases or steps (sthalā) are recognised as part of this system. More accurately, the Ṣaṭsthala is a succession of stages, or a ladder of ascent, or even the metamorphosis of egg—larva—pupa—to final freedom of the winged being (as described in Mahadeviyakka’s vachana on p. 5).

The first phase is ‘the stage of the devotee’ (bhaktasthala) where (s)he practises bhakti (devotion) through the ‘power of action’ (kriyāśakti) – a total surrender to Śiva without desire for reward.

69 Shivasprakash, in fact, candidly signals his own substantial borrowing from Ramanujan’s iteration of the philosophy too, as he makes evident in his “Introduction” to I Keep Vigil of Rudra.

70 My understanding of Ṣaṭsthala Siddhānta is informed by interpretations of the same in Julia Leslie’s “Understanding Basava: history, hagiography and a modern Kannada drama” (1998) and Ramanujan’s work. Their respective readings of the philosophy do not vary significantly, except that Ramanujan details a substantially exhaustive articulation of the philosophy, complete with helpful charts and an in-depth analysis, whereas Leslie shares only a brief, yet well-defined, summary.

71 The Śiva bhakta (devotee) devoted to seeking ‘divine truth’ through personal experience – i.e. seeking to attain ‘oneness’ with Śiva through traversing, and ultimately transcending, personal experience.

72 Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre (1896-1981), popularly known as Da. Ra. Bendre, was a Sanskrit scholar from Dharwad and a specialist in Kannada prosody, and is held as a modern Kannada icon in Karnataka’s literary history. His works, especially poetry, contributed towards one of the most intensely prolific periods of writing, the Navodaya (‘new birth’, ‘modern’) movement, in Kannada literary history. He was awarded the Jnanapith in 1973 (one among several national awards) for his collection of poetry, Naaku Tanti (‘Four Strings‘; 1964).
The second phase is ‘the stage of the Great Lord or Master’ (mahēśvarasthala), channelling one’s own ‘guru’ from within through the ‘power of knowing’ (jñānaśakti) and discipline (niśte) in order to master one’s desires.

The third phase is ‘the stage of one who has received the grace from Śiva’ (prasādisthala) where, by mastering the ‘power of will’ (icchāśakti), the bhakta realises that (s)he is secure in Śiva’s keep. A more peaceful stage than the second, here the bhakta sees everything as the workings of Śiva; all things are offerings, all acts are acts of devotion.

The fourth phase is ‘the stage of identifying the soul (prāṇa) with Śiva’ (prāṇalingisthala), where the bhakta now turns ‘inward’, moving from the outer-world to the inner, through mastery over ‘primal power’ (ādiśakti). Heart cleansed; intelligence clear; ego and senses stilled; the bhakta begins to see the light of Śiva within himself/herself.

The fifth phase is ‘the stage of the sharana’ (śaranasthala), a joyful self-surrendering to Śiva through the harnessing of the ‘ultimate power’ (parāśakti). It is a stage that is one step closer to the feeling or experience of Śiva, of becoming one with Śiva. Ramanujan describes the sharana at this stage as one who, “suffers only as a loving woman suffers her lover’s absence, living in two worlds, half-mad, half in a coma, a ‘fool of god’… In this śaranasthala, he knows that he is not contained in his skin, nor made of earth, water, air, fire, and space, nor a thing of the five senses” (Ramanujan 174).

Of the sixth and final stage, ‘the stage of oneness’ (aikyasthala), whereupon the bhakta masters ‘the power of supreme-intelligence’ (citśakti), Ramanujan writes: “Sharana and Liṅgā [Śiva] become one. There is no worship anymore, for who is out there to receive such worship? This is Oneness or aikyasthala. Like space joining space, water water, the devotee dissolves nameless in the Lord, who is not another” (Ramanujan 174). And Julia Leslie explains further, “The individual existential soul (aṅga) has become fused with Śiva. This supreme experience is described as
'emptiness' or 'nothingness'... The sharana finally realises that the material world – produced by śakti, the energy essence of Śiva – is unreal, merely an externalisation of his creative power (māya)” (Leslie 231).

Vīraśaivism brings further complexity into the apparently-layered Ṣaṭsthala Siddhānta in suggesting that all orders may dissolve and all stages may merge at any point in time of one’s bhakti-process. The vachanakāras too indicate that in any one sthala (stage) all other sthalas are inherent; that “the six stages may only be a manner of speaking of the unspeakable, an ascent on a ladder with no rungs” (Ramanujan 174). While this complex fusing-separating of sthalas need not detain us from our appreciation and understanding of the vachana-spirit, they do offer a useful index of themes in understanding how the early Vīraśaiva saints classified and arranged their own body of works. There is a consensus among vachana scholars such as Zvelebil, Shivaprakash, Leslie, and Ramanujan, that such a six-phase system did indeed underlie the native arrangement of the vachanas of these saints.

For instance, consider this vachana from Allama Prabhu (twelfth century) expressed from the sixth and final sthala:

*O Lord of Caves,*
*if you are light,*
*there can be no metaphor* (Ramanujan 168)

There is a poetic corollary here to transcending the struggle for union (with Śiva): what is beyond human is beyond language; what is beyond language is beyond poetry (beyond even the simple directness of the vachana). What then is the liberated sharana to do if (s)he wishes to communicate the ‘experience’ of the sixth sthala? Allama’s solution, as it is for most poets seeking to convey mystical experience, is the language of poetic code: a highly compressed symbolism of aphoristic allegory that seeks to move beyond (a direct form of) language in its denotative, indicative capacity, as is evident in this vachana –

*When the honey-bee came*
I saw the smell of flowers
run.

Where the heart went
I saw the brain
run.

When the god came,
I saw the temple run. (Ramanujan 157)

The “smell” here is vāsanā in the Kannada, or ‘latencies’; the smell of past lives. As often employed in these riddle poems, the symbol is suggested by a pun: here, vāsanā, while a technical term for ‘latencies’, literally means ‘smell’. Poetic, mystical, as well as dream-symbols are often used as puns. The bee here is the perfect knowledge of god. Heart (manas) and mind (budhī) as intellect are distinguished, and the temple is the body. The collapsing of boundaries between these entities is precisely what the sixth sthala aims to achieve.

II.3 Basavanna

Basava (1106 – 68), more commonly known as Basavanna73, is by far the most influential exponent of the Viraśaiva saints in terms of leadership, voice, sway, and reach. He ushered in the most intensely prolific period of the Viraśaiva movement in Karnataka in the twelfth century. A statesman, an activist and reformer, a philosopher-poet, and (significantly for identity-politics) also a brahmin by birth, Basavanna established some of the earliest precedents of a reform movement in India that, inter alia, unflinchingly addressed the inequities of caste and gender. While still remaining within the framework of Hinduism, the movement rejected most of its social tenets such as untouchability, temple worship, the inequality of women, and

---

73 The suffixes -anna and -akka, meaning ‘elder brother’ and ‘elder sister’ respectively, apart from their use towards signifying these familial relations in general, also signal respect towards someone who may have no familial relation to the user. Hence, Basava becomes Basavanna, and Mahadevi becomes Mahadevi(y)akka (or Akkamahadevi).
became a powerful political and social force in Karnataka. And the form of his protest, like all his other Vīraśaiva contemporaries, was through the Kannada oral lyric of the vachana. Take for instance this vachana of Basavanna’s which checks hierarchical attitudes and caste-determined behaviour in a forthright manner:

*Of one who eats food blessed by you, wherever he be,*

*What is the caste?*

*Of one who is fit for your service, O Master,*

*What is the caste?*

*Of one who is drawn to your bosom, O God,*

*What is the Caste?*

*O Lord of the Meeting Rivers* (Michael 606)

There is a sense of simplified ethical universalism and occupational egalitarianism in his words, presenting a sharp remonstration to established brahmanical tradition. The urgent directness of such utterance also resonates with contemporary readers of today along with its sense of personal voice, expressed through an intensity of feeling.

M. P. Samartha, in his essay “Basava’s Spiritual Struggle”, maps the three major poets who narrate the life-works of Basavanna through the centuries: Harihara, a close contemporary of the saint (twelfth century), composed *Basavarajadevāra Ragale* (Story of Basava in Couplets); Bhima Kavi wrote *Basava Purana* (Ancient Lore of Basava) in the fourteenth century; and Shadakshari Deva composed the masterpiece called *Basavaraja Vijayam* (Victory of Lord Basava) in the seventeenth century. Samartha further studies the characteristics pervading the hagiographic tradition of Basavanna’s vachana-sahitya. First, the three poets share a common motif in how they represent Basavanna: Basava is a divine being, the celestial bull of Śiva (as also echoed in the oral epic of *Manteswamy Kāvya*), incarnate on earth to uphold the Viraśaivaite path. Second, it can be ascertained that the stories about Basava were transmitted orally in individual units and in set forms. They were partly based on eye-witness accounts and partly on later tradition developing out of the needs of the
community. Third, the three poets provide a general and continuous sequence, but while doing so they give their own transitions, place names, dates, and minor characters, which create contradictions in the versions at times. And last, the literary style moves through three stages: the simple couplets of the twelfth century (of Harihara) become the Shatpadi style\textsuperscript{74} in the fourteenth century (of Bhima Kavi) which is far more complicated, although it could be chanted. By the seventeenth century, the Shatpadi gives way to the even more complex, Sanskritic champu style\textsuperscript{75} (of Shadakshari Deva), which is understood by only a small group of learned people (Samartha 336-337).

Clearly, while the legacy of Basavanna’s vachana-sahitya has flourished and re-invented itself through the centuries, the original ideals of vernacular simplicity have not persevered. And as late as in the twentieth century, the iconic Kannada poet Da. Ra. Bendre has attempted to revive the vachanas to fit contemporary social conditions, and again, his poetic style eschews the simple vernacular idiom promoted by Basavanna, preferring instead a complex synthesis of the Old-Kannada vernacular with classical metres. Nonetheless, it can indeed be held as a testament to the singular appeal and value of the vachana legacy that it has withstood the test of time.

\textsuperscript{74} Shatpadi is a native metre in Kannada prosody that has been used extensively by medieval Kannada poets such as Raghavanka and Kumaravyasa. The metre has six padas (metrical foots) of syllables, divided into groups of various fixed number of mātra (beats) in each line.

\textsuperscript{75} The champu Sanskritic metre (poems in verses of various metres interspersed with paragraphs of prose, also known as champu-kāvya) was the most popular written form from the ninth century onwards, although it started to fall into disuse in the twelfth century with the rising impetus to use simple, metre-less lyric in the vernacular vachanas through the works of Vīraśaiva saints, particularly Basavanna.

While it may be a Sanskritic metre, champu (among other Sanskritic metres) was imported into various regional dialects of the South, especially Kannada and Telugu, thus fostering the grafting of Sanskritic forms within Dravidian languages.

Other Sanskritic metres used at the time were the Saptapadi (seven-line verse), the Ashtaka (eight-line verse), and the Shataka (hundred-line verse)
II.4 Vachana-Sahitya

Ramanujan’s influential book, *Speaking of Śiva*, opens the door to the Kannada vachanas for a largely Western, English-speaking audience, and for those who must come to it through translation. In it, he defines the vachana as, “a religious lyric in Kannada free verse; vacana means literally ‘saying, thing said’” (Ramanujan 11). Flourishing in the context of a society stratified by caste, and of a state backing that social order, this oral form radically transformed the literary canon by breaking the stranglehold of Sanskritic modes on expression and creating a new vernacular idiom (in Kannada). In the process, it gave birth to new forms of imagining and voicing dissent, and a new conception of society and social relations.

To understand the epochal nature of the vachanas, it is instructive to take a look at the Kannada literary canon76 prior to the twelfth century and the network of relationships between the canon, state, and religion. As D.R. Nagaraj notes, “tenth-century Kannada poetry self-identified as a cognate of royal inscriptions, and were [sic.] imaginative efforts at poeticizing the material that was already available in inscriptions” (Nagaraj 325). The link between poetics and the state on the one hand, and between the state and religion on the other, was enforced by the Sanskritic sensibilities that governed each: the *champu* form of epic poetry and the state as the protector of brahmanism, respectively. This Sanskritic culture created hierarchies of acceptance, both literary and social. In literature, it was Sanskritic modes that defined what was literary or not, in effect bounding out vernacular modes of expression, and by extension, imagination. This was mirrored in social relations, where state-backed brahmanism excluded the vast majority of people. It was in this milieu that the vachanas were born. In rejecting classical traditions and folklore, and embracing the colloquial vernacular, together with their impulse for lyrical immediacy, it explains

why the vachanas seem strikingly modern, concrete, and accessible. (Nagaraj 323-355)

For Ramanujan, “Vacanas are literature, but not merely literary. They are a literature in spite of itself, scorning artifice, ornament, learning, privilege; great voices of a sweeping movement of protest and reform in Hindu society; witnesses to conflict and ecstasy in gifted mystical men. Vacanas are our wisdom literature. They have been called the Kannada Upaniṣad…The vacanas may be seen as still another version of the Perennial Philosophy” (Ramanujan 12). In contemporary Karnataka today, the vachana culture has been kept alive within popular and folk music circles, but its predominant medium of availability remains in print format.

III. Counter-Hegemonic Form and Oral Poetics of the Vachanas

In the poetry of the Vīraśaivas, says Ramanujan, experience spoke in a mother tongue instead of a pan-Indian Sanskrit, the second language of ‘cultured’ Indians for centuries. Using Kannada freed the commoners, the illiterate, the ‘outcasts and/or outcastes’, from the shackles of the state and the Sanskritic literary conventions. In addition, it allowed for an expansion of the hitherto constrained scope of what was possible to be spoken sans censorship, thus creating a powerful counter hegemonic voice against the oppressive and ritual-ridden social order.

As an oral form, often in the form of a dialogue and following the cadences of speech rather than the classical champu metre, vachanas employed idioms and imagery from the lives of artisans and women. Their authors were diverse: a Śaivaite brahmin, a woman, a cobbler, a cowherd, a clown, a burglar. “These poets were not bards or pundits in a court, but regular men and women speaking to other regular men and women” (Ramanujan 14). They were of every class, caste and trade; some were outcastes, many were illiterate. Their themes were connected to the labour and
the worship of these subaltern groups. On the poetic form of the vachanas, it is helpful to refer to Zvelebil’s analysis here:

The strictness of the complicated traditional metres, the acute formality of literary genres, divisions of prose and verse, gave way to the innovations and spontaneity of free verse – a poetry that was not recognisable in verse. Neither was the vachana decidedly prose nor poetry. Vachanas read like prose, yet they have their own rhyming scheme. The length of each vachana varies. Some have rhyming patterns in the beginning, some in the middle, and some in the end. In some cases, there is a rhyming scheme in the first three lines and the rest of the lines are free prose. Sometimes, there is a rhyme between the first and last lines or three middle lines, and so on. Vachanas synthesize a large amount of information in a few terse sentences. They convey complex ideas of the Vīraśaivas in a succinct style all their own. (Zvelebil 157)

Ramanujan’s assessment of the poetics, on the other hand, draws our attention to the distinctions between Sanskrit religious texts and the vernacular vachanas. “The Sanskrit religious texts are described as śruti and smṛiti. Smṛiti is what is remembered, what is memorable; śruti, what is heard, what is received” (Ramanujan 37). In calling the compositions of the Vīraśaiva saints vachana, ‘what is said’, the vachana, as an active mode, “stands in opposition to both śruti and smṛiti – not what is heard, but what is said; not remembered or received, but uttered here and now” (Ramanujan 37). To the saints, religion was not a spectator, a reception, or a consumption; it was an experience of the here and now, a way of being. This distinction is expressed in the language and form that the vachanas take. Though medieval Kannada was rich in Dravidian metres and borrowed Sanskritic forms, no metrical line or stanza is used in the vachanas. Basavanna claims:

| I don’t know anything like timebeats and metre nor arithmetic of strings and drums; | Never heard Of tunes and rhythms Or keeping count of cymbal beats. Nor about feet Ambrosial or divine. O master Kudalasangamadeva |
| I don’t know the count of iamb and dactyl. |
**My lord of the meeting rivers,**
*as nothing will hurt you*
*I’ll sing as I love.* (Ramanujan 37)

**As no harm can ever come to you**
*I sing as I please.* (Shivaprakash xxvii)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Two translations of the same vachana</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The vachana in these two translations emphasises both, the urgency of the ‘here and now’, and the ‘down-to-earth’, but cannot resist reaching for the poetic mystique either: as suggested by “iamb and dactyl” in Ramanujan, and “ambrosia” in Shivaprakash. While fairly similar overall, the two translators differ on the translation of the old (indeed, antiquated) Kannada metrical units of *amṛtagaṇa* and *dēvagaṇa* in the Kannada version; employed in creating the familiar vachana opposition of measure *v.* spontaneity. For Ramanujan, this translates to “I don’t know the count of iamb and dactyl” and for Shivaprakash, “Nor about feet Ambrosial or divine”. Both versions are loose English comparisons, and both are infused with a self-conscious poeticism; neither can be taken in equivalence to Basavanna’s unadorned, direct reference to the archaic *amṛtagaṇa* and *dēvagaṇa*.

The Vīraśaiva movement was a social upheaval by and for the poor, the low-caste and outcast. It was a rising of the unlettered against the literate pundit. So it follows that the strict traditions of Sanskritic literature had little use and value in their lived experiences. The colloquial Kannada lyric of the vachana on the other hand – blind to caste, creed, gender, and untouchability – was at once liberating and affording dignity in its egalitarianism. The vachana above is therefore a rejection of premeditated art and literary form. It is not only a spontaneous cry (to be freed of fixed strictures) but a cry for spontaneity. In that regard, the traditional timebeat, like the ritual gestures of the Vedas, was felt to be learned (*Śruti*) – passive, and too clinically organised to be organic.
III.1 Counter-Structures of the Vachanas: “Defiance is not Discontinuity”

Of course, the radical ‘spontaneity’ so revered by saints like Basavanna is not completely devoid of all structure; no free verse can be truly free. And without a gamut of structures to rely on, there can be no spontaneity either. And it is here, in the matter of ‘structure’ (unlike their revolutionary ‘content’) that the Vīraśaivas have proven to be traditionalists. They never for a moment abandon a strong overall coherence, and while they eschew classical structures as discussed earlier, they do so by building structures in various ways. As Ramanujan so eloquently puts it: Defiance is not discontinuity (Ramanujan 33; emphasis added). Indeed, a rejection of or an alienation from an immediate system (or environment) does not necessarily mean a complete break from an older ideal; on the contrary, it can indeed mean continuity with an older ideal, and yet be infused with new dissent. Protest can take place in the very name of the opponent’s ideals: hence, Śiva is abstracted from the Hindu trinity of gods and morphed to signify a distinctly monotheistic supreme being within Vīraśaivism.

Following Victor Turner in The Ritual Process (1969), Ramanujan uses the terms ‘structure’ and ‘anti-structure’ to study the vachana form, and further distinguishes between ‘anti-structure’ and ‘counter-structure’.

Anti-structure is anti- ‘structure’, ideological rejection of the idea of structure itself. Yet bhakti-communities, while proclaiming anti-structure, necessarily develop their own structures for behaviour and belief, often minimal, frequently composed of elements selected from the very structures they deny or reject (Ramanujan 35).

In rejecting conventional patterns of verse-making, the vachanas evolve a distinctive structure where anti-structure develops a counter-structure. And this begins with the very basic oral origins of the poetry where the poetics of vachana-sahitya is foremost an oral poetics, and follows on to developing and/or seeking
new(er) forms of expression, be it dialect-choice, non-Sanskritic metres, or establishing cohesion through the ankita device (signature line).

In terms of such a counter-structure effected by the Vīraśaivas, it is interesting to note M. Cidananda Murti’s article (1966) in the Samsodhana Taranga journal showing how the apparently metre-less metre of the vachanas has a tripadi base. The medieval period saw the extensive development and use of metres indigenous to the Kannada language, and tripadi is one such form that gained in popularity in the twelfth century. It is a three-line form of the Kannada oral tradition, and continues to be used widely in folk songs even today. Murti also notes that,

there is a common stock of themes that occur in changing forms, repetitions of phrases and ideas, the tendency to cycles or sequences of poems. But the extensive use of formulae and substitutes in the strict sense and a distinct given prosody, both characteristic of the oral bardic traditions, are generally absent in the vachanas. Though in free verse, vachanas are loosely disciplined by a form of syntactic metre in which regularity, parallelism, repetition, paired opposites and a centralized pattern play an important role (Murti 203).

Murti also reminds us that all the line-divisions we see in modern print (both in Kannada and in translations) are arbitrary. Though editors make their own ‘cuts’ according to syntax, the original manuscripts have no indication of line-, phrase- or word-division, nor punctuation; yet another curious counter-structure of form and style.

Every vachana ends with an ankita, a signature line, which is also a mark of authorship; in the case of Basavanna this is Kūdalasaṅgamadēva, ‘Lord of the Meeting Rivers’, also an allusion to the actual place of his first mystical experience. It is a singular line with no parallels within the poem but is repeated as a refrain across every poem, recurring as the last-line in vachana after vachana. It has the effect of binding together into a cycle (as indicated earlier by Murti) all the poems by the saint. It also follows that since the original vachanas had no punctuation or page or line breaks, the signature line signalled the -end-beginning-end- of the vachanas,
thus allowing for modern print records of the same to establish the divisions of individual vachanas. In addition, the ankita tells us that we are in the presence of dialogue, not literary exercise, but speech to someone. Finally, as a refrain, it puts the poem – short, but whole in itself – in the community of vachana-sahitya, reminding us that we are in the presence of not some singular lyrical cry, but a cycle of sayings that covers a great range of human experience, and as such must be accordingly referred to in order to arrive at the meaning of the Viraśaiva experience in its entirety. In short, the ankita is integral to the structure of the vachanas and affirms their ultimate coherence.

III.2 Counter-Hegemonic Thematic Content of the Vachanas

III.2.a The Personal vs. Impersonality

As discussed in the section on ‘Bhakti’ earlier, both classical (in Sanskrit and in the regional languages) and folk literature of India work with well-established languages of convention, given personae, and elaborate metrical patterns that mediate and depersonalise literary expression. The classical literary ideal is thus impersonality. But vachanas are intensely personal literature, personalised in several senses:

(a) Many of them express the real conflicts of real persons, representing a life more intimately than anything in the older literature. For instance, Basavanna always speaks of himself, as himself, and the trials and joys of his personal experiences in his quest to attain oneness with Śiva.

(b) They are uttered, not through a persona or mask, but directly in the person of the poet himself, in his native dialect and idiom, using the tones and language of personal conversation or outcry.
(c) Even the few given conventional stances of bhakti are expressed in terms of deeply-felt personal relations; those of lover and beloved, mother and child, father and son, master and servant, even prostitute and client.

(d) Compared to other Indian religious literatures like the Vedic hymns, the vachanas describe the bhakta’s state directly and the god only by implication; the concern is with the subject rather than the object (of worship).

In addition, bhakti movements like Vīraśaivism can arguably be held as Indian analogues to European protestant movements. As R. Blake Michael has pointed out in his careful comparative study of Vīraśaivism and Protestant Christianity, there are some unmistakeable parallels: protest against mediators like the priest, ritual, temples, social hierarchy, in the name of direct, individual, original experience; a movement of and for the underdog, inclusive of all castes, genders, and trades, speaking the sub-standard dialect of the region, producing often the first authentic regional expressions and translations of inaccessible Sanskrit texts (like the translations of the Bible in Europe); and doctrines of ‘work as worship’ leading to an austere (arguably ‘puritan’) ethic. From these few surface comparisons, it is easy to understand the temptation for scholars – both Western and Indian, from the past and the present – to compare the Vīraśaivas to the Protestants, and the Vīraśaiva ethics of kāyaka to the Protestant values of good, honest labour. Closer analysis is warranted however, and as Michael’s scholarship reveals, however potent and

77 Max Weber’s *Religion of India* (1958) is one of the modern documented discussions of the Vīraśaivas as sectarian Protestants. He observed that they “represented a type of particularly sharp and principled protestant reaction to the Brahmins and the caste order” (Weber 19).

While this may seem like an innocuous enough comparison, Weber then goes beyond the general nature of ‘protest’ to egregiously state, “For some time, the Liṅgāyat sect has undergone a characteristic process of status differentiation suggestive of the gentility claimed by descendants of the Mayflower Pilgrims in New England” (Weber 20) – an atrocious claim thankfully debunked by the likes of R. Blake Michael (see the next footnote for details).

Unfortunately however, barring few exceptions like Michael, an alarming number of scholars have followed Weber’s lead in their less than careful discussions of Liṅgāyatas likened to Protestant Christianity and even the Calvinist Puritans. (See R. E. Enthoven, Will Durant, and S. C. Nandimath in the bibliography)

appealing the Vīraśaiva ethic of kāyaka, it is not exactly equivalent to the so-called Protestant-ethic.

The vachanas also express a sense of kin and kindness for all living things – not unknown to classical Hindu religion, certainly, but never so insistent and ardently expressed – a love of human, beast, nature, and thing, whilst admitting honestly that man’s arrangements are for man and not man for them (beast, nature, and thing). Basavanna’s most-quoted saying in Kannada, ‘Where is religion without loving-kindness?’ indeed, attests to the humanitarian core of his philosophy.

III.2.b Reform and Protest in the Vachanas

With the rise in popularity of Basavanna’s teachings, the focus of medieval Kannada poetry moved from Kings as the model subject – the upholder of traditional order and guarantor of stability – to the body of the sharana (the Śiva bhakta devoted to seeking divine truth through personal experience). Here, it is most interesting to compare Ramanujan’s and Shivaprakash’s interpretations of the themes and content of the vachanas in relation to the saint-poets who articulate them. While Ramanujan, a brahmin by birth, aligns his reading of Vīraśaivism (and the vachanas) as a reform movement within the confines of Hindu tradition (not unlike the Hindu-reform Gandhi sought), Shivaprakash, a Liṅgāyat himself, asserts that the movement called for a revolutionary break from classical Hindu religion itself (not unlike the rejection of caste-based Hinduism that Ambedkar endorsed). The two books read in concert certainly make for an enriched understanding of vachana-sahitya on the whole when we compare the contrasting interpretations of ‘protest’ within the movement, and its expression in the literature.

Ramanujan sees the ‘protest’ on a personal level, as “a rebellion only against contemporary Hindu practice; the rebellion was a call to return to experience” (Ramanujan 19). This experience, Ramanujan maintains, was seen by the vachanakāras as a return to the ‘original ideals’ of the religious tradition. Ramanujan,
it can then be argued, does not see the vachanas making a radical break with the Hindu tradition. For him, it was one of the many strands of bhakti literature that created an “anti-structure” out of elements taken from the structure of Hinduism (Ramanujan 35). The vachanas he chooses to translate, it can be observed, gravitate towards those which embody this transformation of old metaphors (what he calls, ‘original ideals’) into new images.

One such typical dramatization of ‘original ideals’ as evinced by Ramanujan is explored through Basavanna’s celebration of the jaṅgama imagery, the ever moving/changing, over the sthāvara imagery, the ever standing. Basavanna frames the themes of Vīraśaivism, especially of the moving vs. the standing, when he inverts the metaphor of the temple as a manifestation of the body, to make the body of the true bhakta itself the temple:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The rich} \\
&\text{will make}^{79}\text{ temples for Šiva.} \\
\text{What shall I,} \\
&a \text{ poor man,} \\
&\text{do}^{80}?
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{My legs are pillars,} \\
&\text{the body the shrine,} \\
&\text{the head a cupola} \\
&\text{of gold.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,} \\
&\text{things standing shall fall,} \\
&\text{but the moving ever shall stay.} \text{ (Ramanujan 19)}
\end{align*}
\]

---

79 Here, I must draw your attention to the distinction found in Indo-European languages between ‘making’ and ‘doing’. Kannada has only one word for both: ‘mādu’, and the lines 2 and 5 suggest this distinction.

80 Refer to the point in the previous footnote on ‘making v. doing’.
Here, Basavanna can be seen as responding to, and subverting, the abstraction that governs the blueprint of a temple. Indeed, South Indian temples are traditionally built in the image of the human body. Ramanujan points out that the ritual of building a temple in most parts of South India begins with the planting of a pot of seed and the temple is said to rise from this implanted seed, not unlike a human. The different parts of the temple are named after the parts of the human body as well: the two sides are called the hasta, the hands; the erected pillar is called the pāda, the foot; the top of the temple is the śikhara, the head; and the darkest, inner-most sanctum nestling the shrine is the garbhagṛha, the womb-house. If a temple has three doors, they represent the three states of consciousness – sleep, waking, and dream – through any of which you may reach the Lord within. And if it has five doors, it represents the five senses of the human. The architecture of the temple, therefore, reads like a blueprint of the human body and the human consciousness (Ramanujan 19-20).

But, for Basavanna, the corrupt distortion of Hindu dharma has allowed the human metaphor of temples to fade in history. The symbol of the temple-body is eroded and the temple has become a mere stationary stone object, built and gilded by the rich, that has forgotten its living-moving originals. The vachana here is calling for a return to the original of all temples, preferring the body to the embodiment (the stone temple). “It encapsulates the cycle of transformation [Ṣaṭṭhala Siddhānta] embodied in the philosophy of Vīraśaivism – temple into body into temple; or a circle of identities – a temple is a body is a temple” (Ramanujan 20).

Extending the re-transformation of the metaphor (of temple-body) into a revolt against ‘fixity’, Basavanna makes an important distinction between the ‘standing’ and the ‘moving’, between ‘making’ and ‘being’: the rich, powerful castes can only make temples, but that may not necessarily enable them to be or become temples. One may note here that ‘making’ and ‘doing’ are both opposed to ‘being’ or ‘knowing’ (in
a non-discursive sense). What is made is a material artefact, but what one is is immortal (lines 11-12 of the vachana).

This opposition of the standing vs. the moving, sthāvara vs. jaṅgama, is at the heart of Vīraśaivism. The Sanskrit word, sthāvara, containing the same Indo-European root as in English words like ‘stand’, ‘state’, ‘static’, ‘status’, carries connotations of these related words. Jaṅgama contains a cognate of the English ‘go’. Sthāvara is that which stands, a piece of property, a thing inanimate. Jaṅgama is moving, moveable, anything given to going and coming. According to Zvelebil’s analysis: Basavanna, in this specific vachana, “prefers the original to the symbol, the body that remembers to the temple that forgets, the poor through living moving jaṅgama to the rich petrified temple, the sthāvara,” standing out there (Zvelebil 21-22).

In another vachana echoing a similar theme, for Basavanna, the instrument too is not what is ‘made’ (unchanging sthāvara), but what one ‘is’ (changeable jaṅgama). The body can be lute as it can be temple:

81 Especially in Viraśaivism, a jangama is a religious man who has renounced world and home, moving from village to village, representing god to the devoted, and also considered to be god incarnate by those he teaches.

82 We need to remember that vachanas, in their earliest form, were originally lyric poetry, words set to music, and meant to be sung rather than written.

83 What may be of further interest here, if perhaps extraneous to the immediate focus of this thesis: Analogies between poetry and music go back thousands of years, to the very origins of poetry itself. Poetry, we are told, is music, or at least more like music than other uses of language. Poetry translation also goes back a very long way. And so does the idea that music cannot be translated (See Peter Dayan’s Music Writing Literature*, 2006).

If poetry is music (or at least is characterised by a musical element), and music cannot be translated, how is a translator to cope with the music in poetry? It would seem that this remains an unsolvable conundrum of translation within literary studies.

Yet, interestingly, if the poetry were to be located not within the discipline of ‘Literature’ but within that of ‘Philosophy’ – here, the mystical philosophy of Viraśaivism, where the sharana progresses towards becoming one with Śiva – then poetry would indeed allow for its music to be ‘translated’.

Take the specific vachana here, for instance. It contains explicit references to music: lute, sounding gourd, strings, plucking rods. It then marries these musical referents with the resolute Viraśaivite faith that the very boundaries that exist between these entities and the sharana are collapsible, thus leaving us with the rather overwhelming suggestion that the poet-saint is as much the music, and the instrument, as (s)he is the musician. The body can be lute, as it can be temple, as it can be the very lyrical poem that the sharana utters.

*Dayan’s work is a study of the French intellectual traditions from Chopin, Sand, Baudelaire, Debussy, Mallarmé, Proust, Barthes, to Derrida. It argues that, even as the firm conviction that “music cannot be translated” has embedded itself deeply within literary criticism, the intellectuals in this tradition developed “a
Make of my body the beam of a lute
of my head the sounding gourd
of my nerves the strings
of my fingers the plucking rods.

Clutch me close
and play your thirty-two songs
O lord of the meeting rivers! (Ramanujan 83)

This return to the jaṅgama body and the rejection of the sthāvara orthodoxy flourished throughout the vachana-canon of not just Basavanna, but others such as Mahadeviyakka, Allama Prabhu, and Devara Dasimayya. This process then brought with it a critical inquiry into the fabric of society and religion, and these vachanakāras sought to boldly tear apart both to discover the essence of truth. The crusading militancy at the heart of Vīraśaivism allowed for the challenging of gender norms to permeate their self-reflection. There is a double-edged, gender-fluid thematic frame to some of their vachanas. As illustrated in Basavanna’s words here:

Look here, dear fellow:
I wear these men’s clothes
only for you.

Sometimes I am man,
sometimes I am woman.

O lord of the meeting rivers
I’ll make war for you
but I’ll be your devotees’ bride. (Ramanujan 29)

This is – among other things – a flat refusal to accept roles defined by a world wedded to appearance and performativity. In his protest against traditional

---

style of writing that refused to recognise clear boundaries between the literary, the critical, and the musical” which has not received its due attention (Dayan ix).
dichotomies, for instance, Dasimayya rejects also the gendered-difference between man and woman as superficial:

If they see
breasts and long hair coming
they call it woman,

if beard and whiskers
they call it man:

but, look, the self that hovers
in between
is neither man
nor woman

O Ramanatha (Ramanujan 27)

These Vīraśaiva saints – unlike orthodox Hinduism or even unlike other bhakti movements of India – do not believe that religion, caste, and gender are something one is born with or into. They reject the ‘great traditions’ of Vedic religion, and scorn the effectiveness of the Vedas as scripture. Their fiercely monotheistic faith (in Śiva as the Supreme) allows them to reject the tenet that a Hindu is born, not made. The bhakta believes in acquiring merit only by living and believing in an egalitarian faith, which allows room for choosing and changing beliefs, something hitherto impermissible in the Vedas.

Shivaprakash – contrary to Ramanujan’s interpretation of the vachanas as ‘personal protest’ calling to the ‘original ideals’ of Hinduism – reads the vachanas as “a revolt that attempts to reconfigure the social order” (Shivaprakash xxi). The vachanas he chooses to translate are more reflective of the social, economic, and

---

84 Anthropologist Milton Singer speaks of ‘little’ and ‘great’ traditions in Indian civilization in When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization (1972). The ‘great’ tradition would be inter-regional, pan-Indian; ‘little’ tradition would consist of many regional traditions, carried by regional languages. Other pairs of terms proposed include: popular/learned, folk/classical, low/high, parochial/universal, peasant/aristocratic, lay/hieratic. The native Indian tradition speaks of mārga (‘classical’) and desī (‘folk’).
political critique, and read as the criticism of old traditions itself. The following vachana is of a voice of one speaking ‘from below’, addressing the deep-rooted exploitative nature of the Varna system:

Basava the Bull tills the forest land;
Devendra [Indra] gives the rains;
why should we,
the ones who grow crops through hard labor,
pay taxes to the king? (Shivaprakash 87)

In including a greater number of vachanakāras from the lower castes, Shivaprakash also has the advantage over Ramanujan in exploring the idea of ‘labour’ in the vachana tradition – a factor starkly absent in Ramanujan’s choice of vachanas and in his analyses. On labour, Shivaprakash writes:

As these poets used the imagery of their caste occupations to describe their religious experiences, the understanding of labour itself changed. The traditional hierarchy, with brahmanical intellectual labour at the apex and the manual labour of the lower castes at the base was thus subverted to deem all labour as service to the lord. Thus, the very demeaning acts of labour that inscribed a lower caste on the devotee was transformed into a divine experience. For Chennaiah, the cobbler, the unclean process of tanning hide and working leather becomes the process of the journey between the material to the spiritual. For Ramanna, the cowherd, his staff represents his ceaseless vigil of the gods. Kannappa the animal catcher’s arrows pierce Rudra’s [another name for Śiva] forehead, and make clear the verses of Allama, the mystic vachanakāra. (Shivaprakash 97-98)

Shivaprakash makes an argument for Madara Chennaiah, the untouchable cobbler-poet, as perhaps the first ever vachana poet, the record of whose vachanas (only ten of which are now extant) can be traced back to the eleventh century (Shivaprakash xxiv). One of Chennaiah’s vachanas brilliantly entwines the imagery of the materiality of his cobbler’s trade with that of metaphysical notions of Vīraśaivism:

After erecting three pillars
The gross, the subtle and the causal bodies.
After beating the buffaloes’ rough hide
After removing the flesh
With the staff of the manifest and the hidden
After tanning the hide with the fibre of dualism
After pouring the caustic juice of quintessence
Into the hide-pouch of awareness
The blemishes of soul thus destroyed
I have come
To take the sandals to his feet.
Take care,
Not of the ground below,
But of the path your feet and sandals take.
Do not be enslaved
By the hand-awl, blade or peg
But realize
Ramarama, your own true self, the joy of joys! (Shivaprakash xxiv)

The manner in which Chennaiah, the cobbler-saint, combines abstract philosophical preoccupations envisioning a society free from caste and expresses them in concrete metaphors taken from the cobbler’s trade is truly remarkable, especially when situated in context of the stranglehold of classical literary traditions in the eleventh century; traditions that were categorically denied to the likes of him. Chennaiah, claims Shivaprakash, set the example of effective use of metaphors taken from the particulars of one’s own trade and vocation for future vachanakāras. Another cobbler-saint, Dhoolaiah, too contributes to such an inflow of new metaphors (drawn from labour) into vachana-sahitya:

On seeing the great godhead
Appear on the edge of the chisel
Piercing the hide—
‘Why are you here, sir
In front of the one that moves about
Carrying the bag of flesh?
Go go away
To the dwelling places of your devotees
Free them
Go on to the top of your silver mountain,
With your masquerades
Go free your devotees.
By the grace of the master of lust, dust and smoke
Go and prosper’. (Shivaprakash lxx)

As the forthright, even fierce, tones in Chennaiah’s and Dhoolaiah’s vachanas make clear, their representation of the toils of their trade as untouchable cobblers is not so much as to ‘dignify’ their ‘demeaning’ labour – which, if it were so, might be understood as a profoundly conservative gesture – as a repurposing of the same into imagery and metaphors in their personal and frank expressions to Śiva. The two vachanas therefore can be read as disambiguating counterpoints to Shivaprakash’s somewhat unclear argument that “the very demeaning acts of labour that inscribed a lower caste on the devotee was transformed into a divine experience”, which opens itself to a certain problematic conservatism at play in the sense of ‘dignity of labour = dignity of demeaning labour’. Subsequently, Shivaprakash, while embracing most of Ramanujan’s interpretations of Vīraśaivism, also offers his own critique on Ramanujan’s vision of the ‘protest’ in vachana-sahitya:

The vachanas were informed by an understanding of how state and brahmanism were twined together in oppressing the lower castes. To see them merely as a personal form of protest, and as a return to the original, as Ramanujan sees it, is missing this point. It is this understanding, springing from a privileging of the subject’s experience rather than adherence to tradition, that gives the radical edge to the vachana, and which later gives voice to the social critique. (Shivaprakash 98)

However, it would serve well to treat Shivaprakash’s teleological view in his “Introduction” that the intention of the vachanakāras was to “revolutionize the individual and the society in the light of an innate sense of truth and justice, posing an insurrectionary challenge to Hindu dharma that was hitherto unseen”
(Shivaprakash xxii) with a healthy scepticism. The vachanas in his edition, while unarguably of the protest variety, are yet a far shout away from being an active call to arms. At most, they can be seen as a bold questioning of the status-quo of privilege, religion, and society, but certainly not a fierce shout to upend the existing Hindu order itself as projected in his “Introduction”. Nonetheless, by focusing on the radicalism and socio-economic content-in-context, Shivaprakash’s book brings welcome depth to the already substantial efforts of Ramanujan towards understanding the vachanas as a product of their material conditions. In turn, their respective works read in concert allows the reader to envision the vachanas as more than a mere form of bhakti literature, into one that constitutes a churning of revolutionary protest with bhakti that transformed both society and literature for centuries to come.

IV. Can a Radical Moment Outlive its Movement? Reflections on the Impact and Relevance of Vīraśaivism

IV.1 Modernity and Vīraśaiva Bhakti

The Vīraśaiva vachanakāras discussed in this chapter are, in a manner of speaking, far closer to the modern audience (both Western and Indian) in that they present the true feelings of the poet himself or herself, expressed with the directness of naked confession. And this is really revolutionary, not to mention simply astonishing, when we consider that they were composed many centuries ago, set against the background of the classical conventions of ‘elegant impersonality’ and ‘subtle indirection’ in the Sanskritic kāvya. The personal and the direct are, of course, part of a larger mode associated with the bhakti movement across India – but that mode was never more radically practiced than by the Vīraśaivas in their vachanas. Nor too did the any of the other bhakti movements call for such an explicit, unrelenting, and resolute denunciation of casteism.
But if the vachanakāras share such a passion for the personal and the plain with modern poets (both Western and Indian, but especially so, the modern dalit writers), the particular parallel stops there; for they certainly do not share the same motive for that passion. If today’s dalit poets find at the end of ruthless frankness about themselves and their material conditions (often their primary poetic topic), some minimal affirmation of the human (be it via gender, identity, subalternity, caste, class, and so on), the Vīraśaiva Sharanas aimed at nothing less than the obliteration of their humanity (human materiality) in absolute unity with their god, Śiva. If they insistently harp on their personal state, it is not because – like modern poets – the poet’s personality is the sole remaining poetic authority left them, or that the worldly self has some intrinsic value to be discovered and cleansed by the truth. Such poetry, based on such a view, would seem to them one more counter in the game of illusions. And they will have none of it. They seek, instead, unmediated and unconditioned reality between them and Śiva. This mystical frame, thus, immediately undercuts any definitive assertions of modernity inscribed on to the expression of the vachanas.

On the other hand, K. Ishwaran makes a claim for a Liṅgāyat model of modernisation in his essay, “Bhakti Tradition and Modernization: The Case of Lingayatism”. In an attempt to circumvent the ethnocentric models of modernisation prevalent in the twentieth century (which were largely Western and Euro-centric), he outlines his own alternative model of modernisation: “as a process by which any society at any time transforms itself structurally and functionally to realize the values of individual freedom, equality, rationality and community” (Ishwaran 74). He further claims that the compositions of Basavanna amply manifest these modernistic values “to an extent unique within the bhakti tradition” (Ishwaran 74-75). Now this argument is simply hard to agree with, if for nothing else, due to the less than careful endorsement of Universalist values of rationality, freedom, equality, and community, and misrepresenting them as precepts “unique” in bhakti or Vīraśaivism. Even more,
he appears to have unwittingly fallen into the very same ethnocentric trap that he had set out to avoid.

Such endeavours to chalk out an ‘indigenous bhakti modernity’ (if there is ever such a thing) lead to a far more interesting reflection on how Indian nationalism and the bhakti movement narrative fit together. As Patton Burchett’s critique of the bhakti movements in India suggests,

the narrative of bhakti as a pan-Indian, socially egalitarian movement as viewed by the nationalist agenda of the late nineteenth and early-mid-twentieth century undoubtedly served to mobilise the support and involvement of the masses. But this progressive/reform/anti-caste dimension of bhakti rhetoric demonstrates too, how deeply entwined British Colonialism and Indian Nationalism are. For not only do liberal values get read into, and written onto, the distant past, but it also depends on colonial knowledge formations to do the same. (Burchett 132-133; emphasis in original)

Burchett’s argument rings true in light of Nicholas Dirks’ *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (2001), on the colonial construction of caste as the central marker of Indian identity. “If we are to accept [Dirk’s premise] that caste did not exist in the way we – both in India and in the West – have typically conceived of it since colonial rule, then how can the bhakti movement be characterised as having at least opposed, if not transcended, such notions of caste throughout its history?” (Burchett 133)

I believe that the way to offset such epistemological roadblocks, if not arrive at a resolution, lies in the study of not a ‘pan-Indian bhakti’ tradition (as the orientalist and later, the nationalist projects sought to do) but a more localised, even esoteric, scrutiny of the same. This would allow for a critical preoccupation with Vīraśaivism as not to do with ‘origins’ but with ‘process’, not historical fact but discourse, not privilege any material product (a single text or practice or even the ideologically overburdened category of bhakti itself) but the motivation of Vīraśaivism as a social, cultural, literary act. And that is precisely what this chapter has attempted to do
through its singular focus on the undisputedly indigenous Vīraśaivism, and its expression through the Kannada vachanas. In centring on this philosophy, this vachana text, and re-considering the emphasis placed on Vīraśaivism as a bhakti movement, and instead, re-orienting our recognition of it as primarily that of a literary movement with a powerful anti-caste impetus, it allows room to offset the anxieties that Burchett has laid out. While not austerely isolating such an understanding from any pan-Indian possibilities, connections, or contexts, but re-emphasising the literary particularity of the vachana practice all the same, it reaches parts of our twenty-first century understanding of that ‘moment’ in the twelfth century movement that still resonates with contemporary conditions of the Kannada-speaking dalit. Indeed, the religious and socio-political tensions of Basavanna’s day have travelled, and re-produced, into contemporary Liṅgāyatism in Karnataka.

IV.2 Formation of a caste on the basis of an anti-caste movement: The Liṅgāyata Case

Writing in 1915, the renowned Anthropologist specialising in castes and tribes of India, Reginald Edward Enthoven, identifies that the study of the Vīraśaiva sharana movement and the Kannada vachanas is instrumental to our understanding of the history of Liṅgāyatism as we know it today. In particular, he argues that such a study of their history provides an interesting example of “the evolution of caste inside the fold of a religious community originally formed on a non-caste basis” (Enthoven 70). Indeed, ironically enough, the community is itself regarded as a caste today, constitutionally classified as ‘backward’ and comprising several occupational sub-castes. Enthoven elaborates on such a phenomenon of newly emergent castes:

If caste is largely a manifestation of deep-rooted prejudices tending to raise and preserve barriers between the social intercourse of different sections of the human race, it would seem not unnatural to expect that it would tend to reassert itself within the fold of an essentially casteless religion so soon as the enthusiasm of the founders had spent itself; and it is not unlikely that the mere fact of converts having joined the movement at an early stage in its history would generate a claim
to social precedence over the late converts, and thus in time reconstitute the old caste barrier that the reformers spent themselves in endeavouring to destroy. One of the most interesting pages in the history of caste evolution, therefore, must be that which deals with the evolution of caste inside the fold of a religious community originally formed on a non-caste basis. A remarkable instance of such evolution will be found in the history of Lingayatism. … Another instance, of course, is the case of Christianity in much of India (Enthoven 70).

Contrary to the constitutional label of ‘backward’ however, the Vīraśaiva-to-Liṅgāyata evolution “underwent a Brahminisation [Sanskritisation] with a validation of caste identities and of Brahmanic superiority” (Rao 15-16). Firmly a middle-caste group today, the Liṅgāyatas dominate state politics in contemporary Karnataka, wielding substantial political and hegemonic clout. Such power has unfortunately also translated to dominant, often violent, assertions of the same within the drama of state politics. And the assassination of Prof M. M. Kalburgi on 30 August, 2015 is a tragic case in point of such violence. The context of Kalburgi’s life’s work – and the likely context of his death85 – is the fraught cultural politics of the Liṅgāyat community in Karnataka.

Kalburgi (1938 – 2015), a former vice-chancellor of Kannada University, Dharwad, and a Liṅgāyat himself, was a progressive voice among the Liṅgāyatas. In addition, as a scholar in Old Kannada (medieval Kannada), he was a leading authority in Vīraśaivism and Vachana-sahitya, and as such his work had significant implications for the theology of the Liṅgāyata establishment and their political status-quo.

According to an article in India Today, Kalburgi was said to have frequently riled the Liṅgāyat orthodoxy, most memorably in 1989, when he completed a study of the vachanas of Neelāmbika, Basavanna’s second wife. The book, Marga One (1989), prompted the Liṅgāyat community to force him to withdraw some parts of his

85 See Raghu Karnad’s “Murder in the Academy: MM Kalburgi’s Dangerous Literary Studies” in The Wire (30 August, 2015)
text. Kalburgi linked Neelāmbika’s vachanas to a minor myth in which Basavanna, unable to refuse anything to a supplicant, gave away his second wife to a Jaṅgama sanyasi. According to Kalburgi, Neelāmbika’s own vachanas suggest that she and Basavanna did indeed cease their conjugal relationship. Conservative Liṅgāyatas were outraged and Kalburgi received death threats; eventually, he was forced to apologise and retract his statements. Said a crestfallen Kalburgi: “I did it to save the lives of my family. But I also committed intellectual suicide on that day.”

More recently in June 2014, according to an article in The Wire, Kalburgi had declared that the Liṅgāyatas cannot be called Hindus since, according to Basava’s teachings, the community does not endorse idol worship, temple construction, or the caste system – thereby attracting the hostility of the RSS (the Liṅgāyat vote was crucial to the election of the first BJP government in Karnataka in 2004, and its first chief minister, BS Yeddyurappa, is a Liṅgāyat). Kalburgi also dismissed the sanctity of religious idols, which brought protestors from the Bajrang Dal and VHP to his doorstep. Kalburgi was placed under police protection for a short period after having received fatal threats (such threats were not uncommon in his tenure as a writer). But not long after he requested the police to remove their protection, two men on a

---

86 See Chidanand Rajghatta’s “Satanic Echo” in India Today (May 15, 1989)

87 Founded on 27 September 1925, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is a right-wing Hindu nationalist paramilitary organisation; one of the world’s largest voluntary missionary organisations. It is also widely regarded as the parent organisation of the currently ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The RSS is one of the principal organizations of the Sangh Parivar group, which refers to the family of Hindu nationalist organisations that have been started by members of the RSS, or drew inspiration from its ideology.

88 The BJP is one of the two major political parties in India, along with the Indian National Congress. A right-wing party, its policy has historically reflected Hindu-nationalist positions.

89 See Raghu Karnad, ibid.

90 Bajarang Dal is a religious militant organisation that forms the youth wing of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). It is a member of the RSS family of organisations. The ideology of the organisation is based on Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) politics.

91 The Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) is an Indian right-wing Hindu nationalist organisation based on the ideology of Hindutva, a member of the Sangh Parivar group, and an umbrella of the RSS. Its stated objective is: “to organise, consolidate the Hindu society and to serve, protect the Hindu Dharma.” http://vhp.org/swagatam/ [Accessed on 18 Jan 2017]
motorcycle came to his residence, posing as students, shot Kalburgi at point blank range, and fled the scene. The ongoing investigations have yet to uncover their identities and motives.

But according to professor K M Marulsidappa\textsuperscript{92}, Kalburgi’s murder is less likely to implicate conventional Hindutva groups, and more likely to involve the fine rivalries and high political stakes within Liṅgāyat caste politics. Writer-activist H.S Anupama too echoes such an allegation: “His research work on the Liṅgāyat community, the Vachanas and the Śaiva-Vaiśnava clash had created ideological enemies to him within the community.”\textsuperscript{93}

Regardless of the veracity of these allegations against the fanatical Liṅgāyat orthodoxy, there is certainly an overarching concern of a culture of violence mired in regressive identity-politics, justified by the rhetoric of ‘outrage’ and ‘hurt’, that threatens to overwhelm the hallowed culture and legacy of a Vīraśaiva culture. A culture that is in danger of forgetting its original ideals of Basavanna’s visionary Anubhava Mantapa, the egalitarian ‘space’ propagating reflection and dialogue on ethics, bhakti, and socio-religious freedom of expression. Of course, it is also true that one of the first victims of such ideological and corporeal violence was Basavanna himself – martyred at the end of his celebrated period of reform, when he was thought to have gone too far by marrying a brahmin girl to a dalit boy. One picketer at a protest-gathering in Bangalore’s Town Hall in the aftermath of Kalburgi’s assassination draws a sorrowful parallel:

“Yesterday Basavanna”, his sign read, “Today Kalburgi”.\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{92} See Raghu Karnad, ibid


\textsuperscript{94} See Raghu Karnad, ibid.
V. Closing Comment

A close reading of the form and oral poetics of the Vīraśaiva vachana practice not only reveals that they too contribute to the counter-hegemonic protest in the literature but also helps to reinstate the often overlooked and under-appreciated nature of literariness that so strongly defines the movement. The chapter has argued that by re-considering the emphasis placed on Vīraśaivism as a bhakti movement, and instead, re-orienting our recognition of it as primarily that of a literary movement driven by a powerful anti-caste impetus, this allows us to offset, if not overcome, the overburdened ideological baggage and epistemological roadblocks inherent in the category of ‘bhakti’ itself. This challenging of the common scholarly understanding of the practice as a “bhakti movement” is important, not just for the way it can supply historically accurate portrayals of India’s religious and literary past, but also for the way it illuminates the motivations that lie behind our current scholarly conventions. For, as Christian Lee Novetzke in his critique on whether ‘bhakti’ should be considered as a ‘movement’ at all, points out in warning:

Indeed, rather than Hindu-Muslim antagonism, the primary locus of public political tension across India for decades to come will be caste, and into this cauldron we can expect expressions of bhakti as caste difference to be poured. When we talk of a ‘bhakti movement’ we are identifying – perhaps even representing – one of many publics that have received this ancient word in a particular way [he is referring to both the orientalist and the modern nationalist framework], a public of which we, as scholars, form an important part in the present. My point is not to prove or disprove this question of whether bhakti is a ‘movement,’ but to attend to the ‘who’ indeed ‘says’ there is a bhakti movement at a particular time and for an identifiable purpose. I have suggested that the multiple manifestations of bhakti in South Asian history are predicated on asking the same questions: who says? And, just as importantly, who listens? (Novetzke 268)

Indeed, as the final section of this chapter has shown, ironically, an entirely new religious caste group, recognised as Scheduled Caste by the Karnataka charter, has
been formed on the basis of an anti-caste movement – something entirely unique to the Vīraśaiva phenomenon, even taken in a pan-Indian context. This Liṅgāyata community of contemporary Karnataka has shown itself to be wholly preoccupied with defining and restricting who does – or does not – get have a say in the socio-political and cultural stakes involving Vīraśaiva discourse today. While the vachana movement began with its revolutionary vision of anubhava mantapa and its vehement rejection of casteism, clearly, those ideals have been silenced, if not outright discarded, by the fraught politics of identity that preoccupies the community today. It then falls on today’s incumbent artists and thinkers to valiantly, actively, counteract this baggage of violence and ensure that the legacy of Vīraśaivism for dalit discourse not carry the senselessness of fanatical identity-politics. Indeed, it becomes all the more worthwhile to revisit, reimagine, and reinforce the spirit and ideals of the Vīraśaiva movement. It can only serve to enrich dalit and anti-caste literary discourse to see a resurgence and reinfusion of the vachana values in the current context.

As Novetzke’s cautionary words remind us, much work remains to be done on critically evaluating historical and contemporary (primarily political) uses of bhakti to unite as well as paradoxically set caste communities against each other along the axes of community, ethnicity, sect, nation, polity, or even individual. As the following chapter will reveal, bhakti has certainly played a significant role in the construction of nationalism in modern India which has sowed its own divisions along the ideologies of Gandhi and Ambedkar.
Works Cited


Murti, Cidananda M. “Basavanna-na Tripadi”. Mysore, Samsodhana Taranga, 1966, pp. 190-204


Modern and contemporary dalit movements in India have received, as it were, the incidental influence of the Bhakti tradition through early Hindu reform movements, and in particular, through Gandhi’s Harijan movement in the 1930s that aimed at eradicating untouchability. Gail Omvedt describes the Harijan movement as an “incorporative, norm-oriented reformist trend” (Omvedt 10), embodying the upper caste social reform tradition that sought to cleanse Hinduism of its impurities. Or, to “lop off the excrescences” in the words of M.G. Ranade, i.e., to chop off the diseased branches of the tree with the intention of fostering its growth (Omvedt 10).

In contrast to this spirit of Hindu-reform, the anti-caste movements on the other hand aimed at felling the tree whole. Radical, and even militantly revolutionary, these anti-caste movements sought to act against caste-based exploitation and rise from oppression culturally, politically, and economically. The anti-caste leaders challenged the Hindu nationalism emerging from the nineteenth century onwards as a construction of the elite, an attempt to define Indian society, and the majority of the Indian people, as essentially Hindu. They attacked Hinduism itself by arguing that it was in essence brahmanical, caste-bound, and devoid of rational logic. Asserting that Hinduism was an imposed religion, the anti-caste movement called for a break from this imposition. They began to define themselves as ‘Non-Hindu’ and took up alternative systems of ideology and belief: Phule denounced the very legitimacy of Hinduism itself; Periyar promoted atheism; others in the Tamil-Nadu non-Brahmin movement attempted to claim Saivism as an independent religion; Narayanswami Guru in Kerala formulated “one religion, one caste, one god” (Omvedt 12), while his more radical follower, Ayyapan, avowed “no religion, no caste, and no God for

95 The notable figures of this larger anti-caste drive were Jotiba Phule, Ambedkar, and ‘Periyar’ E.V. Ramasamy, among many others throughout India (Narayanswami Guru in Kerala, Acchutanand in Uttar Pradesh, Mangoo Ram in Punjab, to name a few others).
mankind” (Omvedt 12). Regardless of the specificities, the rejection of Hinduism remained a feature that distinguished the anti-caste radicals from the reformers.

It was from such a lineage of radical dissent and revolution that Ambedkar emerges as an anti-caste intellectual and leader of the untouchables. Reading an historical overview of the Dalit Movement from the early-mid 20 century onwards, Ambedkar’s presence and role are, indeed, so critical to the movement that it becomes nearly impossible to conceptualise the same in the absence of Ambedkar. The 1930s onwards marks an especially prolific period in the Dalit Movement, with Ambedkar its leading icon; and Gandhi following close behind as a significant notable, albeit in conflicting positions of ally and antagonist. In particular, the epic confrontation between Gandhi and Ambedkar in 1932 marks a turning point in the Dalit Movement, leading to the onset of the ‘Ambedkarite Paradigm’

I. The Poona Pact (1932): A Watershed Moment for Dalit Discourse on ‘Representation’

In polity, the anti-caste thinkers were opposed to being represented by the Indian National Congress on the grounds that it was controlled by upper castes, and sought an alternative political front. Ambedkar, in particular, was a strong advocate of one such political alternative, and in the process, it led to the historical stand-off between him and Gandhi, in what is now referred to as The Poona Pact of 1932. In order to grasp its full import, it is worth examining the context and dynamics of that period of nationalist struggle in India, and Gandhi’s pivotal presence – alternating between ally and antagonist – looming over this horizon.

---

96 Both Gail Omvedt and D. R. Nagaraj identify the historic Gandhi-Ambedkar confrontation in 1932 as paving the way for, what they both call, the “Ambedkarite Paradigms” (roughly from the early-1930s to the mid-1970s). For a further reading on the same: see Omvedt’s Dalits and the Democratic Revolution, p. 337; see also, Nagaraj’s Flaming Feet, p. 97.
As a social reformer, Gandhi was comparable to co-religionists such as Bankim Chatterjee and Swami Vivekananda, who devoted their lives to the moral and material transformation of Hinduism. Like them, Gandhi too spoke of the need for a cohesive Hindu social order, and like them, he too attacked the distinctions of caste and sect within Hinduism which undermined its capacity to act as a unified social entity. Choosing an indirect rather than a direct attack on caste, Gandhi spoke of a distinction between varnāshramadharma as a prescriptive value, and caste as an existential reality. He found nothing exploitative about the varna system as it was conceived; nor did he believe that these varnas allocated caste systems of superiority or inferiority within the framework of Hindu society. He argued, instead, that caste as an existential reality reflected the degeneration of Hindu society over the centuries; this fall from a morally unexceptionable state had to be reversed if Hinduism was to regain its classical, conceptual capacity in the twentieth century.

Gandhi’s perceptions of Hindu society, and his resolute faith in its ability to reform, stood wholly at variance with Ambedkar’s position on the same.

---

97 Both Bankim Chatterjee and Swami Vivekananda recognised caste as a social institution which stood in the way of a revitalisation of Hindu society and its ability to effectively face the Western challenge.

98 Two comprehensive studies on Hindu reform movements are C. H. Heimsath’s *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform* (Bombay, 1964), and N. S. Bose’s *The Indian Awakening & Bengal* (Calcutta, 1960).


100 As Gandhi observed:

> When we...have cleansed ourselves, we may have the four varnas according to the way in which we can express the best in us. But varna then will invest one with higher responsibility and duties. Those who will impart knowledge in a spirit of service will be called Brahmans. They will assume no superior airs but will be true servants of society.

> When inequality of status or rights is ended, every one of us will be equal. (qtd. in Ravinder 89)

101 In Ambedkar’s essay, “Castes in India” (1917), which is also a sharp critique of Hinduism, he argues that the basic characteristic of Hindu society was that castes were not distinct entities in themselves. Castes formed the organic constituents of a larger whole, and could not be prised free from Hinduism itself, just as the relations of inferiority and superiority, along with the oppression and exploitation accompanying these relations, could never be freed from the religion. In fact, Ambedkar regarded the relationship of superiority and inferiority as intrinsic to Hinduism, and he believed that it was incapable of being transformed into an egalitarian social bond, as Gandhi envisioned. In considering the possibilities of reform within Hindu society, Ambedkar felt that since the caste order was legitimised by the shastric literature of Hinduism, it was impossible to conceive of a
Ambedkar was openly sceptical of Gandhi’s reformatory vision of widening the moral horizons of Hinduism that required the orthodox Hindus to adopt a new social outlook. As he states in his essay, “Annihilation of Caste”:

Unlike the Mahatma [Gandhi] there are Hindu leaders who are not content merely to believe and follow...Yet how many Brahmins who break caste every day will preach against Caste and against the Shastras? For one honest Brahmin preaching against Caste and Shastras because his practical instinct and moral conscience cannot support a conviction in them, there are hundreds who break Caste and trample upon the Shastras every day but who are the most fanatic upholders of the theory of Caste and the sanctity of the Shastras. Why this duplicity? Because they feel that if the masses are emancipated from the yoke of Caste they would be a menace to the power and prestige of the Brahmins as a class. The dishonesty of this intellectual class who would deny the masses the fruits of their thinking is a most disgraceful phenomenon. (Ambedkar 354-355)

Thus, for Ambedkar, it seemed obvious that it would be impossible for the untouchables to seek emancipation from within this existing framework which, in effect, would condemn them to eternal subordination. Therefore, in the evidence he submitted to the Southborough Committee in 1919, he advanced the view that (like the Muslims, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, and Christians) the untouchables should be treated as a distinctive community in any future constitutional arrangements for India. Indeed, to enable the untouchables to exercise their agency in the representative councils being created at various levels in the polity, they should be given the right to vote in separate electorates. If denied such a right, if they were given nothing more than substantial seats in Hindu constituencies, then they would be unable to elect representatives who could voice their true interests. A leadership created through the provision of reserved seats in Hindu constituencies would only maintain the status quo of the dominant upper castes, the continued subordination of state where the casteHindus would cut themselves adrift from their shastras and willingly reshape their society of privilege into one that invited the liberal principles of the twentieth century.

the untouchables, and would ultimately fail to perform the task of speaking for the untouchables. Such a position was in complete variance with that of Gandhi, who had no desire to see the rupture this would create within Hinduism and Hindu society.

These conflicting stances of Gandhi and Ambedkar on the possibility of transforming Hindu society from within built towards a major crisis during the political deliberations preceding the Government of India Act of 1935. Gandhi and Ambedkar attended the Second Round Table Conference in 1931 at London, where, in a memorable speech, Gandhi made a strong case for Congress’s demand for Purna Swaraj (‘complete independence’). In addition, he argued that Congress could be trusted to represent and protect the interests of all classes and communities in the country.

The British Government, on the other hand, considered other challenges in the event of framing a new constitution for India. As then British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, told the delegates of the Conference, the real challenge before them lay in “devising a system of representation whereby power could be equitably shared by different classes, communities and religious groups, before the shape of an independent all-India polity was hammered out” (IRTC 1336). The Prime Minister’s statement prompted Ambedkar to put before the Minorities Committee a document proposing the fair and equitable allocation of representation for untouchables in different elected legislatures. In doing so, Ambedkar was also challenging Gandhi’s assertion that the Congress represented all classes and communities in India, and not just with respect to the untouchables. Ambedkar’s proposal resulted in the Minorities Committee to defer its decision on a future system of representative government. Gandhi vehemently objected to such a possibility of creating separate electorates for

---

103 As is well known in history, the First Round Table Conference convened in 1930 to discuss the future constitution of India where the momentous decision was reached that the growth of nationalism in the subcontinent necessitated the creation of an all-India federal government free of British control. The Constitutional debate which led to the Government of India Act of 1935 is dealt with in a number of studies. Of relevance are: R. J. Moore, The crisis of Indian Unity 1917-1940 (Delhi, 1979); J. M. Brown, Gandhi and Civil Disobedience, The Mahatma in Indian Politics 1928-1934 (Cambridge, 1972)
the untouchables, especially when it was becoming apparent that Ramsay MacDonald was going to endorse it. Such a provision was only ill-disposed towards the country, he declared:

Let this Committee and let the whole world know that today there is a body of Hindu reformers who are pledged to remove this blot of untouchability. We do not want on our register and on our census untouchables classified as a separate class. Sikhs may remain as such in perpetuity, so may Mohamedans, so may Europeans. Will untouchables remain untouchables in perpetuity? I would far rather that Hinduism died than that untouchability lived…I don’t mind untouchables if they so desire, being converted to Islam or Christianity. I should tolerate that, but I cannot possibly tolerate what is in store for Hinduism if there are two divisions set forth in the villages. Those who speak of the political rights of the untouchables don’t know their India, don’t know how Indian society is today constituted and therefore I want to say with all the emphasis that I can command that if I was the only person to resist this thing I would resist it with my life. (IRTC 1385)

That Gandhi’s impassioned declaration to resist, at any cost, the delinking of the untouchables from mainstream Hindu society through such separate electorates was uttered in seriousness was soon made evident on his return from the Conference. Resuming his imprisonment from his prison cell in Yervada, Poona (known today as Pune), he first announced his decision to “fast unto death” in the event of the creation of separate electorates for the Untouchables in any future constitution of India (Pyarelal 99-103). But MacDonald nonetheless released the first draft of the Communal Award on 16 August 1932, confirming the provision of separate electorates for untouchables among other minority groups. On 20 September 1932, Gandhi formally communicated to MacDonald his decision to undertake a “fast unto death” unless the provision of separate electorates for the Untouchables was cancelled before that date (Pyarelal 103-106).

When the correspondence between Gandhi and MacDonald was published to the public on 13 September 1932, it precipitated a crisis of national proportions. The projected fast prompted serious concern for the Mahatma’s well-being among
various communities of all religions and classes, as well as various political leaders. But, Ambedkar’s initial response to Gandhi’s threatened fast remained true to his stance on advocating for separate electorates, as he makes clear in *The Times of India* on 14 September 1932:

I do not care for political stunts…My decision stands. If Mr. Gandhi wants to fight with his life for the interests of the Hindu community, the Depressed Classes will also be forced to fight for their lives to safeguard their interests (qtd. in Ravinder 95).

However, Ambedkar’s views were not shared by all in the untouchable communities. Under pressure from the differing stances of other untouchable leaders, as well as the alarming likelihood of a backlash against the untouchable community in the event of Gandhi’s possible martyrdom, Ambedkar was obliged to alter his initial response and reconsider negotiations with Gandhi on the issue. As his statement to *The Times of India* on 19 September 1932 says:

I hope that Mr. Gandhi will desist from carrying out the extreme step contemplated by him. We mean no harm to Hindu society, when we demand separate electorates. If we choose separate electorates we do so in order to cancel total dependence on the sweet will of the caste Hindus in matters affecting our destiny[…]Whether he knows it or not Mr. Gandhi’s act will result in nothing but terrorism by his followers against the Depressed Classes all over the country[…] It is still more important to note that Mr. Gandhi is releasing reactionary and uncontrollable forces and is fostering the spirit of hatred between the Hindu community and the Depressed Classes by resorting to this method and thereby widening the existing gulf between the two[…] If Mr. Gandhi does not want all this to be repeated on a larger scale let him, for God’s sake, reconsider his decision and avert the disastrous consequences (qtd. in Ravinder 96)

104 Of significance was the stance of M. C. Rajah, a leader of the untouchables in Tamil Nadu, a province with arguably the highest proportion of untouchables at the time. In an interview with *The Times of India*, on 4 September 1932, Rajah openly advocated for a joint electorate system, as Gandhi wanted it, while pointing out that that the Communal award was an attempt at transforming a community which was “socially untouchable” into one which would become “politically untouchable” (Ravinder 95).
Ambedkar finally signalled his assent to a compromise whereby he would give up his insistence on separate electorates and instead agree to a system of primary and secondary elections, which, while conforming to the system of joint electorates, would nevertheless enable the untouchables to choose their candidates (Ravinder 98-100). Ambedkar then met Gandhi at the Yervada prison in Poona to discuss the compromise on 23 August 1932, and by the 24th, a formal agreement was drafted, which has come to be known in history as ‘The Poona Pact of 1932’. Subsequently, the British Government set aside the Communal Award pertaining to the untouchables, and Gandhi broke his fast on 26 September 1932.

The Poona Pact is recognised in dalit discourse as a defining moment in the history of dalit struggle that resulted in the birth of dalit activism. To date, in various parts of the country, initiation into dalit activism is often through participation in a workshop or seminar on The Poona Pact and on how Gandhi is said to have betrayed the interests of the untouchables (Nagaraj xxiv). D. R. Nagaraj, in *The Flaming Feet*, refers to this period of Gandhi-Ambedkar confrontation of the 1930s as the “birth of the Ambedkarite Paradigm in untouchable activism” (95-96). Among other things, this paradigm includes the various activities, programmes, and movements led by Ambedkar, as well as his socio-cultural and political philosophies, that have had an indelible impact on modern and contemporary Dalit Movements and dalit identity.

II. In Search of the Ambedkarite Paradigm within Modern Anglophone Literature

But to plot the Ambedkarite paradigm – and the accompanying significant historical moments that have fed various Dalit Movements – across modern Indian literatures in English from the 1930s to the end of the century, has posed a challenge that has been hard to surmount. A survey of Anglophone literatures on dalits, especially the well-recognised works written by non-dalits in the period, do not lend
themselves readily for a critical study of the Ambedkarite paradigm; they either simply do not feature Ambedkar or do not engage with Ambedkarite politics and philosophy. Likewise, the political and literary ferment around the historic Poona Pact, or the historical mood of this period and the various dalit movements that were spawned from the event, have not made their way into Anglophone literary works by non-dalit writers (whether written from or set in this period). For the most part, well-recognised and well-circulated works by writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Rohinton Mistry, or Amitav Ghosh, who have written on dalits, have failed to capture the impact of anti-caste thinkers (such as Phule-Periyar-Ambedkar) on the historical settings within their works. Even as they diligently capture the hardships and historical injustices wrought on dalit lives, even as writers such as Ghosh have portrayed dalits with agency, their works are curiously devoid of a ‘dalit history’ itself. Any dalit history available to be mined, so to speak, from within their works is one that has been subsumed within the nationalist framework (a framework that has side-lined and/or excluded a ‘dalit history’) or the Gandhian paradigm (most noticeably in Anand’s and Rao’s works). Neither of these frameworks allows for a critical engagement with the Ambedkarite paradigm that is so crucial to the history of dalits. Nor are the works of these writers amenable to a reading of the zeitgeist of those critical historical moments that have been woven into dalit consciousness; nor the long history of arduous struggle that has been knit into the very word ‘dalit’. The dalit history these writers seem to favour, and have thus far portrayed in their works, is one that has been reduced to an uncomplicated narrative of suffering and grievance. The historical conflicts within and athwart caste-lines; the crisis they posed to the progressive writer’s determined advance towards modernity; the uneasy fit of ‘dalit’ within constructions of the nation and Hinduism; issues such as these that are highly relevant to dalit discourse scarcely find room within the works of these significant writers. In not attending to the historicity of their dalit characters and how their identities and communities have come to be, these writers have unwittingly rendered their dalit protagonists as quasi-historical props to the main
event, in a manner of speaking. Thus, from the point of view of literary criticism, the Anglophone works of these well-recognised non-dalit writers have not made themselves amenable to a scrutiny of the historical dalit movements, and their specific moments of import, that have undoubtedly impacted literary modernity in relation to the politics of caste and dalit subjectivity.

Where Anglophone writing has paid little or no attention to the vibrant, yet also fascinatingly contradictory, modernity that dalit discourse has affected, literatures in the vernaculars have readily and organically reflected the same through their engagement with caste and dalit subjectivity. The setback, however, is that much of this vernacular writing remains unavailable – at times, even unviable – in English translation, and hence rendered invisible or deemed non-existent. And even when they do travel into the domain of English, one of the (many) losses incurred by this ‘unviability’ is that the heterogeneity – the curious inter-regional mismatch – of dalit discourses as embodied and embedded in specific linguistic and cultural systems, is lost in translation. For instance, dalit discourse and subjectivity as they manifest in literary works in Tamil are, at times, at complete variance with that within works in Marathi or Hindi, or even its linguistic neighbour, Kannada. Some of the reasons for this mismatch could be that: Tamil dalit history traces its roots in Saivism more so than Buddhism; the borrowed Marathi word ‘dalit’ – with its accompanying historicity – has been grafted within the Tamil variant of ‘adi-Dravida’ and, thus, today’s idea of the ‘Tamil dalit’ carries in its DNA this marriage of histories; the preponderance of Periyar, with Ambedkar only following closely, as the key anti-caste leader around whom Tamil dalit movements are formed, and so on. Indeed, such heterogeneity may manifest within the same language system as well. As Sarah Beth Hunt argues in *Hindi Literature and the Politics of Representation* (2014),

the existence of two fields of Hindi Dalit literature [the field of Hindi dalit literary pamphlets beginning in the 1920s and a second autobiographic field of Hindi dalit literature, which emerged in the 1980s] suggests that the multiplicity of voices will continue to increase as Dalits enter new disparate social groupings (Hunt 246).
The overarching point to be noted here is that diverse language systems carry their own epistemological and phenomenological methods of constructing the ‘dalit’ and ‘dalit culture’, and these unique factors do not necessarily travel well into English. That said however, and notwithstanding these limitations (but being attentive to the same), the following section attempts to undertake exactly such an endeavour. It draws into the domain of English a brief study of dalit subjectivity, caste, and the Ambedkarite influence on literary modernity in Kannada literature written by both, dalit and non-dalit writers. The main objective of this endeavour is to open up dalit literary discourse in English to borrowed literary reactions and influences of the historical period in the vernaculars that may speak to what literatures written in English may have thus far remained unamenable to.

III. An Overview of the Ambedkarite Paradigm in Modern Kannada Writing

In nationalist accounts of Indian writing, Ambedkar is more often than not represented as a former untouchable fighting for his community (‘leader of the Mahar caste’), the framer of the Constitution, and, upon his famous renunciation of Hinduism, as a Buddhist convert – but not as a national leader. That it may not be particularly desirable to see a counter-revolutionary leader such as Ambedkar be subsumed within the nationalist framework is not quite the point to note here; the fact is that the opportunity, or choice, to actually make this argument has never presented itself within nationalist discourse. Beyond the dalit communities, Ambedkar simply never came to form an integral part of the national conversation until the late 20th century; certainly never like Gandhi or other nationalist leaders did. But this ‘absence’ (or silencing) of Ambedkar in nationalist discourse belies the crucial role he played in shaping modern discourse as it has evolved in India. Between the 1930s to the end of the 20th century (roughly the period of mid to late
modern Indian writing), significant debates, tensions, and contradictions that emerge in many recognisable literary works of this period revolve around the historic dispute between Ambedkar and Gandhi. Yet, far from being attributed, Ambedkar hardly ever finds a mention in the early and late modern works. It is only in the last leg of this period (from the 1980s or thereabouts) – with an increase in dalit consciousness spreading across the country, the formation of the Kanshi Ram-led Bahujan Samaj Party, and both these factors coinciding with the inter-regional dissemination of Ambedkar’s writing in vernacular translations – that Ambedkar finds his way into the forefront of political and literary dalit discourse.

This section of the chapter attempts to convey this historical journey through a vast, but by no means exhaustive or complete, overview of modern and contemporary Kannada literature. While a pan-Indian route is not only desirable but highly necessary, it is regrettably beyond the overarching goals of this thesis. As an alternative, this segment will rely instead on Karnataka’s literary trajectory as a regional sample illustrating: first, the contradictions and conflict that the Ambedkarite paradigm engenders in early-late modern writing; and then, the subsequent channelling of Ambedkar and Ambedkarite ideology within dalit literary practice towards the end of the 20th century.

There are profound differences in the conception of the ‘dalit’ among modern literary movements in Karnataka. While it is possible to sharply demarcate the differences between Navodaya (Modern) and the Dalit-Bandaya (Dalit-Rebel/Dalit-Revolt) writers, it is more difficult to distinguish between the Navodaya and Pragatisheela (Progressive) positions. The silence of the Navodaya writers on the dalit community and dalit leaders such as Ambedkar in their ‘realist’ modes of depicting history is obvious, if perhaps not shocking at this point. What is striking, however, is that, despite their silence, Ambedkar and Ambedkarite perspectives are very much woven into their narratives, often serving as counterpoints or contradictions to their own modernist views and progressive impulses. Indeed, this
silence is one provocation for a strong articulation of dalit issues in the Dalit-Bandaya movement. This silence gradually disappears in the post-Navodaya period, and the ‘naming’ of Ambedkar as the progenitor of that ideology impacting literary modernity begins to take form within the works.

IV. Navodaya Literature and the Dawning Ambedkarite Horizon

The Navodaya period (1925-1950) and the late Navodaya period (1950-1975) mark the era of modern writing in Kannada. And at various, if uneven, points of the Navodaya time span, there emerged progressive counterpoints to the Navodaya sensibilities in the form of Pragatisheela writers and literature. Ambedkar was a considerable influence on Navodaya writers, but he finds no mention in their works. Even Gandhi, who deeply impressed and influenced (albeit indirectly) the society of his time, was not accepted readily by a number of Kannada writers in this period. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo are mostly the figures that fired their imaginations. The most significant fact about the Navodaya movement is that its major writers were all brahmins, and predominantly men. With none to match them in stature, they became the sole spokesmen in the literary field. Their control over the print media, which faced its own severe challenges during the freedom struggle movement, ensured that only their writings reached ordinary readers for whom these writings were sacred truths. These writers were primarily engaged with the problems faced by brahmin women and men living on the cusp of modernity. Novels such as Indira Bai (1899), Indira (1908), Maadduddunno Maharaya (‘As You Sow, So Shall You Reap’, 1915), Madhava Karunavilasa (‘The Play of Madhava’s Mercy’, 1923), Kanyabali (‘Bride Sacrifice’, 1927), Dharmasere (‘The Prison of Religion’, 1934), Susheele (1915), Priyamvada (1922), and Matrunandini (1916) are filled with issues faced by the brahmin community. Sufferings of widows, child marriage, women’s education, tonsuring of widows, the custom of sati, crossing the seas
(which a brahmin’s dharma forbids him from doing), brahmin men entering ‘hotels’\textsuperscript{105} to partake of coffee and dosa – such issues loomed large as ‘modern problems’ in their pictures of the world. Problems faced by dalits did not engage their attention beyond a cursory acknowledgment of the existence of dalits in the margins of their society, and the issue of untouchability that needed to be reckoned with at some point in time.

While ‘progressive’ reformist brahmins revolted against the brahmanical order, arousing the ire of traditional brahmins in how the orthodoxy was being destabilised in the name of modernity, this reformism failed to extend its revolutionary spirit to – or even relate to – the situation of the dalits. These progressive writers simply weren’t prepared to expend their powerful voice and intellectual capital or their considerable resources on the issues of dalit communities in the same way they addressed the internal problems of their own caste. Even when dalit problems did find their way into their reformism, their treatment was half-hearted and sporadic at best. So one is compelled to ask (as did the radical dalit thinkers that were to follow): to what extent can the reformism of Navodaya Pragatisheela literature be accepted as ‘progressive’? The trends of token reformism \textit{vis-à-vis} dalit concerns become visible in the works of writers who emerged in the first phase of modern Kannada literature, such as Masti Venkatesh Iyengar (1891-1986), Goruru Ramaswamy Iyengar (popularly known as ‘Gorur’, 1904-1991), Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre (or Da. Ra. Bendre, 1896-1981), Adya Rangacharya (known simply as ‘Shriranga’, 1904-1984), Kota Shivaram Karanth (1902-1997), and Govindacharya Bhimacharya Joshi (pen name: Jadabharata\textsuperscript{106}, 1904-1993); all of whom are celebrated as iconic

\textsuperscript{105} In South India’s colloquial usage of the word, an ‘hotel’ typically refers to local eateries (called ‘Darshinis’ in Karnataka) and coffee houses in addition to the actual establishment offering boarding and lodging facilities.

\textsuperscript{106} A passionate writer as well as publisher of modern Kannada literature, Jadabharatha enjoys legendary status in the Kannada publishing world, and with good reason. Back in the 1930s, when Kannada readership was scarce and the literature hardly found a place within any market or publishing house, Jadabharatha, a man of modest economic means himself, founded the Manohara Grantha Mala (MGM) in Dharwad, in 1933. It was the first ever Kannada publishing house to be established, and while it was never commercially prosperous, in true keeping with Jadabharatha’s own spirit for experimentation, MGM disseminated a modern, even trendy, assortment of novels, plays, poetry, essays,
litterateurs in the Kannada literary canon with each being a recipient of either the Sahitya Akademy Award or the Jnanpith Award, or both. Karanth, who is often (questionably) hailed as ‘The Tagore of the South’, was among the more progressive of these writers. But his thinking gradually merged with that of the others for various reasons, not the least of which was the backlash he received for his views transgressing that invisible line between ‘acceptably’ and ‘unforgivably’ progressive in some of his early works.

This tendency towards half-hearted reformism is most apparent in the genre of short story and drama. By ‘half-hearted’ reformist thinking, it refers to edicts such as: dalits need to purify themselves with a bath; should wear white clothes; should worship god; should sing bhajans; should not be impertinent; should conduct themselves with due modesty and humility; should not cross limits laid down by their superiors – the list is endless. Examples of such paternalistic thinking are Bendre’s *Uddhara* (‘Deliverance’; play, 1930), Goruru’s *Hemavathi* (novel, 1934), Karanth’s *Devadutharu* (‘God’s Messengers’; play, 1931), Sriranga’s *Vishwamitra Srishti* (‘Vishwamitra’s Creation’; short story, 1934), Srinivas Shenoy’s *Swanubhava* (*Self-Experience*; novel, 1933), *Holey Hudugi* (‘Untouchable Girl’; short story, 1932), and *Narapungava* (‘Eminent Man’; short story, 1932), among others. Dalit characters (both male and female) that appear in these works are invariably modest, humble, and artless with an almost child-like innocence. They bear the suffering patiently, and willingly submit themselves to the powers of the authoritative upper caste figure, who is, more often than not, a temple priest. In situations of life-threatening crises, in heroic self-sacrifice, the dalit characters come to the aid of upper caste characters, thereby effecting a reformatory transformation in the latter. And this is the point at which the story typically ends within these works.

translations, literary criticism, and short stories. Stalwarts like Da. Ra. Bendre, R. S. Mugali, and Anandakanda actively supported his initiative by contributing their early works to MGM. Jadabharatha was the first publisher to recognise the potential of, and invest in, the talents of budding writers like U. R. Ananthamurthy and Girish Karnad, both of whom would themselves eventually come to occupy eminent stations in the Kannada literary canon.
Such a mode of transition into reform that is premised on the benevolence of the upper castes and their voluntary willingness to reform on the one hand, and the humble, patient, docility of the lower castes on the other, is, of course, most recognisably of a Gandhian credo. Yet, curiously, Gandhi’s name, like Ambedkar’s, almost never finds its way into these modern works. Ambedkar’s philosophy is the dialectical opposite to this running theme of tame reform; for Ambedkar, in the matter of entering a temple or an ‘hotel’, mere persuasion was not going to bring about a change (material or ideological). Ambedkar believed that rights are not willingly ceded, they have to be seized. Navodaya writers completely reject this mode of agential spirit in their portrayal of dalit characters. Interestingly however, even while faithfully reflecting Gandhian thought, the writers do present characters that counter such thinking, yet never identify the intellectual progenitor of this counter-opinion as Ambedkarite thought. Rather, in what can be interpreted as a reflection of the writers’ own unconsciously conflicted ideological positions, the narratives ridicule this counter-opinion and attack the same. Bendre’s play Uddhara provides a good illustration of this tendency.

The play depicts three types of dalits: those who accept and preserve the status quo; those who exist in this system, yet rail against it and talk about revolution; and those who yearn to convert to another religion. One of the dalit protagonists, Kodandaraya, belongs to the second category. A lawyer by profession, he appears to embody a negative image of Ambedkar that is clearly designed to appeal to simplistic binaries of ‘good-bad’; cast as an impetuous man denouncing Hinduism who often gets carried away by his overblown rage and theatrical indignation. The

---

107 As Ambedkar himself wrote so prophetically:

“History, I am afraid, will not justify the conclusion that a Hindu has a quick conscience, or if he has it, is so active as to charge him with moral indignation and drive him to undertake a crusade to eradicate the wrong. History shows that where ethics and economics come in conflict, victory is always with economics. Vested interests have never been known to have willingly divested themselves unless there was sufficient force to compel them.” (emphasis mine)

in What Gandhi and the Congress Have Done to the Untouchables, Chapter VIII – “The Real Issue: Aren’t the Untouchables a Separate Element?”, Section V (Thacker & Co. Editions, 1946), p. 179.
play strongly suggests that dalits in the first category are far superior in credibility and moral character to the other two, and are to be preferred. In contrast, Kodandaraya’s revolutionary thoughts are (un-conflictingly) presented as immoral and sinister, deserving of suspicion and discouragement, and all of this is taken for granted by the narrative. And while the progenitors of these thought processes themselves are not directly named or attributed, in essence, the play upholds the ethical superiority of ‘Gandhism’ over ‘Ambedkarism’.

Against the backdrop of the Poona Pact, the predominantly brahmin and shudra writers of the Navodaya movement reject the Ambedkarite argument for separate electorates – a rejection that was unplanned and unspoken perhaps, but nevertheless manifests in their representation of dalit characters and issues. Their opposing stance to Ambedkarite thinking is displayed most strongly through works such as Sriranga’s Vishwamitra Srishti (’Vishwamitra’s Creation’, 1934), R. S. Mugali’s Baalu (’Life’, 1942), Karanth’s Gedda Doddatike (’The Victor’s Arrogance’, 1979) and Ade Uru, Ade Mara (’The Same Village, The Same Tree’, 1977). In these stories, while criticising the caste system and rejecting untouchability, paradoxically, the predominant anxiety is that the specially created bloc that was distinguishing itself from caste-Hindus – i.e., the untouchables demanding a special ‘space’ and corresponding ‘rights’ – leads to the exploitation of the upper-castes. While taking up the cause of unemployed brahmins and constructing it as the fallout from ‘giving’ dalits special entitlements, these stories are essentially criticising the reservation policy, be it the question of separate electorates as aimed for by Ambedkar in 1932, or the subsequent affirmative action ‘quotas’ as guaranteed by the independent Indian Republic.

The question of conversion too is a recurring anxiety for these brahmin and shudra writers; growing proportionately with the rise in dalit conversions to other religions such as Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. But beyond this anxiety around conversion, like the brahmin writers, the shudra writers, too, showed little awareness
of the dalit question. Their interests lay elsewhere. For them, Hinduism was not Vedic brahmanism alone. They lost no opportunity in staking their claim and asserting their identity over the religion. Their confrontation with brahmins in the fight for dignity and equality within the Hindu fold is indeed a major feat and understandably took precedence in their writing. But in this, dalits were neither included nor welcomed to join the struggle.

In two highly celebrated ‘progressive’ novels written by Kuvempu (who belonged to the Vokkaliga community: a powerful shudra caste in southern Karnataka), Kaanuru Subbamma Heggadathi (‘Subamma, the Landlady of Kanur’, 1936) and Malegalalli Madumagalu (‘The Bride of the Hills’, 1967), the predominant concerns are education, conversion, the trials and tribulations faced by zamindars, spirituality, and the institution of the family. Many dalit characters feature in both novels, albeit in supplementary capacities, and their problems are defined by issues of inter-caste love and conversion; i.e., anxieties that assumed more precedence in middle and upper caste modernity than in the untouchable castes anyway, but projected on to dalit characters with the same degree of urgency and anxiety, all the same. Real issues of actual urgency to dalits of those times – temple entry, the right to draw water from a communal well or pond, the right to enter an ‘hotel’, rejecting the ‘two-lota’ system of a separate drinking tumbler for untouchables located outside the eateries which they would then have to wash themselves after using, the right to attend the community schools, and where allowed that right, the right to then sit beside other attendees rather than on the floor or outside of the classroom as was common practice in most towns and villages, and so on – find no place in these novels.

One explanation could be that, for the modern shudra writer such as Kuvempu, the dalit issue was not a comfortable one; thus, one that was best avoided. While in the traditional caste system, brahmins occupied the apex station, keeping the other
three castes under their intellectual control, similarly, the shudra\textsuperscript{108} exercised social and economic control over dalits. Indeed, many injustices that historically (and contemporaneously) have agitated dalits hinge on the fraught relationship between dalits and shudras themselves. For, alongside the brahmins enforcing such discriminatory practices as listed above, were, of course, the similarly dominant and powerful shudra castes who exerted considerable clout in the agricultural communities. If a ‘progressive’ writer such as Kuvempu were to proceed to attack brahmanical priesthood, he would then have been compelled to condemn priesthood among the shudras too. Any narration of the fight for a dalit’s rights would have required an honest scrutiny of his own community’s complicity. In this regard, it would appear that writers like Kuvempu thus self-censor in their ‘progressive’ literary pursuits by stopping just short of the full self-reflexive criticism that frank progressivism of the time would have required. It is for this reason (of caste-anxiety limiting and affecting candid self-critique) that many of Kuvempu’s revolutionary works invoke Buddha and Vivekananda, but not Ambedkar. The adoption of an Ambedkarite framework of critique would have required the searing criticism and unflinching confrontation of unpalatable truths about religious and social aspects of the caste system that writers such as Kuvempu were apparently not prepared to afford. As a result, these two novels, while hailed as ‘must-read’ progressive novels purporting to illuminate the problems faced by the dalit community, do so only to the (incomplete) extent that they do not threaten the interests of the shudra community.

\textsuperscript{108} The shudra caste, within orthodox Hinduism following the tenets of Manu’s \textit{varnāshramadharma}, is traditionally held as the fourth and the ‘lowest’ of the varnas. Theoretically, they constitute the hereditary labouring class serving those higher in the caste hierarchy. But in reality, they have shared occupations with other varnas, including being traders, agriculturists, artisans, and warriors. The sociologist Govind S. Ghurye writes in \textit{Caste and Race in India} (1932), “Though theoretically the position of the Shudras was very low, there is evidence to show that many of them were well-to-do. Some of them succeeded in marrying their daughters in royal families. Sumitra, one of the four wives of king Dasharatha, was a Shudra. Some of them even worked their way up to throne. The famous Chandragupta [Chandragupta I of the Gupta dynasty] is traditionally known to be a Shudra” (63).
When Ambedkar’s *Who Were the Sudras?* (1946) and *The Untouchables* (1948) first appeared, they caused an uproar across regions and caste lines of the nation. In 1962, when Kumara Venkanna translated these books into Kannada for the first time, there was an even greater uproar. As they were largely perceived to be ‘anti-brahmin’ texts among the Kannada (upper and middle caste) bourgeoisie, the Social Welfare Department and the Textbook Committee stopped the state offices from buying or prescribing the two books. The Social Welfare Ministry declared, “What the harijans [thus, the spectre of Gandhi speaks] need is food, not books,” and stopped their dissemination. And it is worth examining the two Kuvempu novels against the backdrop of this controversy. One must be careful, of course, of assuming that he had read Ambedkar’s books before writing either novel; there is no evidence (be it in writing or speeches or interviews of Kuvempu’s) to suggest an encounter with Ambedkar’s works, but considering the prolific reader he was known to be, the scenario is far from improbable.

Ambedkar’s economic analyses of the caste system too offers a useful framework of critique in examining modern texts, in particular, the relationship obtaining between dalits and non-dalits as portrayed in these novels. A number of major modern Kannada works deal with issues of toil on the land as well as the struggle for ownership over land. Among them, Shivaram Karanth’s *Chomana Dudi* in 1933 (trans. *Choma’s Drum*, 1978), Kuvempu’s 1936 and 1962 novels as previously discussed, and Niranjana’s *Chirasmarane* in 1955 (‘Eternal Remembrance’) are notable works.

Karanth’s novel is an exemplary work conveying the zeitgeist of this period (set and written in pre-independence Indian society) witnessing the advent of historic

---

109 In the peculiar way that socio-political status-quo of caste-hegemony becomes normalised in Indian polity, especially in small town bureaucracy, both these offices (of the Gulbarga-based Social Welfare Ministry and the Mysore-based Department of Education’s Textbook Committee) were, and to date, remain, controlled by officials belonging mostly to the shudra castes of Gowdas and Vokkaligas, and also the equally powerful Lingayats.

changes, not the least of which was India’s Independence within realisable reach, and makes for an especially interesting case here as one of the earliest works that showcases dalits and their struggle for land. Karanth’s novel features brahmin landlords and the agrarian dalits who work these lands. Choma, the landless untouchable, whose entire familial hereditary fate it is to be bonded in labour tilling agricultural land, has a burning desire to own his own piece of land that he could farm even though the caste laws dictate that this is impossible. Choma is a widower and father of four sons and a daughter, and when the frustrations from the increasing unlikelihood of paying off the bonded debt within his lifetime overtake him, he is shown to spend his meagre income on drinking local toddy. His prized possessions are two bullocks that he once found abandoned in the forests and subsequently adopted which are now fully grown, thus fuelling his desire to own his land so that he could employ them in its tilling, and his dudi, the drum that has come to be a part of Choma’s identity and the sound of which is meant to signal (the untouchable) Choma’s approach in the upper caste spaces of the village. The story charts his struggle to pay off the debt bondage that keeps him and his sons enslaved to the brahmin landlord, the death of three of his sons, the abandonment of a fourth son who runs away and marries a Christian girl (thus transferring his bonded debt on to Choma), and the rape of his daughter, Belli, by a Christian debt collector who abuses his power over the family. The narration of the story reveals insights into the conflicted ideology of the brahmin landlord’s son, a key protagonist with unmistakable Gandhian attributes, who embodies the conflicted modern brahmin of his time. He is a character that readily dispenses compassion and pity towards the victims of caste injustice and is yet caught up in the stranglehold of his own brahmanical beliefs. It is to this sympathetic but nevertheless unhelpful brahmin that Choma constantly implores to be allotted a small piece of land from that which he and his untouchable family have for generations worked on. Insofar as this Kannada-speaking region was concerned (i.e., the colonial Mysore state before it became ‘Karnataka’), the brahmin castes had had little or no anxiety over their land
ownership being under any proximate threat, until that point in the 1930s. In that sense, *Chomana Dudi* is quite a remarkable literary production when located in its historical context, in that it is perhaps one of the earliest works to convey this anxiety. It is furthermore extraordinary that, in this novel, an untouchable should assert his right for land – and *persistently* do so throughout the story at various moments in the plot, despite failing every single time – even before land reforms actually came into effect.

In 1920, Ambedkar commenced his political movement with the publication of the magazine, *Mook Nayak* (‘Mute Leader’). In 1927, he launched his struggle for the abolition of *vetbegarpaddhati* (‘unpaid labour extracted from dalits by landlords’). The main demands of the movement were: dalits should become owners of their land, and practices such as bonded labour, carrying dead cattle, and doing menial jobs ranging from disposing of night soil to the likes of delivering messages should be ended. Soon, Ambedkar’s movement extended itself to cover other movements: a struggle was launched against the *koti zamindari* system prevalent in Maharashtra, in which he assumed leadership of the farmers’ movement and started the Independent Workers’ Party. The main demands of this struggle were: removal of the *vetbegar* system and abolition of the zamindari system; distribution of *patta*\(^{\text{111}}\) and forest lands among dalits; regulation of minimum wages and minimum working hours; land to the tiller, among others. It is noteworthy that, in extending his 1927 struggle, Ambedkar became a leader not only of the dalits but also of the farmers’ movement.

When the historical mood in colonial Karnataka is examined in the light of these developments, the anxiety in the critical concerns of brahmin as well as shudra landlords regarding landownership become clear. It is in this cultural context that a novel like *Chomana Dudi* appears; written by the staunchly Gandhian writer that is Karanth who was also a (practising but reformist) brahmin. It is but natural that this novel, set in a realist mould, should have elicited conflicting responses from the

\(^{\text{111}}\) The title deed to land or property required, in order to secure a legal legitimacy of ownership.
The writer himself. Impelled by the notion of ‘land belongs to the tiller’ as well as the government’s scheme for distributing *patta* land among the landless, the brahmin zamindar in the novel is moved to show sympathy for Choma’s plea for land. Yet, he is unable to act on that sympathy since he cannot convince his own mother – in the Gandhian manner – to grant Choma’s plea, nor is he convinced enough to act on it himself. At the end of the story, Choma, whose persistent attempts at acquiring a piece of land is shown to have failed every time, and who has now lost every single member of his family, shuts himself in his house and pounds furiously on his *dudi* until, it is presumed, his death. Notwithstanding Choma’s failure to obtain land, which surprises no one when situated historically, Karanth’s novel is a deeply significant work not only because it constitutes a departure from the half-hearted reformism of his time, but it also serves as an enlightening glimpse into the conflict and contradictions of this progressive period of modern reform of the 1930s.

Around the same period, between the mid-1930s and early 1940s, it became acutely evident to Ambedkar that since dalits were not tenants themselves\(^\text{112}\), agitating for ‘land to the tiller’ only ensured that shudras (who formed the agrarian community), and not dalits, became owners of the land. Thus, dalits would, in effect, remain landless labourers. Concluding that farmers’ leaders were only interested in exploiting dalits for the farmers’ own interests, Ambedkar broke away from the agitation and formed a Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942. The Poona Pact and the appearance of revolutionary writings such as *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (1945), *Who Were the Shudras?* (1946), *The Untouchables* (1946), and *Hindu Code Bill* (1951), all had a cataclysmic effect on the reformists. It would be no exaggeration to deduce that they must have been shaken to the core, since it was no longer possible to view ‘artless’ dalits with infantilising pity and desultory compassion. The dalit critic and poet Aravind Malagatti captures the historical mood

\(^{112}\) The untouchables were traditionally held as ‘below’ even the lowest in the caste order: below shudras. Thus, they were shunned even from the shudra agricultural labourer communities.
in his analysis of the Kannada Navodaya movement and its brahmin and shudra writers:

When they demanded their rights, dalits appeared detestable and frightening – and so did Ambedkar… Artless dalits are the true dalits, while dalits demanding their rights are not dalits at all – this attitude was manifested not only in literature but in society too. Gandhi, who used to show compassion towards bhangis, missed no opportunity to revile Ambedkar. When Ambedkar challenged the customary rights and privileges of brahmins in social and religious and religious spheres, these two groups [land-owning brahmins and farming-community shudras] came together to brand him a traitor to the nation. It was inconceivable that Ambedkar’s national stature be acknowledged and it is entirely natural that no traces are found in pre-modern Navodaya literature of any direct influence of Ambedkar (Malagatti 237).

The collective silence of brahmin and shudra writers on Ambedkar becomes evident even as, paradoxically, (unconsciously or otherwise) their writing played out the conflicting ideologies of Ambedkar and Gandhi. However, the impact of Ambedkar, though unacknowledged and not at the forefront, was the silent force in the backdrop gathering momentum at a steady pace, about to catch up.

V. The Pragathisheela Writers

Emerging from under the Navodaya shadow, the Pragatisheela (Progressive) writers, in growing numbers, began to come to the fore with works displaying an increasingly liberal resolve in the next phase of the late Navodaya period (1950-1975). Where the Navodaya writers had remained moored to the nationalist framework of ideology and had been preoccupied with preserving the caste status quo, some of the newly emergent Pragatisheela writers were struggling in their (arguably) genuine efforts to resist the same. Some of these early writers, and their works, played a significant role in the shudra cultural movement that was to emerge in this period.
Two of the most striking works from this progressive movement, from a dalit literary perspective, are Basavaraj Kattimani’s Nee Nanna Muttabeda (‘Don’t Touch Me!, 1954) and Harijanayana (‘The Story of Harijans’, 1979). In the context of land struggle, Chirasmarane and Harijanayana deal respectively with the pre-independence and post-independence periods. From an Ambedkarite perspective, Harijanayana positively leaps to one’s attention. Kattimani is the first writer in Kannada to directly apply Ambedkar’s thoughts to a literary work. Both his works are liberally sprinkled with references to Ambedkar and his calls to break away from the caste-mindset that even the dalits had internalised. However, these thoughts are not transmuted into the artistic realm and remain set pieces that the various characters mouth. The names of Lohia, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Marx, and Lenin resound throughout the novel but Kattimani fails to creatively explore or commit himself to any one philosophical perspective. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm for Ambedkar and a high regard for the other thinkers are unmistakable in the text. Kattimani’s Nee Nanna Muttabeda goes one step further and boldly declares that Gandhi and his disciples are a bunch of frauds who will not emancipate harijans. This passionate denunciation owes, no doubt, much to the influence of Ambedkar’s What Congress and Gandhi Have Done on Kattimani. His novel throws into sharp relief the chicanery of the Congress leaders, the deep differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar, the oppression of dalit women, and the utter destitution of the dalit communities. In comparison, Harijanayana lacks the sharp edge of critique that is unmissable in Nee Nanna Muttabeda.

Two other novels that focalise on dalit lives and experiences in this movement, quite in the manner of Chomana Dudi in that the dalit protagonists in the novels occupy a significant narrative space and voice, are S. L. Byrappa’s Daatu (‘Crossing’.

---

113 The socialist thinker, Ram Manohar Lohia (1910-1967), was highly instrumental in shaping the ideological and philosophical framework of Karnataka’s dalit movements in their nascent formation, through the influential presence and activities of the Lohiaite group in Mysore, since the 1930s. As Satyanarayana and Tharu have accurately identified, it was through Lohia (who was a staunch Gandhian with strong Marxist leanings) that the Kannada community, and not just the Kannada dalit movement, receives Gandhi as well as Marx as two critical sources of their ideological and philosophical lineages. For a further reading on the same, see Satyanarayana and Tharu (eds.) Steel Nibs are Sprouting, pp. 24-31.
and U. R. Ananthamurthy’s *Bharathipura* (1973). These novels have, in various ways, repurposed Ambedkarite thought and politics and delivered them through their non-dalit protagonists. The repurposing of Ambedkarite thought ultimately serves to reflect the writers’ own unconsciously conflicted positions on caste and identity, and on the ‘Ambedkarite versus Gandhian’ paradigm, via their portrayal of dalit issues. In both novels, which are written in the realist mode, Ambedkarite ideology has been attributed to, most peculiarly, not the dalit protagonists in the novels, but the brahmin ones. And while both novels are replete with Ambedkarite ideas, they are enacted and expressed through non-dalit protagonists who are torn between Gandhian ideals of reform and Ambedkar’s revolutionary call for a break from caste. It is most interesting how both texts never identify – indeed, do not seem to bear a conscious awareness of – the progenitors of this dialectical line of debate as either Ambedkar or Gandhi. While Anathamurthy’s work comes in for an analysis in the next chapter, Byrappa’s novel can be looked at here.

In *Daatu*, Ambedkarite thought is presented as polarised through the characters of Satyabhame (a brahmin woman) and Mohandas (a dalit man), both of whom fall in love and decide to marry each other. But their differences in caste-station, and how they personally struggle with their own convictions regarding the caste system, become the crisis around which the novel unfolds. If the conviction of brahmanical pre-eminence is embedded in the subconscious of Satyabhame, Mohandas – the focalisation of whom is wholly confined to serve as her counterpoint throughout the novel – is opposed to the ideology of and need for braminisation (Sanskritisation). This conflict is crystallised when Satyabhame suggests that Mohandas could adopt a new brahmanical surname and wear the sacred brahmanical *upanāyana* thread, purely for appearance’s sake, in order to counteract any societal censure or hostility they may face upon their forthcoming wedding.

---

114 It is to be noted, however, that Satyabhame’s position on brahmanical supremacy cannot be taken as representative of Gandhi’s own ideas on the same; while Gandhi may have defended the *varnashramadharma* itself, he in no way has defended brahmanical supremacy.
Of interest here is that, this rather conservative strategy of brahminisation – of dalits adopting upper caste names and the inclusion of dalits in (predominantly brahmanical) societal norms and practices – was incidentally a positon that Ambedkar himself had endorsed until the 1940s before his thinking underwent a sea change on the subject. Until the ‘40s, Ambedkar’s outlook on dalits adopting upper-caste names in their struggles for upward mobility was one of open approbation. Such methods were very much part of the dalit struggle and were evident in practice across different regions in the country. In Belgaum during the mid-1930s for instance, the Satnami community of dalits, as a group that closely followed Ambedkar’s work, took on upper caste names and began wearing the sacred upanāyana thread as part of their revolt against brahmin domination. That many Satnamis were murdered for this reason is a well recorded historical fact.

Thus, peculiarly enough, in suggesting the adoption of the thread and brahmanical name, it is the brahmin Satyabhame and not the dalit Mohandas who is marked by Ambedkarite reasoning in this context. And when Mohandas, with a great show of vitriol and antagonism, the gratuitous descriptions of which span three whole pages in the novel, vehemently rejects the thread and the name, it was, in fact, going against the grain of what Ambedkar had endorsed at the time, and therefore cannot be read as representative of an Ambedkarite brand of anti-caste negation.

Consequently, a heart-broken, defeated, and somewhat (un-ironically) nonplussed Satyabham is then presented as only just beginning to grasp the futility of their doomed love, at which point the novel ends. The narration offers insights into her reflections on why it all went wrong and ends with her lament (that loosely translates to), “if only Mohandas could have found a middle ground towards negotiating his anti-brahmanical antipathy”. This is, quite unmistakably, the infusion of Gandhian beliefs of ‘resolution by peaceful persuasion’ blended conflictingly with

---

115 While today Belgaum is a part of the Karnataka state and forms one of the most culturally and linguistically rich regions of north-west Karnataka, until 1956 (when the Indian states were reorganised along linguistic lines), it actually belonged to the Bombay presidency. This would explain why Ambedkar had, and continues to have, such a significance influence on Belgaum as compared to the rest of the Kannada-speaking state.
Ambedkar’s views within Satyabhame’s subconscious make-up. She thus becomes the simultaneous embodiment of Ambedkar’s revolutionary stance and an ideal of Gandhian customary virtue, thereby heightening the progressive potential and the manifold prestige of brahmin society. Mohandas’s dalit character fares poorly in comparison; in fact, this character extends Ambedkar’s revolutionary practice to such an extreme that it alienates the ordinary reader (as it was perhaps meant to). Mohandas accordingly embodies a mere revolutionary, but counterproductively intransigent, counterweight to the variant of vedic brahmanism, which has shown itself to be the ‘real’ progressive element, willing to reform itself and embrace the intractable dalit, should he be so disposed as to accept the overture. To return to Malagatti’s assessment of the historical context, this is what he has to say:

When Ambedkar launched the next phase of his revolutionary struggle in the early 1940s, he called it ‘Lota, Roti, Beti’. ‘Lota’ symbolizes the struggle for water, ‘Roti’ for intercommunity dining and ‘Beti’ for inter-caste marriage. Public reactions to Ambedkar’s charter of demands are interesting. Gandhi didn’t support these dalit demands at first but eventually conceded them, albeit by suggesting that upper castes be won over, not by means of agitation but by love and persuasion. As a matter of fact, these means are more of an obstacle for dalits than anything else.

(Malagatti 241)

As for the didactic overtone in *Daatu* on the issue of dalit-brahmin marriage, the tacit message is that it is primarily a transgressive course of action. And in the second instance, it is shown as only ever successful so long as the transgression itself adheres to the permissible limits of palatable reform (in *Daatu*: the dalit compelled to adopt markers of brahmanism such as the thread and name) as delineated by the upper caste communities. Works such as these can be read as reacting to the pressures exerted by a assertive dalit consciousness that was noticeably emerging, traveling across state boundaries, and gathering momentum in its anti-caste impulse in the 1970s from which Bhyrappa was writing. All the same, while such novels affirm the dalits’ struggles and assertions for power, they tend to imply that dalits have no identity of their own, or agency, and any power they did acquire, had to be granted.
The most frequently recurring trope in many of these progressive novels is one that is strongly suggestive of (upper caste) compassion and (dalit) persuasion as the rewarding means through which dalits can achieve power.

The issues from the historical context of the Gandhi-Ambedkar splinter in ideologies – or the Lota-Roti-Beti agenda, and the like – from the 1930s and 1940s may seem anachronistic in their belated manifestations within novels written in the 1970s (as Daatu was). But then again, it is important to recall that Ambedkar’s writings came to be available within Karnataka via functional translations only since the 1960s. And even then, only selected works were received: not all at once, nor in chronological order, but in a rather jumbled and non-methodical fashion owing more to enthusiasm than meticulousness. A systematic dissemination of Ambedkar’s collected works, in multiple languages, was to come only from the early 1990s onwards, as part of various state governments’ efforts, led by the Maharashtra government, in the wake of Ambedkar’s centenary celebrations (i.e., post-1991).

VI. Dalit-Bandaya (Dalit-Radical/Dalit-Rebel) Literature and Ambedkar’s Philosophy

Born under the inspiration of Ambedkar’s political philosophies and the orientation towards a Navayana Buddhism in his last years, the Dalit-Bandaya movement’s self-conscious modern turn towards speaking from and embracing a newfound and assertive ‘dalit-ness’, is self-evident in its name. From the late 1970s onwards, this literary movement became emblematic of the autonomous voices of excluded peoples (re)claiming their historically dispossessed spaces and hitherto silenced leaders. For, when a philosophy forms the framework of an entire literary movement, the movement naturally becomes the voice of that philosophy.

Ambedkar’s ideology influenced the Dalit-Bandaya writers much as Marxism did the Bandaya (‘Rebellion’ or ‘Radical’ or ‘Revolt’) writers. Initially, the Bandaya writers
wrote about dalit revolt in terms of class struggle, but gradually, their works came to foreground the issue of caste instead. Subsequently, any focalisation on class was arrived at, no longer by circumventing but rather, through caste. This signals the shift from the Bandaya movement’s advocacy of Marxist ideology to that of Ambedkarite ideology; which is not to say that the latter necessarily nullifies the former. If the Bandaya works previously typically declared that ‘every caste necessarily constitutes a class’, the shift towards Ambedkarite thought appended that to ‘every caste necessarily constitutes a class, which is informed by that caste’. Both, dalit and non-dalit writing emerging from this new phase in the Bandaya movement are marked by themes such as inter-caste marriage, fraternity, equality, liberty, and the rallying Ambedkarite cry, ‘Educate-Organise-Agitate!’. Siddaramaiah, Devanoora Mahadeva, Aravind Malagatti, Mullur Nagaraj, Channanna Walikar, Baragur Ramachandrappa, are some of the writers that made an early mark on the movement.

While these writers invoke the ideas of Ambedkar and Marx in their works, for the most part, their writings do not display a pronounced departure from the Gandhian paradigm either. While many of these Ambedkarite writers mounted a scathing attack on the infantilising nomenclature of ‘Harijan’ as promoted by Gandhi, their criticism fell well short of denouncing Gandhi himself. Like the Navodaya and Pragatisheela writers before them, the Dalit-Bandaya writers too have shown an unmistakable disinclination towards making a complete break from Gandhian ideology, unlike, say, their Maharashtrian or Keralite counterparts who showed no such hesitation. This reluctance to construct a binary opposition between Ambedkar and Gandhi – to create a false choice, as it were, between Ambedkar and Gandhi – is what prompts D. R. Nagaraj to write an essay (which drew considerable criticism from critics in Andhra Pradesh¹¹⁶ and Kerala¹¹⁷, among others, after it was

---

¹¹⁶ See K. Satyanarayana’s critique of D. R. Nagaraj’s imagined soliloquy from a Telugu and Marathi dalit literary perspective in “The Political and Aesthetic Significance of Contemporary Dalit Literature” [The Journal of Commonwealth Literature July 21 (2017), 1-12]

¹¹⁷ See T. M. Saradamoni’s critique on D. R. Nagaraj from a Malayalam dalit literary perspective in “Secularisation of Caste” [EPW August 43.33 (2011) 10-22]
published) in which he boldly sets out to posthumously reconcile the two. "Two Imagined Soliloquies: Ambedkar and Gandhi" is a creative piece of writing that imagines how Ambedkar and Gandhi, each of whose arguments are constructed through their soliloquies, might have mended their differences in 1993, sixty-one years after their historical standoff in 1932. That Nagaraj, quite like U R Ananthamurthy and Mulk Raj Anand, and activists such as Vandana Shiva and Medha Patkar, considered himself to be a Left-Gandhian goes a long way in shedding light on his reluctance to summarily wipe out Gandhi from the newly emerging dalit movements. As Ashis Nandy observes in his "Foreword" to Nagaraj’s *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays: The Dalit Movement in India* (1993; 2nd ed. 2010):

Nagaraj was never only a spectator or recorder to the changing self-definition of the Dalits, he also actively participated in the changes. He was convinced that the Dalit movement had to move beyond the politics of rage. Dalit politics had led to literary and artistic creativity, but also to self-pity and self-negation, to a denigration of one's own cultural heritage. Indeed, as the political lot of the Dalits improved, their past and cultures seemed in his analysis to have become something of a liability for them. They wanted to wipe the slate clean. But, he argued, such anonymity too is not easy in a community-based society that has not, expect in small urban pockets, fragmented into atomized individuals...Nagaraj’s passionate commitment to the rediscovery—not discovery—of the self-esteem and dignity of Dalits. This was his politics of acknowledgement. He believed that in the diverse, rich cultures of Dalit communities all over South Asia there existed not merely the ingredients but also cultural forms that comprised the wherewithal of both self-esteem and dignity...This was the reason, I suspect, which led Nagaraj to Gandhi and to his marvellous attempt to posthumously reconcile Gandhi and Ambedkar. (Nandy xv; emphasis in original)

The ‘politics of rage’ referred to in Nandy’s assessment of Nagaraj must be read in the historical context. The formation of Karnataka’s Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS) in 1974 – which was inspired by and fashioned after the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra – marked the beginning of a ‘new’ dalit identity, born of a dalit-consciousness that was taking form within Maharashtra and traveling across the rest
of the country. In its early years, the DSS’s activism, and the literary body of works it produced, was marked by a radical politics, an open proclamation of rage, and was often expressed in the idiom of violence. The new dalit, in contrast to the Gandhian harijan, had no use for the subtle forms of societal reform in which dalits had to depend on the benevolence of their upper caste antagonists for societal change to materialise. In addition, the patronising methods of persuasion expected of them in facilitating this upper caste reform were understood to be subtle forms of a denial of self-respect. To rebel and to rage became not only preferable but entirely necessary when faced with this alternative.

This phenomenon of the birth of a new dalit is poignantly captured by Siddalingaiah’s Kannada play *Panchama* (‘The Fifth One’; c.1980). The title of the play is in reference to one of the names by which the former untouchables were known, and it means: the people who exist beyond the order of the four *varnas*. A short play, it portrays the problematic relationship obtaining from the ambiguity of dalit pasts, of dalit memory, and constructions of dalit identity. *Panchama* has the setting of an interview conducted by a rather overbearing upper caste IAS (Indian Administrative Service) officer, Hayavadan Rao, and his comic-absurd relationship with his interviewees. It offers us a typology of the former untouchables: some are timid; some, full of self-pity; and some cringe before authority. The first four candidates, both men and women, present different faces of the making of modern dalit identity in all its unstable forms. The first four are not sure of themselves, are awkward and clumsy, they lie and are caught lying; the one commonality they all share is the wilful amnesia they portray towards their past. These four candidates, who embody a certain typage at play, come in for allusive as well as direct sardonic association with Gandhian ‘harijans’, and this depiction conveys the playwright’s unmistakable rebuke, giving the play its satirical tone. The upper-caste officer dismisses one candidate after another in a brusque manner that eviscerates their confidence and self-esteem. But then, in somewhat cinematic fashion, the ‘Fifth One’ (the eponymous
'Panchama'), a young man, arrives as the last candidate for the job, and then everything changes utterly. However, from the moment of his entry itself, it becomes apparent to the reader-audience that he is not actually interested in securing the job but in engaging the official in dialogue. Hayavadan Rao has not seen the likes of The Fifth One ever before. Not only does The Fifth One refuse to forget his past, he remembers it deliberately, in unflinching detail, and with a noble anger. The Fifth One is radically different from the other candidates; he is savagely witty and is more than an equal in matching the officer in ridicule for ridicule, intellect for intellect, and argument for argument. In true keeping with an Indian flair for drama (and one must bear in mind that this play was meant to be performed on stage rather than read on paper), the balance of power in the relationship between upper and lower caste is, instantaneously, inverted. The previously arrogant interviewer’s is now rendered fearful and overshadowed as the interviewee’s fury builds and spills over into his rousting monologue. A terrible, but glorious, rage is born. Righteous anger, it becomes evident, is a more real and honest mode of expression for him than the pacifist’s plea for change. The closing scene of the play sees the Fifth One beat up the officer and make his exit, with a final parting shot in which he defines himself as the birth of the ‘new-generation dalit’.

This politics of rage became a recurring poetic mode in which DSS writers such as Siddalingaiah (an early member of the DSS) increasingly preferred to write; quite as how Namdeo Dhasal did for the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra. Here is a small poem of Siddalingaiah’s, “A Song” (trans. Sumateendra Nadig), which took on manifesto-status among many young dalit followers in the DSS, and the select lines of which became their rallying cry in the 1970s. The poem seethes under the weight of injustice, sharply employs irony, and is on the cusp of erupting with a rage it can barely contain:

Kick them and smash them,
Skin these bastards alive.
They say there is only
One God and for each one they build a
Different temple.
They say all of us are God’s children
And when they see paraiahs they fly as if they have seen snakes.
Damn it! They don’t admit us to hotels,
Or homes; let us near drinking wells;
The dogs that eat our shit, they admit into their rooms. (in Nagaraj 200)

In April 1978, at a public event commemorating Ambedkar’s birthday in Bangalore, a twenty-four year old Siddalingaiah was delivering a speech on Ambedkar’s political and philosophical writing when somebody in the crowd shouted at him: “You speak of caste—where do you find caste? Caste does not exist today!” To which, pat came Siddalingaiah’s reply: “You say there is no caste. Give your sister to me, I will marry her.” That Siddalingaiah was notorious for his irrepressible and irreverent sense of humour carried no weight, nor did the crucial point contained in his retort, and, as is well-recorded in Kannada media, the outraged crowd went on a vandalising rampage, resulting in a case filed against him. Such incidents where caste-Hindus, no matter their claims to ‘progressive’ aspirations, clashed with the newly emerging non-conformist Ambedkarite voice, which did not hesitate to challenge caste-hegemony, were not, and are not, uncommon.

As elsewhere in the rest of the country, Ambedkar became an inseparable icon of these regional movements of dalit assertion, resistance, mobilisation, and (with limits) unification. Just as Gandhi had captured the literary imagination of India during the nationalist struggle for independence and a huge body of writing around Gandhi emerged as a result, so was Ambedkar’s impact on the imagination of the dalit movements from the 1970s. Here is Siddalingaiah’s “Ode to Ambedkar” (trans. M. Madhava Prasad):

O cry that burst

---

118 For a detailed reading of this incident, see “Siddalingaiah” in Steel Nibs are Sprouting: New Dalit Writing from South India, Dossier II: Kannada and Telugu (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2013), pp. 151-155.
from the nation’s heart,  
towering banyan  
wide as the sky,

O first words of  
the dark millions,  
declaration that resounded  
beyond the sea and sky,

You showed with your life  
the way of struggle.  
You called us to come and see  
the cracks in the mansion.

To bury the demon of caste  
you organised lakhs of people  
and led them into action,  
O ocean of self-esteem,

O thunder and lightning that  
struck the soil of Maharashtra,  
why did you not bring rain?  
Was it only a trick of light?

You who sowed the barren land  
with the plough of self-respect,  
you did not stay to water and weed  
and see the crop grow.

------------------------------------------------------

You woke up the sleeping,  
who will make us stand?  
The need for strength to back resolve  
who will teach us now? (in *Steel Nibs* 160-161)
VII. The Ambedkarite Paradigm and Contemporary Contentions of Self-Closure

D. R. Nagaraj identifies two key strategies, organically linked to each other, that have gone into the making of dalit identity which continue to carry import for the contemporary phase of the dalit movement: (a) the mode of self-minoritisation, and (b) the mode of self-closure. Of relevance are the implications of these two strategies for the polemics of ‘representation’ versus ‘self-representation’ in contemporary dalit discourse. In the imaginative search for a distinct dalit identity, spearheaded by Ambedkar in the context of the modern polity, it becomes apparent that aggressive self-minoritisation was the surest way to stay within mainstream political institutions (Nagaraj 114-124). Indeed, Ambedkar’s first major statement before the Simon Commission in 1919 shows a tenacious determination towards such self-minoritisation of dalits:

We claim that we must be treated as a distinct community, separate from the Hindu community. Our minority character has been hitherto concealed by our inclusion in the Hindu community, but as a matter of fact there is really no link between the DCs [Depressed Classes] and the Hindu community (Ambedkar 465)

It was a shrewd attempt to break the organic unity of dalits and Hindus; the deliberate removal of an imposed homogeneity that, for him, was misleadingly suggestive of shared social experiences and cultural memory. Ambedkar’s (nearly successful) efforts to secure separate electorates for the untouchables that led to The Poona Pact, too, can be seen as another attempt towards self-minoritisation of dalits.

However, what may be read as the historical necessity of Ambedkar’s call for such self-minoritisation and self-closure in the light dalit emancipation in its nascent phase, has, in contemporary times, been re-purposed and re-articulated in other contexts. The mode of instituting self-closure has taken on the form of creating a binary opposition between the savarnas (caste-Hindus) and the avarnas (dalits).
According to Nagaraj, the post-independence Dalit-Bahujan movements have made this binary opposition the sole ideological base of their cultural politics (Nagaraj 121-122). The means of constructing such self-closure have consciously invoked the idiom of ‘insider-outsider’, ‘us-others’, and shown a tendency towards drawing (unstable) parameters signifying identity-boundaries that have often served as inflexible roadblocks to the prospect of dialogue between dalit and non-dalit entities.

To contextualise the anxiety of representation that such self-closure manifests in dalit discourse today, one need only look to the contemporary example of the Arundhati Roy and Navayana controversy with regard to the re-publication of Ambedkar’s “Annihilation of Caste”. In 2014, Navayana119 presented an annotated critical edition of Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste* (AoC)120, with an extensive introduction written by Roy entitled, “The Doctor and the Saint”. Ambedkar originally intended to deliver the AoC as a speech in 1936, at the annual lecture of the *Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal* (‘Forum for the Break-Up of Caste’), a Lahore-based Hindu Reformist Group. On reading a copy of his speech in advance, and finding its contents ‘unbearable’ in their excoriation of Hinduism, they withdrew their invitation and Ambedkar never got to deliver his speech at the forum. Subsequently, he published the speech himself in 1936 under the title “Annihilation of Caste”. Since its first publication, AoC has been kept in steady circulation mostly by small dalit presses and dalit communities across India in multiple translations, and crucially for many dalits, at relatively inexpensive prices. The AoC is of indisputable significance to dalits, indeed, serves as a touchstone text in the formation of dalit identity and dalit political mobilisation, to date. Heralded as a revolutionary classic in dalit

---

119 This is the description given on Navayana’s “About” page on its website: Navayana is a publishing house that focuses on the issue of caste from an anticaste perspective. Founded in 2003, Navayana publishes general and academic nonfiction, graphic books, poetry and literary translations. It is best known for its finely curated list of books by and on Ambedkar.

https://navayana.org/about/ [accessed 19 Aug. 2018]

120 Since this section of the chapter focuses especially on the politics of representation and dissemination of Ambedkar’s AoC, the study of the original speech itself is beyond the scope of this section.
literary circles, it is at the same time also a personal text of sorts for dalits in its constructions of dalit dignity and self-respect.

Now, with Navayana’s publication of an annotated critical edition of this classic, it has arguably attained a wide(r) savarna and global readership owing to the attention an introduction by Roy was bound to gather; her being a renowned writer-activist and Man Booker Prize winner. On the surface of it, it appears to bode well for AoC to expand its readership beyond dalit circles and indeed, beyond the Indian subcontinent. Given the resurgence of the Hindu Right in the Indian political scene with the advent of the Narendra Modi government in 2014, one could perhaps even consider Navayana’s publication as prudently well timed. But the widespread criticism and fierce objections from Ambedkarite dalits that this edition of AoC attracted was quite remarkable and, one gets the impression, somewhat unexpected – with some critics even calling it an insult to the dalit community.

In one of the first open letters121 to Roy122 and S. Anand123 (publisher-director of Navayana who edited and annotated this version of AoC), it questions, among other things, her motives in writing this introduction, her extraordinary focus on Gandhi in her essay (arguing that the attention paid to Gandhi eclipses Ambedkar himself in her introduction), and the politics and agenda surrounding her decision to write it. Roy and Anand replied to the letter, via the RTI and Navayana websites, detailing the motivations and choices that have informed their writing and annotations respectively.

---


122 It is worth noting that Roy acknowledges, in the very beginning of her “Introduction”, that she is not dalit herself and cannot speak for the dalit community.

123 Anand has written openly on the website of Nayavana, and elsewhere, about being born into a brahmin community although he does not subscribe to brahmanism or the codes of caste.
The overall controversy, as it unfolded through a volley of open letters and articles exchanged, can be abridged as such: the issue of representation, and in specific, the politics of appropriation of a seminal text of dalit resistance by a well-known, but non-dalit, writer; and the content of this representation. And the broader issue attests to the politics of publication and distribution of dalit writing within the global publishing industry.

A highly visible and active YouTube channel, *Dalit Camera*, and Round Table India (RTI), an Ambedkarite website, published critiques of Roy’s introduction. Furthermore, The Shared Mirror, a Dalit-Bahujan platform promoting works on dalits, published *Hatred in the Belly* (2015) tracking critiques of various anti-caste groups, scholars, activists, artists, and academics. The book and critiques take up the Roy-Navayana-AoC issue as a case-study to examine the politics of appropriation and the disjuncture between mainstream hegemonic institutions (publishing, academia) and dalit intellectual capital.

Roy’s introduction has been accused of diluting Ambedkar’s anti-caste critique as well as his relevance to dalit politics. That Roy’s introduction was longer than even the actual Ambedkar essay, and the disproportionate attention it pays towards Gandhi were two important factors contributing towards much of the criticism she faced. In a questioning of her credentials as a dalit scholar, it was further pointed out that Roy hardly had a history of engagement with dalit politics,

---


125 In Ambedkar’s original, Gandhi is placed in the appendix and does not feature anywhere else in the actual speech. Simply, put, the original AoC has nothing to do with the differences/conflict between Ambedkar and Gandhi, nor is it a comparison of their two ideologies. It is a speech/text that devotes itself entirely to caste and its annihilation, and if anything else, for the urgent purpose of that annihilation. It also addresses caste-Hindus and urges them to take up the work of annihilating caste. These are the basic motivations of AoC. Which explains why it has outraged so many dalits: “If at all she [Roy] wanted to compare Gandhi and Ambedkar, she could have written a different text...He [Ambedkar] never wanted to compare Gandhi and himself” (Tharakam 10).

“What political need is there to forcefully and violently bring Gandhi to the introduction when...he [Gandhi] was placed in the appendix by Dr. Ambedkar himself? What is the need to title an introduction as ‘The Doctor and the Saint’ instead of just calling it ‘Introduction’?” (Semmalar 144)
or previous records of scholarship in the context of dalit discourse. Writing as the spokesperson for RTI, Anoop Kumar sums up the Ambedkarite position in his article, “Resisting a Messiah”. Speaking to what appears to be the contentious question of who can or should represent Ambedkar (and by implication: who cannot or should not), he addresses Roy as follows,

You want to represent Ambedkar without bearing – or having borne – the burden of being Dalit in a society that oppresses Dalits. How could you? 126

Kumar’s criticism draws attention to the element of ‘experiential authenticity’ that contributes towards a dalit consciousness in dalit representation; an element that many dalit writers have argued is a crucial component in writing dalit literature. At this juncture, it is worth reflecting on whether Roy’s introduction even qualifies as a form of ‘representation’. While Roy goes to great lengths in her introduction to assure the reader that she does not, and cannot, speak for dalits, she is certainly speaking of or about dalits expansively, so in that basic (albeit simplified) sense, her essay is indeed a form of representation – be it of Ambedkar, of Ambedkar’s original AoC, of dalits, or of Gandhi for that matter. Without said element of experiential authenticity, and the accompanying implications for a dalit consciousness (or lack thereof), an essay representing an iconic dalit figure such as Ambedkar by an ‘outsider’ like Roy was precisely what Ambedkarites such as Kumar found unacceptable. The not-so-simplified implications of Roy representing Ambedkar and dalits are highlighted by Ambedkarite critic, Gee Iman Semmalar:

What is the need to trick… cajole… savarna readership into buying [AoC] when it has been in print since 1936 in different Indian languages for a fraction of the cost?
What is the need for a savarna writer introducing and making more palatable to a savarna readership, a seminal text written about the destruction of the caste system?
Is the Navayana edition of an untouchable text written by an “untouchable” being made touchable for savarna readership through the mediation of a touchable

126 “Resisting a Messiah” in Round Table India.
introduction by a touchable, Booker prize winning saint? If for 80 years, savarna readership has ignored this treatise written against them by the greatest leader of modern India, the first law minister of independent India, the man behind the drafting of the Constitution, political thinker par excellence, [the long list of Ambedkar’s credentials establishing him already worthy of recognition ensues], the loss is theirs.” (Semmalar 144-145)\(^{127}\)

Roy, in an open letter, has defended her introduction of Ambedkar in her essay by stating:

If it is your case that only Dalits can write an introduction about Ambedkar, then I must disagree with you. What if tomorrow Gujarati baniyas say only they can write about Gandhi [Gandhi belonged to the Baniya caste]? Or Mahars say their understanding of Ambedkar [Ambedkar belonged to the Mahar caste] is more authentic and more radical than that of the Dalits?\(^{128}\)

Roy’s rebuttal addresses the dilemma that exists within the strategy of self-closure discussed earlier – that of essentialism. Just as in all discourses of identity politics, dalit identity politics too is susceptible to the pitfalls of essentialism. Her references to the baniyas or mahars zero in on the essentialist dimension to representation: Who is qualified to represent? Is there an inherent (or inherited) eligibility (that one can only be born with, or into) that is required, and if so, is this essentially infallible? Or, on the other hand, can one be trained to acquire such a qualification and/or eligibility, as Roy does through her undeniably well-researched scholarship in Navyana’s AoC?

Roy further argues,

I feel that it would be counter-productive to police the territory of ‘representation’ to the point of turning it into a kind of formal policy i.e. ‘non-dalits cannot represent dalits’; or, the obverse ‘dalits cannot represent non-dalits’, or ‘women cannot

\(^{127}\) This brings to mind other instances where ‘celebrity/celebrated’ first world writers have introduced writers from the third world to the global audiences in strategic ways to ‘put them on the map’ so to speak. E. M. Forster’s preface to Anand’s Untouchable, or Yeats’s introduction to Tagore’s Gitanjali (1910).

represent men’, or ‘parayans cannot represent pulayas’, or ‘non-marxists cannot represent marxists. What kind of stories can be told then? (“Interview with S. Anand” 17)

But it becomes apparent that who does the questioning of such standards of essentialism is of just as great significance as the act of questioning itself. The charge of being essentialist, when made by another dalit, carries different weighted import than when made by a non-dalit. When voiced by the latter, it is – perhaps justifiably, one could argue, in matters of ethics – met with suspicion. K. Satyanarana addresses Roy’s charge of essentialism on such grounds, arguing that it oversimplifies the issue:

One could compare this with, say, if today you want to write an anthology of feminist literature, would you go to a prominent male person and ask him to write an anthology for women? If you were to look into the history of Black thought, who would you go to? Would you not be going to a black intellectual? (Satyanarayana 121)

These are all questions and problems in representation that do not have an easy or one-size-fits-all solution to them. For, neither can we take it for granted that a dalit writer might necessarily be the best equipped to write about dalits, or Ambedkar, or AoC. For, as dalit scholar Drishawad Margi cautions, such assumptions lead to the “ghettoisation…and trivialisation of the complexity of power-knowledge representation nexus…[since the] experience of caste discrimination [does not] guarantee one’s commitment to the battle against caste discrimination” (Margi 224).

Ultimately, given that Navayana is considered the foremost anti-caste publisher in the Anglophone world, the better question – indeed, the more pressing question – to ask might have been: why was Ambedkar not being introduced by a dalit? The

---

129 Semmalar writes: “Why is it then, that only when caste is used by dalits to assert and question representation that they are cautioned against such essentialist identities? Is woman also an essentialist identity? Alternately, if a cis gendered, savarna man made an argument that the category of savarna woman is essentialist and he insists on writing the introduction to a book on patriarchy, would that be acceptable to cis gendered, savarna feminists?” (Semmalar 146)
rather obvious deductions point to typical economic motivations of the publishing industry and Navayana is not immune to them either. There can be no arguing that Roy’s celebrity status as a writer-activist has a strategic (and advantageous) significance for Navayana’s market goals in that it commands a ready audience across the globe. Navayana’s prints can be seen in terms of what Francesca Orsini has identified as “triply privileged” in how they negotiate, capitalise, and strategically find themselves a visible space in the intersecting pathways of the regional, national, and world (Orsini 82). And in this, English plays a determining role, for as Orsini asserts, English “alone commands international access to Western publishing houses, journals, and prizes” (Orsini 84). In addition, Orsini observes that the global cultural market is one where “translated from” is often read as “difficult, obsolete, non-global” (Orsini 86). Navayana’s publications of translations, and his strategic use of Roy’s brand, can be seen as an attempt to negotiate this unsympathetic perception in global cultural market trend. Whereas, vernacular prints by regional dalit publishing houses, while immensely popular among dalit readers, “are not easily found in ‘elite’ spaces” (Anand in “We Need to Talk”) and thus do not have access to the same privileges.

Beyond the economics of such a decision, however, is the more urgent of the implications – that of the paucity of dalit voices in the Anglophone publishing industry. In a response of sorts that indirectly speaks to the question of why Ambedkar was not being introduced by a dalit intellectual, Anand states the following:

While I understand the anxiety and politics over who gets to introduce or annotate Ambedkar, I do strongly believe Ambedkar belongs to all. (“We Need to Talk”)

As to whether Ambedkar does indeed belong to “all” is precisely what is being contested by the Ambedkarite critics. While Ambedkar may have attained (a
cynically strategic) political capital today which prompts the Hindu right to co-opt Ambedkar (and the Ambedkarite voter base), praise and garland him, and erect statues of him in saffron robes, that is the story of today. Satyanarana is quick to point out, “Ambedkar’s memories were kept alive by these [dalit-run] small journals, small booklets and it is Dalits who have preserved his memory and who have forever argued that he is an important intellectual for this country” (Satyanarana 118).

Where the Roy-Ambedkar debate may have taken root in identity politics, it may be re-framed as one in which caste affects structural privilege and results in the uneven access to opportunities. For the Ambedkarite critics, Navayana’s choice to have Roy introduce AoC, a touchstone text in the dalit movement, and have the same disseminated globally, was a glaring reminder of the unequal gap in power to exercise knowledge capital between the savarnas and avarnas; the intense intellectual labour that has gone into producing the arguably well-researched introduction thus became immaterial to their contention. Structural privilege, the Ambedkarite critique makes apparent, is more often than not rendered invisible to its benefitees. Even in the event that the privilege gets acknowledged by its benefitee (as Roy does in her introduction), the crux of the predicament for Ambedkarites – and the consequent impasse it results in – is that merely admitting ones privilege as a disclaimer is not enough to invalidate or render its existence impotent.

VIII. Closing Comment

The Roy-Navayana-AoC dispute offers food for thought to introspect on the historical gaps, limits, and pitfalls in the discourse on dalit representation. It also

130 Pierre Bourdieu’s theories on four different capitals are useful here. According to Bourdieu, four different kinds of resources, or capital, are competed over: economic capital (wealth), social capital (valued relationships), cultural capital (legitimate knowledge), and symbolic capital (prestige, status). And for Bourdieu, in the field of cultural production – ‘the economic field reversed’ – individuals in the literary world often value types of symbolic capital (recognition by other writers, academia, literary organisations, etc.) over making money. See Bordieu (1993).
points to the need for non-dalits articulating the dalit condition to scrutinise how caste-privilege (with attendant intersectional implications of class-gender) determines their very subject positions and worldview. It becomes evident too that the tendency towards constructing rigid binaries of ‘insider-outsider’ in the attempt to constitute a self-closure of a community (as Ambedkarites do) brings about its own sets of problems, notwithstanding their underlying legitimate reasons. It leads to either a policing on the question of who can/cannot write about dalits and Ambedkar, or results in an impasse that does little to address structural caste privilege. Finally, the debate around the Navayana edition of Ambedkar’s “Annihilation of Caste” can be held as not merely re-visiting and re-considering the historical Ambedkar-Gandhi paradigm emerging from the Poona Pact, but infusing a twenty-first century focus onto a twentieth century text, thus ensuring that that defining period in dalit history is not relegated to long-forgotten antiquity.

This chapter has charted the emergence of Ambedkar as a thinker and political leader and his historic standoff with Gandhi in the Poona Pact of 1932, which marked a turning point in the consolidation of the dalit movement in modern India, spawning what critics such as Gail Omvedt and D. R. Nagaraj have called the Ambedkarite paradigm. But a perusal of modern Anglophone literatures to grasp the full import of this Ambedkarite paradigm on literary modernity in a period of historical fervent in colonial India during the freedom movement revealed their lack of engagement with both the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate or the Ambedkarite paradigm. Curiously devoid of a ‘dalit history’ itself, most Anglophone works writing on dalit subjectivity around that period do not lend themselves for a critical study of that milieu. Thus the chapter turned to literatures in the vernacular, and early to late modern Kannada literature to be specific.

A broad overview of early to late modern Kannada writing on the dalit subject revealed the following: the historical conflicts within and athwart caste-lines; the crisis they posed to the progressive writer’s determined advance towards modernity;
the uneasy fit of ‘dalit’ within constructions of the nation and Hinduism; issues such as these that are highly relevant to dalit discourse found ample room within the works of Navodaya, Pragatisheela, and Dalit-Bandaya writers. More significantly, what a critical overview of a host of Navodaya and Pragatisheela writers and their works suggested is that Ambedkar and Ambedkarite perspectives are, more often than not, very much implicitly woven into their narratives, often serving as counterpoints or contradictions to their own modernist views and progressive impulses. The Dalit-Bandaya movement’s self-conscious modern turn towards speaking from and embracing a newfound and assertive ‘dalit-ness’ was inspired directly by an Ambedkarite politics and expressed itself in a distinctive form and style in their literature. The final section of the chapter highlights that in this period of late modernity in India, from the late 1960s onwards, a significant pan-Indian dalit consciousness began to build and consolidate around Ambedkar and his philosophy and the politics of identity. The most recognisable of the strategies of the Ambedkarite paradigm has been the mode of self-closure of the dalit communities, and the polemics of ‘representation’ versus ‘self-representation’ in dalit discourse continues to develop to date. As the next chapter will examine further, this fraught identity politics that preoccupies dalit discourse today makes it highly challenging to overcome caste, class, and gender barriers in the conscious construction of a politics of solidarity in the contexts of gender discourse and dalit feminism.
Works Cited


---. “Who were the Shudras?” *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchable* in BAWS 7 (1948).


“Arundhati Roy Replies to Dalit Camera”. *Round Table India: For an Informed Ambedkar Age*. Round Table India, 15 Mar. 2014.


CHAPTER 3: Writing Gender: Silence, Graded Difference, and Solidarity

PART I: The Feminist Impasse: Three Contexts

Three events that took place between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, when there was an upsurge in dalit writing, are being introduced here because they assume certain significance in light of this chapter’s objectives. In addition, they help contextualise the early years of dalit feminist movements in three distinct Indian states. The three cases give us a sense of the early complexities, contradictions, and impasses around the questions and assumptions of ‘a’ dalit feminism. They also help illustrate how some of the region-specific politics of identity may pose challenges to the establishing of solidarities athwart caste, class, and gender groups.

Context I: Karnataka

The usual male priest
was praying to the deity – right, mother?
“The whole time I’m inside the sanctum,
the life in me is rotting away,
I have no entertainment,” he said.
Ellamma appeared to him –
“Ask your heart's desire”, she said.
“Once a year at your festival
the womenfolk should go naked
in your presence. The whole body
should be revealed to us,”
he replied.
“Granted,” said Ellamma, and holding
her sari tight around her,
she climbed the hill.
In this way
an atrocity
was sanctioned by the gods and became
“service in the nude”

In 1985, and again in 1986, DSS activists around Shimoga and Bhadravathi (both are small cities) along with other groups, notably the Bangalore women’s collective, Manavi, tried to stop the annual bettale sēve (‘nude worship’) in the Chandragutti temple in Shimoga. Generally undertaken in fulfilment of a religious vow or a request for a boon, the sēve involves bathing in the Varada river and then running up – a distance of about five kilometres – to the temple, naked. Those taking part in the ritual have traditionally and mainly been dalit and backward-class women. The reformists who attempted to intervene in this practice included some dalit men, a few progressive/rationalist dissenting men from certain upper castes, but predominantly, upper caste women. This motley group believed that the practice was humiliating to dalits – upper caste women, they pointed out, were never involved in such rituals – and that the State had a responsibility to stop it. The humiliation was aggravated, they claimed, in the changed circumstances of the contemporary age in which large numbers of voyeuristic outsiders, armed with cameras, arrived to gape at the religious dalit women. Those opposed to this group’s intervention (mostly Hindutva groups, but also, interestingly, some secularists) vociferously argued that this was a matter of faith and tradition and was undertaken freely; no one was coercing the women. It eventually ended with the activists, having gained no support either from the public or the sēve participants, withdrawing from the issue.

¹³¹ Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy (b. 1954) is a dalit poet and activist from Karnataka and is a retired Financial Advisor in Karnataka’s civil services. He is an important contributor to the Dalit-Bandaya movement and writes mostly on eradicating the caste system, untouchability, and fundamentalism. About 45 poems of his have been translated by Rowena Hill into English and Spanish. The specific poem referred to here was sourced from Round Table India’s website. http://roundtableindia.co.in/lit-blogs/?p=2033 [Accessed 12 Oct 2017]
What took place in 1986, when this issue was once again taken up by these reformist-activists, resulted in a debacle that called a final halt to this group's efforts. A major intervention had been planned to dissuade the women, and if proven necessary, to even use the force of the local state government to stop the ritual. But it was the worshippers – the dalit women participating in the ritual – who forced the reformers to retreat. Allegedly encouraged and assisted by the temple authorities, these women “took to violence, beat up some of the social workers; cameras were broken and policewomen were stripped”\(^{132}\). The event generated heated debate and has been extensively written about in Kannada media. The reformist group has since gone silent and not resumed efforts to stop or reform the dalit women following this custom. But this was also a failure that carried significant implications for a taken for granted idea of ‘dalit feminism’.\(^{133}\)

**Context II: Tamil Nadu**

The story of how Sivakami’s self-reflective, revisionary Afterword (in 1995) to her first novel, *The Grip of Change*\(^{134}\) (1989) came about speaks of an altogether different mode of ‘silencing’. Incidentally, and of much significance to the unfolding of events, this novel was first written in the period in Tamil Nadu when Ambedkar associations in villages were beginning to again vociferously raise the caste issue. In the 1989 book, the story is told from the point of view of Gowri, a young girl growing up in the family of Kathamuthu. Kathamuthu is a dalit leader and a key protagonist of the story who assumes the significance of an Ambedkar-like leadership role in the novel. Though Kathamuthu is loved and respected by his people, who turn to him in

\(^{132}\) Radhika, P. “Nude Worship in Karnataka”. *Economic and Political Weekly*. XLVII: 44.3 (Nov 2012) 30-34.

\(^{133}\) Eventually in 1992, a ban was imposed on *Bettale Sēve* at Chandragutti temple.

\(^{134}\) Sivakami’s work is the first Tamil novel by a dalit woman. First published in Tamil (as *Pazhayana Kazhithalam*; Chennai: Annam, 1989) and subsequently in English as *Grip of Change* (trans. P. Sivakami; Hyderabad: Orient Longman Pvt Ltd., 2006). The Tamil original of the revised edition, with a revisionary afterword, was published as *Asiriyar Kurippu* (Chennai: Tamil Puthaklayam, 1995), and was incorporated within the 2006 English text as “Author’s Notes”.
their need and regard him as an effective representative, in Gowri’s story he emerges as a womaniser, a polygamist, a patriarchal father and husband who practises a dishonest and manipulative politics. His counterfoil is her cousin: an upright trade union leader from a younger generation who provides the narrative with its winning, climactic resolution. While the novel was acclaimed by the literary establishment, it received severe disapprobation from many dalit critics, who perceived it to be an attack on Ambedkar. Her own family came out in open criticism of her. Her father publicly expressed his hurt (reading himself in the character of Kathamuthu), and other family members made their unhappiness known. The criticism was important enough to Sivakami to occasion the sequel, Author’s Notes (1995). The revised text is a self-reflective and self-critical exploration of the hazards created for the dalit writer by taken-for-granted assumptions and subliminal perceptions that constitute, what we might think of as, an authorised Indian sensorium. A sensorium that underlies all our realisms (psychological, literary, legal, social scientific) as well as the subjectivities they assume and produce.

The narrative in Author’s Notes moves between outer and inner worlds to reflect on: a) what the author evades or could not write about; b) how she frames an issue; c) when she impulsively leaps ahead of the evidence; d) the inner compulsions that drove her writing. At one point in the sequel, after reporting on a nightmare, she writes: “How was she to escape from her father? From all of them? She wanted to take flight, naked and free.” (Sivakami Author’s Notes, 143). Elsewhere, in a scathing, self-scolding monologue, she asks herself:

Why did you have to mock the dalit leadership?...you were eager to project yourself as fair and just...Your subconscious is evident in the language of your writing—you choice of words, in the construction of your phrases. You carefully guard the image of the upper castes...Your subconscious addresses the rich with respect and the poor with disrespect. (Sivakami 151-152)
Finally, appearing rather lost, she directs one last criticism at herself, with the critique of her first novel now serving merely as pretext: “Nothing in the [first] novel was untrue,” she concludes. “But the novel itself was false” (Sivakami 150).

Context III: Andhra Pradesh

In 1995, an encounter ending in a stalemate similar to the one in Karnataka occurs. Following the publication of a generally well-received collection of radical Telugu dalit poems, Nishani135 (‘Thumbprint’), some feminist writer-intellectuals and activists felt compelled to make an intervention. Much of the poetry in this collection employed a startingly violent, enflamed idiom (akin to how the Dalit Panthers wrote). But what these critics were challenging specifically was, in their view, the unmistakable glorification and incitement of violence for violence’s sake in select poems which resorted to violent misogyny in language and imagery. Those challenging this rhetoric included activist-intellectuals such as Volga, Vasanth Kannabiran, and Kalpana Kannabiran, all three of whom, while not dalit, are significant contributors themselves to dalit academic discourse. And they went to great lengths to clarify that their criticism was in no way a denial or denunciation of the progressive and radical possibilities of dalit assertions. They also made clear that their objections were confined solely to the language used in the poems, which they described as the language of the dominant and openly misogynistic patriarchal classes and extremely insulting to women. “It was regrettable that abusive terms referring to women’s body parts were being claimed as dalit literature. True, it was an upper-caste that had stigmatized these terms, but was it not possible to develop a new language, one that does not humiliate women, to express anger and hatred?

The collection of poems has not been translated into English, and I am unfortunately only poorly literate in Telugu myself, thus the poems in question are not available to the purview of this chapter. A secondary reading of the same can be found in the source (Satyanarana: 2012) as cited in the next footnote.
Dalit poetry...needed to invent a new and more egalitarian language” (Volga et al. 115-20).

The Telugu dalit poets (all men) categorically disagreed with this critique. They did not believe they had been disrespectful or hateful towards women in any way – it was just how dalit dialects of Telugu sounded to outsiders, they insisted – and argued that their work had been deliberately misrecognised and misunderstood. Readers and the popular print media then joined the fray. Some quickly seized the opportunity to frame the critique as “upper-caste attack on a new movement and its poetry” and branded the feminist critics (Volga and Kalpana Kannabiran) as “brahmanical and ‘Hindu’”; others argued that it was the upper castes who consider the everyday behaviour and ordinary language of dalits as violent or vulgar. “It was this politics of culture and language that should have been the focus of discussion, not [accusations of] vulgarity. This time it was a face-off between dalits and feminists. The silence of dalit women, and their absence [in the mid-1990s] from the world of feminism and even dalit literature, was palpable” (Satyanarana “Categories of Caste”, 125).

PART II: ‘Silence’ and ‘Silencing’: Theoretical Formulations of Dalit Gender Discourse

II.1 Theoretical Frameworks and Silence by Lacunae

Satyanarayana’s observation of the absence, and the silence, of women writers-intellectuals in the early years of dalit writing is a reflection too of the lamentable fact


137 Ibid. pp 425-426.
that few women writers-thinkers emerge from the otherwise awe-inspiring DSS or even the Dalit-Bandaya contexts of the 1970s and 80s in Karnataka. There is far too little research done on why such absence, and silence, has come to be. Or, if it has been the case that dalit women did write and speak, but they were silenced, then these actors and modes – those silencing and those silenced – need to be determined. Indeed, at the very least, a comprehensive, systematic, historical study of dalit women’s voices from the modern anti-caste movements to the contemporary period, in each of the main linguistic regions, is needed. And such an examination is yet to be undertaken in the southern states of Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh.

However, one such ambitious – indeed, inspiring – project has been undertaken in Maharashtra, led by Sharmila Rege. In Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonios (2006) Rege’s path-breaking study reveals that, far from being ‘silent’ as so often presumed, dalit women’s writing and dalit feminism has a long history in Maharashtra. The book’s extensive extracts from dalit women’s writing and other oral forms of literatures (such as songs and testimonies) are aimed towards a recouping of the epistemological challenge posed by dalit movements that was lost to the hitherto exclusionary domains of knowledge production (the Indian academy being the main culprit). Rege cites a host of other critics of caste studies to argue that the academic knowledge systems and the Indian academy have hitherto been predominantly occupied by brahmanical and/or upper classes. The work also points to the disjuncture between theoretical ‘secular’ formulations as produced in academic knowledge systems and the actual practices of caste affirmation and caste discrimination they have unwittingly engendered.

Another resourceful work with a focus on a very specific linguistic group of dalit literatures is Sarah Beth Hunt’s Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation (2014). While it is not a work that carries the same close focus on gender as in Rege’s, its methodological approach is nevertheless extremely helpful in
showing how specific, localised, at times even peculiar, historical formations of dalit subjectivities within a single state – that may not have made its way into the consciousness of the ‘nation’ – can be excavated. The method Hunt adopts demonstrates how the researcher can historically chart or map key dalit writer-intellectuals, literary practices and readership, specific political conditions, and emerging formulations of ideologies and subjectivity, which may not necessarily be homogeneous, but have shaped the local dalit movement. Thus, it shows how such a close, particularised focus is bound to draw out the latent voices, trends, and ideologies who real value and impact belies their apparent silence.

The Satyanarayana and Tharu (ed.) *Steel Nibs* and *No Alphabet* are two other immensely useful volumes on recovering and mapping dalit voices from South India. They are both exhaustive works of painstakingly compiled and translated dalit literature and prose, which, by adopting the form of a dossier, are able to include an incredibly diverse range and number of both, well-known and not so well-known, dalit voices, which may have faced challenges to be published elsewhere on their own. Albeit, admittedly, the two dossiers are perhaps limited in their focus on ‘gender’ overall in dalit writing, and not just ‘the dalit woman question’. In fact, an important characteristic to note in modern and contemporary dalit discourse is the overwhelming heteronormativity that pervades it – especially in literary production. Heteronormativity is an unmistakable, and somewhat ironic, ‘norm’ that persists within the otherwise counter-hegemonic, counter-cultural, dissenting, and protesting dalit discursivity. And barring rare exceptions (one of which is explored in Chapter 4 through a filmic text), this is a norm that permeates dalit literatures across Indian languages. The silence is deafening on the dalit queer, on transgendered dalits, on homosexuality and bisexuality, and on the questions that need to be raised on the same within discourse. I have yet to find (in my admittedly relatively short period of

138 Hunt’s work is a study of Hindi dalit autobiographies and Hindi dalit pamphlets from Uttar Pradesh as distinct dalit literary productions, which reveal the distinct dalit identities, subjectivities, and dalit community formations that develop within the same region and in the same language.
research of just four years) any dalit writer identifying as (or a literary work that addresses) LGBTQ. It is certainly not that dalit literature and dalit writers are obligated to do so, or obliged to fill in some desired “LGBTQ quota” in literary production; merely that it is a curious absence, especially for a literature that makes identity/identification so central to its discursivity. Yet, it does not appear to be the case that dalit discourse actively courts and consciously endorses heteronormativity. And there is nothing overt in dalit writing to suggest, nor be deduced, that LGBTQ issues are anathema to dalit thought and dialogue. Rather, one gets the impression that, given the various other grave and urgent concerns that preoccupy dalit discourse, heteronormativity simply slips by unnoticed and unattended to. But this is an area towards which dalit writers could perhaps direct some much needed reflection and exploration. And it is also one deserving rigorous attention in a gendered study of dalit literature that has hitherto not been undertaken within gender criticism.

II.2 The Silence on Love, Desire, Pleasure

The only fictional account of unaffected, joyous attraction between a dalit man and a dalit woman (that is not portrayed as transgressive and does not end in tragedy) in modern-contemporary dalit literatures that my 4-year search has yielded thus far, appears in Imayam’s short story, Video Mariamman (trans. Sunder Kaali; 2008). No small part of the aesthetic achievement of this story is the creation of a literary space for this rare happening. In the domain of poetry, on the other hand, there has been some success in finding writing on love and (non-predatory) sexual desire. For instance, Tamil poet Sukirtharani’s lush poems in celebration of sexuality especially, frame the idea of ‘love’ and of human scale in a mode that enables a fresh articulation of ‘desire’ and ‘pleasure’. ‘Fresh’ insofar as such articulation has been scarce, and perhaps unnoticed and therefore under-appreciated, in dalit writing and
criticism. Dalit women’s and men’s sexualities have been confined to the overwhelmingly negative portrayal as problematic sexualised subjects (and objects) in most narratives. Hovering menacingly over a dalit woman’s claim on narrative spaces and in discourse is the tortured image in which she has hitherto appeared in public consciousness – as a victim of dominant-caste lust. In that setting, her body is only a place of violence. That this has been the ground reality for far too many dalit women has been rightly condemned and scrutinised vigorously (at least at the level of academic discourse).

However, this single-minded scrutiny of the gendered female dalit body as the site of upper caste predatory design – and the gravitas of the issue that has no doubt necessitated this singlemindedness – has perhaps come to inadvertently silence other representations of the female dalit body, and especially so, its sexuality. Can this very body re-notate itself to lay a claim on desire? And further, can it make a claim on pleasure, even on self-pleasing? Sukirtharani’s poetry shows that it can. She is a writer who, while very much an active part of the dalit movement and activism, prefers to write on caste and gender not in combination, but in separation. This is interesting because, as we shall see whilst reading her poem, it makes it very difficult for the reader to identify or characterise her poetry as distinctly ‘dalit writing’ or ‘dalit women’s writing’. The beauty of Sukirthrani’s poems on sexuality lies in the very courage and artistic abandon with which they re-notate the gendered female dalit body. As she demonstrates in her poem, “Night Beast” (trans. N. Kalyan Raman):

```
Darkness had begun
to descend on the sky
like pallor spreads
on the skin of a girl
come of age.

Shutting the street door
```
I sat inside, alone
in the yellow light of candles.

It was then that the daily
—unwelcome—visit
came to pass.

Even as I was watching,
it stripped me away
and brought forth
another version of myself.

As one drunk on wine cup
brimming,
my body swam
and rose to the surface.

While I was absorbed
in pleasuring myself, muttering
obscenities in a low moan, hearing
the rustle of bird wings,
the night beast fled, returning
me to myself. (Sukirtharani 314-315)

The blurring of boundaries between ‘woman’ and ‘dalit woman’ in this poem offers an important moment of intervention to any fixity we may be inclined to inscribe on to dalit women’s bodies and subjectivities.

II.3 Silence and Silencing: The Tale of Two Feminisms

“Feminism asked questions which mainstream political science couldn’t answer.
Dalit feminism asked questions which mainstream feminism couldn’t answer.”
Dalit feminism has had its earliest support in Jotiba Phule who established a school for untouchable girls in 1848, and Savitribai Phule who worked as perhaps the first woman activist to fight for the rights of untouchable women. Ambedkar too remained a dedicated champion of dalit women’s rights throughout his life, and this is especially reflected in his extensive efforts towards the passing of the Hindu Code Bill (1948) as law minister of independent India. The proposed bill illustrated his extensive understanding of the complex relationship between the caste system and the position of women in the country. Another significant event was the foundation of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) in 1987, and its proposed 12-point agenda which formed the basis for the dalit women’s movement in India. The Bahujan Mahila Mahasangh (BMM), which takes a radical position of removing all Vedic brahmanical traditions and tries to replace them with bahujan traditions, is yet another important influence. It seeks to oppose the common civil code and aspires to revive customary law and community based justice. The BMM has received its share of criticism too for its radical position and its tendency to excessively glorify dalit bahujan familial and community practices. It views all traces of patriarchal power as negative structures that have resulted solely from the process of ‘brahminisation’ (Sanskritisation).

With the rise in production of dalit writing from 1970 onwards, and the inadequate representation of dalit women in them, a new consciousness emerged in dalit women writers, who sought to challenge and register their protest against this disproportionate representation through their writings. Today we have many assertive dalit women’s voices speaking in many tongues across the country, vociferous in their dissent, and expressing their own distinct, unapologetic, female voices.

---

During a panel presentation on ‘Gender and Telugu Dalit Writing’ in a Dalit Literatures conference at Savitri Bai Phule Pune University, Maharashtra (22 Dec 2015), one of the panellists, C. Chandrashekar, referred to this quote by Prof Ratnam. Unfortunately, I never got the chance to obtain citation details from Chandrashekar, nor does it appear to be available in online publications.
sensibility. In South India, the names of Bama, Sivakami, Sukirtharani, are frequently heard and listed as significant dalit feminists writing in Tamil; Gogu Shyamala, Joopaka Subhadra, Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, M. M. Vinodini, in Telugu; Du Saraswathi and B. T. Jhanavi in Kannada; and with so many more, the list is a happily big one. Many of these feminist writers speak of being inspired by their Marathi dalit counterparts such as Urmila Pawar, Jyoti Langewar, Hira Bansode, Surekha Bhagat, Pradanya Lokhande, Mina Gajbhiye, Shantabai Kamble, and Mallika Dhasal, who, by the late ‘80s and throughout the ‘90s, were already making their voices heard in dalit writing.

Some questions that frequently emerge from a reading of Dalit women’s writing are: Who really is a ‘dalit woman’? What are the restrictive socio-religious sanctions she has to face as a woman and as a dalit? How does the dalit movement, given its predominantly male representative voice, carry forward the dalit woman’s concerns and aspirations? What are the points of conflict between the dalit male view-point and the dalit female’s? What constitutes the essential difference between dalit women’s struggles and the mainstream feminist’s?

On the last question, there has been some vigorous scholarship since the turn of the new millennium. Activists and academics such as Rege, Gopal Guru, V. Geetha, Anupama Rao, Uma Chakravarty, among others, have argued that until about the early 2000s, the mainstream feminist movement in India has rarely discussed or addressed caste within gender discourse. A comprehensive reckoning of the interdependence of caste and gender is required for any comprehensive discourse on women’s issues in India. Chakravarti rues the absence of adequate studies exploring this interdependence:

> Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organising principles of the brahmanical social order and despite their close interconnections neither scholars of the caste system nor feminist scholars have attempted to analyse the relationship between the two (Chakravarti 579).
Rege draws on Marathi dalit women’s critiques on *abrāhmanī* women’s studies:

[I]t was assumed that caste identities could be transcended by the larger identity of sisterhood among all women. The marginalisation of the non-brahmanical perspectives and experience in the institutionalised scholarship on caste has blurred our understanding of the relations between structural continuities and contemporary change in the social institution of caste. (Rege 2)

Aupama Rao notes in the Introduction to the edited collection of essays in *Gender & Caste* (2005):

The women’s movement has in its enthrallment of ‘sisterhood’ failed to note the ‘caste’ factor while the Dalit movement has remained patriarchal and sees the dalit woman’s oppression merely as a caste oppression (Rao 4).

The awareness of the position and location of dalit women as a special case not only within the dalit movement overall, but also within the wider women’s movement has been a distinctive feature of dalit feminism since the ‘90s.

In the early 1990s, dalit feminist articulations challenged the conceptions of ‘genderless caste’ and ‘casteless gender’...The writings and manifestoes of different dalit women’s groups underlined the fact that the unmarked feminism of the 1970s had, in fact, been in theory and praxis a kind of brahmanical feminism... Dalit feminist critique of the 1990s posed challenges to [mainstream Indian] feminist canons, curricular protocols and alliances with brahmanical power and privilege...The recognition of caste as not just a retrograde past but an oppressive past reproduced as forms of inequality in modern society requires therefore that we integrate questions of caste with those of class and gender (Rege 3–4).

And with the recognition of the distinct pathways of dalit and savarna feminists that have more often than not diverged rather than converged, it became necessary to examine the implications for constructions of solidarity. While the question of solidarity is not limited to just feminist solidarity, many of the issues flagged by dalit feminists do apply for all dalits as well.

---

140 The word ‘non-brahmanical’ as used in Rege’s work refers to an English translation of *abrāhmanī*, literally meaning ‘all except the brahmins’.
II.4 The Question of ‘Lived Experience’: Silencing Solidarities

The critical issue emerging from dalit and non-dalit views on forming solidarities can be briefly summarised as such: Can (the structurally privileged savarna’s) imaginative participation and a sense of self-reflexive and politically-aware empathy with the dalit cause compensate for the lack of an ‘experiential authenticity’? And if so, of what real use and help would this be to the dalits in question?

There are staunch votaries of two points of view on this insider-outsider debate. There are the ‘exclusivists’ who assert that the lived experiences of ‘dalitism’ cannot be acquired, however sympathetic and well-intentioned a non-dalit might be. Sharatchandra Muktibodh in Arjun Dangle’s Poisoned Bread (1992) equates this difference of knowledge and experience with that of a ‘view’ and ‘vision’:

There is as much a difference between a dalit view and dalit vision as there is between having a look at the map of a city and actually living in that city. When a view of life is experienced by a writer in its multiform distinct totality, he could be said to have had a vision of his own point of view (in Dangle 268).

The dalit writer, Narendra Jadhav, argues in a similar vein:

Non-dalit writing for dalit is written out of sympathy. Empathy is a right word, but there is always a difference between mother’s love and a wet nurse love. There is a substantial difference between dalit writing about themselves and others doing it. Because they have a second hand experience and they could not shake the other’s perception as could the first person account (in Anand and Zelliot 33).

For these exclusivists, it becomes evident, imaginative identification is not sufficient. The reality of ‘felt experience’, which takes precedence for them, can never be equalled with the cerebral engagement and political solidarity on dalit issues. For them, such engagement, at best, shows an incomplete understanding, and at worst,
panders to a patronising façade of false-sympathy underscored by centuries-old caste prejudices and acrimony. Advocating a similar position, Gopal Guru, in “Dalit Women Talk Differently”, distinguishes the discourse of dalit women from that of the (upper class and upper caste) mainstream feminists’. Guru asserts that ‘social location’ determines the perception of reality, making the representation of dalit women’s issues by non-dalit women as less authentic and (thus, by extension) as less valid:

The claim for women’s solidarity at both national and global levels subsumes contradictions that exist between high caste and dalit women. The latent manifestations of these contradictions involve subtle forms of caste discrimination as practised by upper caste upper class women against dalit women in the urban areas and resorting to slander of dalit women in rural areas…beneath the call for women’s solidarity the identity of the dalit woman as ‘dalit’ gets whitewashed and allows a ‘non-dalit’ woman to speak on her behalf. It is against this background that dalit women have of late protested against their ‘guest appearances’ in a text or a speech of a non-dalit woman and instead organized on their own terms. They consider the feminist theory developed by non-dalit women as unauthentic since it does not capture their reality (Guru 82-83).

Rege’s arguments on the deceptive invisibility of ‘caste’ underpinning the unmarked mainstream feminism’s constructions of a ‘larger sisterhood’, in Writing Caste, agree with Guru’s to some extent. It is then the dalit feminists who challenge the misleading, not to mention dangerous, concepts of ‘casteless gender’ and ‘genderless caste’. Guru also points out that, “Dalit women define the concept of dalit strictly in caste terms, refuting the claim of upper caste women to dalithood. Dalit women activists quote Phule and Ambedkar to invalidate the attempt of a non-dalit woman to don dalit identity” (Guru 83).

Seema Sharma and Kanta Sharma, in Dalit and Backward Women (2006), find it impossible to align the women’s movement with the dalit movement. According to them, there is no common economic or ideological platform to sustain such a sisterhood:
A uniform autonomous women’s movement cannot sustain as there is no common material base to launch such a movement. Not only is there no common material base but there is also not a common philosophy to combine Dalit women’s movement with other women’s movement. Dalit women’s emancipation entails a dual struggle as a dalit and as a woman (Sharma and Sharma 226).

Yet, as counters to these exclusivists’ views, there does exist a mixed collective of ‘outsiders’ – historical and contemporary. Comprised of activists and intellectuals among others, and while not dalit themselves, they have been active contributors to the dalit feminist movement: through intellectual and material labour; through imaginative participation in literary and political expression; through a politically-aware sense of responsiveness and identification; as witnesses to the experiences of dalit women who have then refused to remain silent on the same, to state simply a few basic reasons. The historical roles and labour of this collective cannot be dismissed, nor silenced, solely on the grounds of their lacking in ‘experiential authenticity’ or a ‘common material base’.

While one cannot reject the no doubt real concerns of exclusivist critics such as Dangle (in Poisoned Bread), Guru, and Jadhav as invalid, the grounds on which these critics base their arguments are shaky; and especially so when it comes to reading literary texts. Their view does not account for the irrefutable fact that all literature is essentially and inherently representational and symbolic: ‘one voice’ speaking for ‘others’. The claim of even a dalit woman to speak ‘more authentically’ about other dalit women in itself is questionable. The dalit woman (or any) writer/speaker can, at the most, claim to honestly and accurately speak about herself; and even this is open to challenge (‘mediation’). Any claim to accurately represent other dalits who may be subjected to different conditions (graded differences; ‘graded inequality’) or might have different experiences than the dalit claimant, in itself is debatable. While it cannot be denied that to actually feel caste degradation and dehumanisation, a considerable part is played by ‘real life experiences’, equally, this can never be absolute and an end in itself. Arguments based on ‘feelings’ are extremely subjective
and therefore cannot be taken on the merit of feelings alone—unless, perhaps, if one can also successfully argue that there is a connection between ‘feeling’ and literary expression. Ultimately, all experiences are ‘borrowed’ to some extent, and especially so in community formations that are crucial to dalit subjectivity. They are also always mediated. And imaginative identification plays a crucial role in every discourse; and dalit discourse is no exception.

Indeed, while discussing the issue of representation of dalit women at a conference in Beijing, Guru himself accepts the difficulty of taking a homogeneous view of ‘dalit experience’ (what some critics have called ‘dalitism’) and the ‘dalit woman’:

There is a notable shift taking place in the location of dalit women. Dalit women from Maharashtra are better educated and employed than their counterparts from Karnataka. And it would be the former who represent dalit women at Beijing. Thus, here too, a certain section of dalit women will be rendered anonymous (in Rao 84).

What can be inferred here is that educated, employed, and economically self-sufficient dalit women can be problematic representatives of grassroots dalit women, whose experiences significantly differ from those of the middle-class dalit’s. Then, the pertinent question to ask when we encounter such relatively upper-middle class dalit women writing about dalit lives is: which dalit’s experience is the writer claiming to represent? Besides, if a process of identification is possible for the urban, relatively upper-middle class dalit (male or female) with a grassroots dalit woman, then might it not also be possible for a non-dalit with a keen, attentive, self-aware, and politically-conscious intellectual apparatus, to do the same? Furthermore, any claim to an ‘exclusive dalit experience’ fails to take into account the role of other equally important dynamics such as individuality, class, sub-jātis, religion and language, to name a few, in the formation of ‘experiences’. The term ‘dalit’ or ‘dalit woman’ is at best an umbrella term with pluralistic differentiations. And it is prudent to bear in mind that claims of absolute exclusivity (anywhere) are, more often than not, appropriated as tools of justification for one’s own narrow parochial ends.
In correlation with this argument, Sharmila Rege’s important critique of Guru’s position on exclusivity bears noting here:

Though Guru’s argument is well taken...a privileging of knowledge claims on the basis of direct experience as authentic may lead to a furthering of narrow identity politics. Such a narrow frame may well limit the emancipatory potential of the dalit women’s organisations as also their epistemological standpoints...The dalit feminist standpoint which emerges from the practices and struggles of dalit women may originate in the works of dalit feminist intellectuals, but it cannot flourish if it is isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups...By this we do not argue that non-dalit feminists can ‘speak as’ or ‘for the’ dalit women but they can ‘reinvent’ themselves as dalit feminists. Such a position therefore avoids the narrow alley of direct experience based ‘authenticity’ and narrow ‘identity politics’ (in Rao 96-99).

Rege’s argument can be taken as a prudent call for caution and alertness in understanding the limitations and potential dangers of an exclusivist approach. Especially in the current phase of the dalit women’s movement, which is still in the process of gaining ground and momentum, this caution and alertness can only be helpful to its progress.

PART III: Constructing the Gendered Dalit Woman

III.1 Constructing the Gendered Dalit Woman through the Dalit Male Gaze

One major facet in representations of the dalit woman that has drawn much criticism is the portrayal of her in dalit men’s writing. It becomes apparent that barring a few exceptions, for the most part, this portrayal has been a skewed one. For one, caste is noticeably given primacy in comparison to women’s struggles, and the notion of ‘genderless caste’ very much pervades dalit men’s writing. Another visible undercurrent is the disjunction between portrayals of upper caste and lower caste
women in their works. While the upper caste women are seen as exploitative, artificial, cloistered, and decadent, the lower caste women are idealised as enterprising, brave, earthy, and liberated (Non-dalit men’s writing is highly susceptible to this construct as well). It is problematic to justify such representations merely on the grounds of creative choices and poetic license. For, this overlooks the dangerous obfuscation of the mechanisms and full-fledged functioning of patriarchy within the dalit communities themselves.

In *Why I Am Not a Hindu* (1996), Kancha Ilaiah acknowledges the affiliations of patriarchy among the dalitbahujans, but coins the term “democratic-patriarchy” in order to distinguish it from patriarchy proper. In the section of the book that focuses on women and patriarchy, Ilaiah attempts to theorise a foundational basis for his model of essential separability between caste-Hindu and dalit women. Emphasising that the caste-Hindu woman’s life is governed by the sexual metaphor of ‘divine love’ of mythological figures, in comparison, Ilaiah asserts that the dalitbahujan woman is largely free of it. The “man-woman relations” among dalitbahujans, he argues, do not go beyond natural relationships (Ilaiah 32). The dalit woman also does not indulge in overt deification of her husband. Due to the lack of brahmanical ideology, which he rightly stresses is patriarchal hegemony, there is no consistent husband-worship in dalit families and a dalit woman takes her husband as an “equal partner”, not a “personification of God”. He elaborates:

> A dalitbahujan woman does not have to perform *padapuja* (worshipping the husband’s feet) to her husband either in the morning or in the evening. She does not have to address her husband in a way she would address a superior. In a situation of dispute, word in response to word, and abuse for abuse is the socially visible norm (Ilaiah 34; emphasis in original).

The approach of a dalit woman towards love and sex is praised by him as the “more practical and realistic” (Ilaiah 34). According to Ilaiah, while love and sex take spiritual forms in upper castes, in dalits they are more “physical” and “human” (Ilaiah 35). In dalits, he argues further, sex remains a bodily desire and a social need,
whereas this essentially human passion is given a divine orientation through Hindu philosophical abstractions in upper castes. He consistently maintains that “man-woman relations” among dalitbahujans are found to be more natural than between upper caste men and women (Ilaiah 32-36).

This “patriarchal-democracy”, according to him, gives the wife the rights to retaliate and censure her husband publicly. He expands further that in opposition to ritualistically grounded brahmanical patriarchy, the patriarchy in dalits is loosely structured. And since the dalit woman performs the same activities as the dalit man, she is not a helpless creature and is not limited to gender-specific roles.

Within Dalitbahujan patriarchy, woman is an agent of both production and reproduction. The domains of man and woman are not completely bifurcated at home and in the field... While cooking or doing agrarian tasks or while performing caste occupational operations, there are no gender restrictions in belief or practice. In these spheres specializations are not gender specific... The patriarchy that operates among the Dalitbahujans operates between two political beings and hence it still retains an element of democracy in contrast to the authoritarian patriarchy of Brahmanism. In other words, Dalitbahujan patriarchy is a loose structure which can be demolished with counter-cultural movements more easily than Brahmanical patriarchy (Ilaiah 46-47).

And when it comes to the widely prevalent domestic abuse and violence faced day in and out by dalit women, Ilaiah offers the consolation of a tit-for-tat method of retaliation, which he assures the reader, cannot even be conceived of among the upper caste counterparts:

The beaten-up wife has a right to make the attack public by shouting, abusing the husband and, if possible, by beating the husband in return... The father’s atrocities against the mother cannot be discussed in Brahmin or Banya families. But this is not so in our families. The father abuses the mother right in front of the children and the mother will pay back in the same coin then and there. The children are a witness to all that (Ilaiah 40).
Bluntly refuting Ilaiah’s assertion that patriarchy in dalits is in any way ‘democratic’, dalit critic Anita Garve points out that a dalit woman’s shouting back and beating up her husband is neither a reflection of democratic-patriarchy nor the actual issue. Rather, she argues, of more consequence and urgency is the need to question why she has to shout in the first place. Garve makes a case for the economic and sexual exploitation of dalit women within the domestic household:

The Dalit woman, more often than not is dependent on her own labour. She labours outside her home from morning till evening. When she comes home, her husband will be waiting to snatch her hard-earned money which is often the only source to feed the family. If she refuses to give him the money, the husband beats her up. The woman shouts back; in the process of resistance, she might beat him back. This is not because of democratic patriarchy in her family (in Prasad 58-59).

Not the least among other factors that render Ilaiah’s theories problematic is the indiscriminate supplanting of class with caste. Ilaiah constantly confuses these, or simply refuses to acknowledge that they may bear a difference. This becomes especially evident when he applauds the attitude towards love and sex found among the labourer class, agrarian dalit family: “[F]or upper castes sex become[s] an activity of leisure, in dalits it has reproductive functions. Since in dalits both husband and wife remain busy in hard physical labour during the day and up to late in the night and also because they get fewer chances of privacy due to social nature of their life, they have only a few moments to be together…”, thereby making man-woman relations among dalitbahujans “natural” (Ilaiah 32-33). That the values so valorised are not intrinsically caste-specific and are related to the economic status of any working-class labourer remains unobserved by Ilaiah. Moreover, the glorification of ‘natural impulses’ in the ‘earth-borns’ (as dalits are often referred to in the text by Ilaiah) has parallels in Marxists’ veneration of working class people, or Feminists’ veneration of working women; what Adorno has also called the ‘the glorification of
the splendid underdog”. This would then allow for dalit literature to open itself to
the charges laid on the doorstep of Marxists or Feminists, that of propagandist
literature.

The arguments and theories on dalit women’s subjectivities as posited by Ilaiah
are severely undermined by their over-simplified and questionably unambiguous
demarcation between dalit women and upper caste women, and are thus rendered as
short-sighted. In his attempts to theorise a foundational basis for his model of
essential separability between caste-Hindu and dalit women, he appears to
romanticise dalit social life and excuse the violence there. And he does all of this
through the glorification of the subject – and ironically in his case, object – of the ‘dalit
woman’. In fact, this tendency towards glorifying dalit women can be seen amongst a
surprisingly large number of modern dalit male (or indeed non-dalit male) writers
writing on dalit women. This includes the well-noted Sharankumar Limbale in *The
Outcaste*, Omprakash Valmiki in *Joothan*, even the renowned Dalit Panthers in many a
poem, or for that matter iconic non-dalit writers such as Mulk Raj Anand in
*Untouchable*, Premchand in *Godan*, and U. R. Ananthmurthy in *Samskara*.

Regarding Ilaiah’s claims of the ‘greater sexual freedom’ that dalit women
ostensibly enjoy in comparison to their upper caste counterparts, and which sexual
freedom is in turn touted as proof of dalit society being ‘more egalitarian’, this is
severely problematic to accept unquestioningly as well. It can be argued that the
greater sexual freedom ‘enjoyed’ by the dalit woman is hegemonically constructed as
such by upper caste men’s sexual licentiousness, in terms of which such men are
deemed entitled to the sexualised body of dalit women merely by virtue of their
‘superior’ caste. This dubious celebration of ‘greater freedom’ inscribed on dalit
women is highly susceptible to being co-opted as a legitimising tool in the

---

141 “In the end, glorification of splendid underdogs is nothing other than glorification of the splendid system
that makes them so” in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*. (trans. E.F.N. Jephcott. London:
Verso, 1974) p. 28.
justification of abusing dalit women’s sexualised bodies in order to gratify exploitative men’s (both, upper caste and dalit) own depravity.

The romanticising-impulse towards dalit women, creating a false aura around them, it can be argued, is the result of a search for ‘dalit distinctness’ in male dalit writers. They tend to idealise their women in the archetypal roles of mothers and sisters in an attempt to forcibly create structures that romanticise these women. This results in an erasure of the reality of dalit women, who have to bear the double burden of caste as well as patriarchy. Gail Omvedt’s comments on the portrayal of dalit women in male dalit writers’ works are significant in their baring of stereotypes in them:

[T]he majority of dalit poets have tended to view women as victims rather than actors. The image of the oppressed mother, who has suffered and toiled for her son’s education but seen little of its fruits, is a recurring one…Yet, the downtrodden among the downtrodden are not simply passive victims or ignorant, tradition-bound sufferers, as Dalit poetry and most of the scholarly studies on Indian women have suggested…[She] may not have enough to eat; she may feel ignorant, but she knows that she does not know, and because of this awareness her world has changed (in Rao 321-322; emphasis added).

Sharmila Rege, in “A Dalit Feminist Standpoint”, remarks on the lacunae in the dalit movement, which even in its heyday confined itself to the male representation of dalithood: “The Dalit Panthers did make significant contribution to the cultural revolt of the 1970’s, but both in their writings and their programmes, dalit women remained firmly encapsulated in the roles of ‘mother’ and the ‘victimized sexual being’” (in Rao 91).

Along with the celebration of motherhood, which has striking parallels in brahmanical literature, there is also the tendency to make a virtue of even the poverty and deprivation in which the dalit woman is forced to live. The following is a quote from a well-received zealous speech called “Human Response to Dalit
Women Today” delivered by the Reverend Fr. Leo Sequeira, a popular orator in dalit Christian circles:

Our dalit women are ordinary people but real. Not the intellectual or the pseudo-intellectual type. Both of these categories of people are fakes, anyway. Our dalit mothers and sisters are genuine and simple, while the intellectuals – in air-conditioned rooms – and the pseudo-intellectuals of mega cities claim to have wisdom but I have experienced the real wisdom, not knowledge, in the dalit women folk...just talk to them, be with them, live with them and see how they relate to you from their hearts without pretension, without any show, without any artificiality. They love dramatization. Even their smiles are so genuine that you are simply attracted to them (in Jogdand 131).

Awash with the sort of fond imagination and sentimentality that is quietly, suffocatingly, oppressive, this speech typifies one such tendency that blithely trivialises the harsh realities of these women.

III.2 Constructing the Gendered Dalit Woman through the Non-Dalit Male Gaze

Non-dalit men’s writing offers a different set of representational issues in its portrayal of dalit women. Here, the women are portrayed in accordance to at least two broad ideological constructs: one which renders them as mute, passive, stock characters (typically, mother or sister) in order to subsume them within a wider indivisible persecuted people; and the other which excessively glorifies or romanticises them. While the former effectively renders them invisible, the latter exalts them to the point of fetishisation. Works such as Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935), Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* (2007), Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* (2003) exemplify the first tendency. And works such as Joseph McEwan’s *The Stepchild: Angaliyat* (2004) and U. R. Ananthmurthy’s *Samskara* (trans. A. K. Ramanujan; 1978) exemplify the second. For this chapter, Anand’s *Untouchable* and Ananthamurthy’s *Samskara* come in for a brief study. The two texts are interesting to
analyse on the basis of how they address the subjectivity of the dalit woman – a
subjectivity that departs from the dalit men’s constructions as discussed earlier – and
how conscious the texts themselves are of patriarchal structures governing the lives of dalit women.

Untouchable (1935)

Anand’s work has, of course, been widely appreciated and just as much
criticised. It consciously establishes itself as a work of illumination and protest and
has been universally hailed for decades as a ‘protest novel’. But Anand’s brahmanical
caste and upper class status become impossible to overlook in his constructions of
Bakha and his sister, Sohini. Writing at a time when India was still under colonial
rule, Anand consciously sets out to portray them as oppressed by both: the
colonisation by the British and the quasi-colonisation by caste-Hindu society. Yet,
Anand’s very methods of such construction allow for another layer of subjugation:
what Saidiya V. Hartman, elsewhere, has called the “difficulty and slipperiness of
empathy” (Hartman 18). The problematics of such empathy, combined with the
sexualisation of Bakha and Sohini, demonstrate to the reader that the immediacy of
Anand’s non-dalit status becomes a crucial, if not the singular, determinative issue.

142 Critics who have been highly generous in their assessments of Anand and his work include, but are not
limited to, Marlene Fisher (1985), Balarama G. S. Gupta (1974), and perhaps the most noted and cited of
Naik (1982) have accorded Anand’s text canonical status. And these critics have all used the terms ‘protest
novel’ and ‘humanist novel’ interchangeably to label this work.

143 Critics who have criticised Anand’s text, ranging from the measured to the scathing, include: Arun P.

144 Saidiya Hartman’s discussion of empathy/hyperempathy in “Innocent Amusements” from her book,
Scenes of Subjection (1997) provides an interesting lens through which to examine Anand’s empathy-realism. Although
Hartman’s work is engaged in examining the moments of literary violence in works related to 19th century
slavery, with a focus on chattel slavery in particular, many of her questions and concerns are relevant to the
question of literary representation vis-à-vis constructions of the dalit subject by a non-dalit. For instance, she
notes the tendency of well-meaning advocates to engage in “imagined scenario[s]” (Hartman 18). She provides
the example of John Rankin, a white abolitionist, who, in order to understand the plight of the slave and elicit
empathy in his readers, imagines himself and his family as slaves. This scenario, Hartman argues, “enables
Rankin to speak not only for but literally in the place of the enslaved” (Hartman 18; emphasis added).
There are only a handful of female characters in the novel and they chiefly operate to supplement Bakha’s experiences. From the marginal space of the background that they occupy, they are seen as either instruments of caste prejudices or fellow sufferers. Sohini’s character functions in a central capacity in that she becomes the cause of Bakha’s suffering and pain when the brahmin priest, Kalinath, tries to molest her in the temple. She is described as a young girl, with a beautiful body, a natural beauty gained through a life full of hard work and physical labour, which attracts much attention and interest from other men. Again, this sort of valorisation of poor people’s labour, this time by the non-dalit Anand, in the attempt to empathise with their plight, only romanticises them in a dangerously reductive capacity. This is just one of many cases in Anand’s novel where, in the manner that Hartman argues, empathy reveals itself to be ‘slippery’. For, what it does not seem to address or even complicate is the notion that relentless ‘physical labour makes one beautiful and healthy’ is an elitist fantasy (analogous to the trope of the ‘noble savage’). Indeed, “brutally hard work brutalises”\(^{145}\): it breaks people, injures them, undermines their health, and so on goes the list of dehumanisation.

Resorting to another trope strongly favoured by many male writers writing on dalit women, Sohini’s attachment to her brother is shown as artless, earnest, maternal, and instinctively sensitive to his needs and sufferings:

> She had sensed with her deep woman’s instincts the feeling in her brother’s soul. He was tired. He was thirsty. She had felt like a mother as she issued from her home to fetch water, a mother going out to fetch food or drink for her loved ones at home (Untouchable 15).

That this sort of typecasting accomplishes nothing but the inscribing of patriarchal values of ‘desired femininity’ onto the gendered woman, is of course, nothing new and has long been rigorously addressed elsewhere in feminist discourse. On the other hand, Bakha’s love for her is unmistakable in its impulses of

\(^{145}\) I must credit one of my supervisors, Neil Lazarus, for this pithy critique of the tendency among ‘sympathy-eliciting’ critics to romanticise the labour of the poorest classes. It was one he shared with me during a verbal feedback discussion on this chapter, thus has no other mode of citation.
appropriation and colonisation. His love for her is presented in images signifying his own repressed sexual desire for her:

He could not think of her as brutalized by anyone, even by a husband married to her according to the rites of religion. He looked at her and somehow a picture of her future life seemed to come before him. She had a husband—a man who had her, possessed her. He loathed the ghost of her would be husband that he conjured up. He could see the stranger holding her full breasts and she responding with a modest acquiescence. He hated the thought of that man touching her. He felt he would be losing something (Untouchable 55).

This overt incestuous sexualisation of Bakha’s feelings towards his sister is a curious creative choice for Anand to make. What does it really seek to accomplish in the scheme of Anand’s objectives in writing this novel? Speaking to such a question, Sarah Antinora has persuasively argued that creating a sexualised love between an untouchable man and his sister does little to serve the cause of illuminating the untouchable’s plight (which, as Anand has written elsewhere, was his primary objective in writing this ‘protest novel’146). Antinora, following Homi Bhabha’s theories on ‘colonial fantasy, voyeurism, and fetishism’, further argues that, instead, it not only affirms the notion of the eroticized Other, it propels it…However, it cannot be claimed that this particular colonial fantasy is empowering the British [as in Bhabha’s original], for this invention is wholly Anand’s. This fantasy creates enjoyment for both Anand and his readers, allowing both to exert control [over Bakha and Sohini]…[This mode of] consumption of Bahka and Sohini through sexualised fantasy is far more ominous (Antinora 40).

Such modes of representation of the untouchables by a writer whose caste reality is worlds apart from those he portrays, accentuates the enormous divide and the power imbalance between the two worlds and the potential for the abuse of this power. This becomes especially clear when Anand’s incestuous representation of Bakha is located in its historical context at a time when the untouchable subaltern,
indeed, could not speak (back) on being ‘consumed’ in this fashion. And this is made possible, not in spite of, but because of the writer’s self-conscious mode of writing an empathy-realist novel where such ‘empathy’ and ‘good intentions’ show themselves to be ‘slippery’.

Bakha’s interrogation of Sohini after her molestation by Pundit Kali Nath, and his tormented reaction to it, showcases as much his muffled sexual leanings towards Sohini as, arguably, Anand’s own brahmanical patriarchal ideas of ‘chastity’ and ‘honour’, a telling impulse of Anand’s caste and class subjectivity and positionality. Bakha’s reflections on the helplessness and vulnerability of women born into low castes reinforce brahmanical notions of the connection between ‘powerlessness’ and ‘femininity’ whereby women, and their virtue, become a treasure to be safeguarded by the safe-keepers, i.e. the men, of the family. Any attempt on exploiting her virginity becomes a grave cause for concern as she is the embodiment of the family’s ‘prestige’ and ‘honour’.

How can she show her face to the world after this? But why didn’t she let me go and kill that man? Why was she born a girl in our house to bring disgrace upon us? So beautiful and so accursed! I wish she had been the ugliest woman in the world! Then no one would have teased her! (Untouchable 56-57)

The reinforcing and affirmation of such brahmanical values by ascribing them onto the untouchable character (who has no agency) by using authorial (thus authoritative) power in such manner, to put it simply, is precisely how the insider-outsider debate in polemics of representation gains ground, legitimacy, and validity within dalit discourse.

Though sensitively and arguably even self-consciously drawn as such by Anand, Shohini’s meek and modest character noticeably lacks any awareness of or engagement with the anti-caste movements; be it the contemporary events surrounding the Poona Pact, or even the precursors to dalit women’s movements (set forth first by Jotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule). This ‘silence’, of course, can be read
as constituted by Anand’s staunchly Gandhian ideological position as a writer, as evident in the text. Sohini’s quintessential opposite is Gulabo, who belongs to the washer caste, and considers her untouchable caste as superior to Sohini and Bakha’s. Gulabo’s role in the novel represents the prejudices and hierarchical power gradations existing even amongst the sub-jātis within the untouchable communities themselves. The portrayal of these differences conveys the idea that a sense of sisterhood or solidarity even amongst the untouchable women themselves faces its own caste-barriers, and thus cannot be taken for granted. On the whole, the untouchable woman, in Anand’s novel, remains more a passive than an active participant in the narrative. But this portrayal of the ‘mute and muted’ figure can be read as signalling Anand’s conscious depiction of the triply-subjugated untouchable woman (as the colonial subject, an untouchable, and an untouchable woman).

*Samskara (1978)*

If the dalit woman largely disappears as a convincing force from the plot of Anand’s novel, Ananthamurthy’s *Samskara* looks at her through rose-tinted glasses. The novel revolves around a fundamental clash between the life lived by upper caste brahmins of the Madhva sect and those of untouchable women represented by Chandri, Belli, and Padmavati. Praneshacharya, the head of *agrahara* brahmins of the town of Durvasapura, comes in head-to-head conflict with Naranappa, a heretic brahmin who challenges and subverts the ideologies of the orthodox brahmins. Chandri is a lower caste prostitute, taken as Naranappa’s concubine-partner, cohabits with him, and becomes the living embodiment of Naranappa’s dissent against brahmin orthodoxy. She also presents a source of fascination and taboo in the mind of Praneshacharya. The novel offers substantial narrative space to the untouchable women who are seen as the antithesis of brahmin women, as well as the

---

147 A closely-knit residential settlement exclusive to specific brahmin sects. Thus the Madhvas and Smarthas in the novel, both being distinct brahmin castes yet not equal, each reside in different *agraharas*. 
shallow life lived by the orthodox brahmins of the agrahara. That Ananthamurthy’s narrative constructs the untouchables and the other brahmins to be championed and deplored respectively becomes self-evident to the reader from the novel’s very beginning. The central dilemma which the Madhva sect faces is when Naranappa dies and they must now decide whether he should be considered a brahmin despite his heretic deeds and thus be given a burial befitting a brahmin’s after his death. Ananthamurthy skilfully brings to the fore the permeation of caste-barriers even within brahmanical castes through this dilemma of Naranappa’s cremation. As the plot’s dilemma reveals, even within the apparently homogeneous category of ‘brahmin’ that is taken for granted in discourse, there exist hierarchical stratifications based on gōthra (a genealogical sub-sect), which can act as prohibitive barriers—even untouchability—between different groups belonging to the same caste.

Chandri is an object of hatred for the brahmin women, especially Anusuya, who curses her for being the ‘dishonourable temptress’ that seduced her cousin Naranappa and led him astray from morality. One of the reasons for the bad-blood between the upper caste women and Chandri – and presented as ‘obvious’ by the narrative – is that she is vivacious, earthy, young, and pleasure-driven in contrast to the brahmin women who are shown as self-righteous, decadent, puritanical, and unattractive with no innate sexuality of their own. Such a straightforward binary opposition between the upper caste and the lower caste women is sustained throughout the novel. Chandri’s decision to renounce her gold ornaments to facilitate Naranappa’s cremation serves as a heroic self-sacrificing counterpoint against selfish and mercenary brahmin women. It becomes a symbol of her innate goodness, an act that seems so unusual as to bewilder the agrahara brahmins. Despite living in a morally corrupt environment, Chandri’s gesture cements her ‘rare love’ for Naranappa in the eyes of the brahmins, and even the reserved Praneshacharya is moved to comment on her generosity of heart.
Chandri’s devotion to Naranappa is total and unquestioning. She is ever-willing and all too ready to forgo everything for his sake and even begs him not to break caste-restrictions on her account: “Don’t eat my cooking, don’t eat meat and stuff. I’ll give it up myself; if I crave for it, I’ll go to the Shetti’s and I’ll eat my fish there, not in the agrahara” (Samskara 45). She remains anxious for his brahmin soul and desires a proper brahmanical cremation for him. This earns praise from Sripati, another brahmin in the agrahara, not only for her good looks but also for her goodness of heart and devotion to Naranappa, both qualities that are apparently absent in brahmin women:

In a hundred mile radius is there any woman as lovely, as bright, as good as Chandri?...What does it matter if she’s a whore? You tell me, didn’t she behave better than any wife with Naranappa? If he drank too much and vomited, she wiped up the mess. She even wiped ours up, didn’t she? Anytime, even at midnight, when he woke her up she cooked and served him, all smiles. Which Brahmin woman would do so much? Stupid shaven widows! (Samskara 72)

Chandri is cast as spontaneous and elemental like the natural elements of air, water, or earth. Her position outside the rigorous morality of the caste system gives her freedom, her existence not limited and bound by restrictions and taboos. She is all-giving, all-accepting mother earth, and ever-flowing Tunga. Her extraordinary forbearance is lushly described through the narrative language, enriched with imagery of the natural world when the writer compares her to the river Tunga or the night-queen flowering bush:

Born to a family of prostitutes, she was an exception to all rules. She was ever-auspicious, daily wedded, the one without widowhood. How can sin defile a running river? It’s good for a drink when a man’s thirsty, it’s good for a wash when a man’s filthy, and it’s good for bathing the god’s images with; it says yes to everything, never a no. Like her. Doesn’t dry up, doesn’t tire (Samskara 44).

---

148 The Tungabhadra (in short: ‘Tunga’) is a river that flows through the state of Karnataka during most of its course, and along the border between Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.
In comparison, the brahmin women fare rather poorly. If lower caste women are all healthy, beautiful, and lively, the brahmin women are seen as frigid, rigid, and unattractive: “before they bear two brats, their eyes sink, cheeks become hollow, breasts sag and fall” (Samskara 44). Naranappa’s mocking speech emphasises his ideas on the same: “O Acharya, who in the world can live with a girl who gives no pleasure—except of course some barren Brahmins! You fellows—you Brahmins—you want to tie me down to a hysterical female, just because she is some relative right? Just keep your dharma to yourself—we’ve but one life” (Samskara 21). Sripati’s comparison of Belli with brahmin wives is a comment comparing two ways of life, and two types of women to live these lives with—one putrefied, stagnated, and the other, refreshing as a whiff of fresh air:

Who cares if his wife tightens and twines up her thighs? There was Belli. An outcaste, so what? As Naranappa would say—who cares if she’s a goddess or a shaven widow? But Belli was neither. Which brahmin girl—cheek sunken, breast withered, mouth stinking of lentil soup—which Brahmin girl was equal to Belli? Her thighs are full. When she is with him, she twists like a snake coupling with another, writhing in the sands. […] She’d be warm and ready—like a turned up drum. Not utterly black-skinned, not pale white, her body is the colour of the earth, fertile, ready for seed, warmed by an early sun (Samskara 37).

Praneshacharya, despite being the leader of the orthodox brahmins, differs from the others in his sensitive conscience and humane behaviour. It is his kindness and purity of heart that attracts Chandri towards him after Naranappa’s death. He is one of the few in the agrahara who sees Chandri as a human being and is not contemptuous (or at least, not overtly or consciously so) of her caste lineage.

The sexual encounter between Chandri and Praneshacharya, which forms another central crisis in the plot, takes place as much due to her feelings of compassion for him as her desire to beget a child from the holy man. Chandri’s sexual union with him is one brimming with emotions and maternal impulses towards him:
The Acharya’s hunger, so far unconscious, suddenly rages, and he cried out like a child in distress. ‘Ammal!’ Chandri leaned him against her breasts, took the plantains out of her lap, peeled them and fed them to him. Then she took off her sari, spread it on the ground, and lay on it hugging Praneshacharya close to her, weeping, flowing in helpless tears (Samskara 63-64).

There is an unmistakable veneration of the holy man by Chandri, and one which is presented as ‘normal’ in an uncritical and unquestioning manner by the narrative. She is in awe of him, malleable towards his wishes, and grateful for the attention he bestows on her. “Chandri was afraid that Praneshacharya might scold her, despise her. There was also a hope in her that his touch might bear fruit in her body. And a gratefulness that she too might have earned merit’ (Samskara 67).

Praneshacharya, for all his humane treatment of Chandri, and the conflicted but seemingly genuine feelings he possess for her, remains a firm believer in the necessity of maintaining the legitimacy and sanctity of the brahmanical caste system well into the novel’s conclusion. Thus, the extent of the novel’s claim to any subversion of caste structures remains limited towards compassion and humane consideration of the oppressed untouchable. The untouchable women, Chandri and Belli, unquestioningly submit to their positions as outcasts with no hints of assertion or disquiet. They are mostly seen on physical terms, with no claims to a critical thinking mind, as passive recipients of attention and objects of love or lust. They accept without demur the exoticised fascination bestowed upon them by the upper caste men: as hyper-sexualised alter-egos to the de-sexualised brahmin wives, and as escapes for the brahmin men from their suffocating religiosity. The constant impulse to envelop dalit women’s images with those of the natural world throughout the novel, without any reflective, critical engagement on their attendant issues of hunger, exploitation, and violence, sharply departs from any serious engagement with dalit women’s material concerns.

Both Untouchable and Samskara betray a congruous approach towards their depictions of dalit women. The stereotypes in both novels diminish the women by
either viewing them in idealised terms (as in *Samskara*) or render them as elisions (as in *Untouchable*). They never become a ‘talking’ voice and remain passive recipients of brahmanical sexual licentiousness. The transitions from women as vessels of sin (*Untouchable*) to women as passion incarnate (*Samskara*) only anchor the women as sexual objects and not much more. The graded differences in the identities of dalit women as ‘dalit’, as ‘women’, and as ‘dalit women’, rarely find their way into the narrative.

**III.3 Constructing the Gendered Dalit Woman by the Dalit Woman Writer**

The works of dalit women writers present an alternate world in comparison to the one presented by their male counterparts. Their poems, autobiographies, and novels probe the most vexed questions of their position in society. They voice their apprehensions and disquietudes in a most forceful way. Caste remains an important question in their outlook, yet, it is not the question of their existence. More immediate material quotidian concerns such as domestic violence, sex as an instrument of subjugation both within and outside their caste-fold, menstruation, family relations, community traditions, economic sustenance, educating their children, and so on, gain focus in their works. A remarkable characteristic underlying most of the women writers’ works, especially in comparison to the men’s, is the conscious progression towards optimistic ‘improvement and change’ in their narratives. Also striking are their insightful but cutting critiques of the operatives of patriarchy within their communities. Between patriarchy and caste, it becomes evident that for most women writers, the former is the greater bane of their existence. In light of these priorities of
Sangati, the first autobiography by a Tamil dalit to be published, is a seminal text of sorts for dalit feminism. Often reading as a strong sociological commentary on the structural handicaps arresting the dalit woman in all facets of her life, it narrates the tales of different dalit women through the ubiquitous questioning voice of the narrator. It critically examines the malicious nexus of caste and patriarchal masculinity that bears calamitous impact on dalit women. The book is marked by a violence of language which, while capturing the idiomatic styles of some Tamil dialects, also becomes a vehicle for the narrator to vent her anger and frustration. The principal issues raised in the narrative can be summed up as thus: the sexual harassment of rural dalit women by upper caste landlords; the contrast between upper caste and dalit women; violence and discrimination suffered by the women within their own caste groups; and the casteist attitudes of the Christian nuns and priests towards dalit women who convert to Christianity. In addition, a large part of the narrative is devoted to highlighting the strong prevalence of a privileging of patriarchal masculinities within dalit communities and the resultant violence it wreaks on dalit women. The narrative succeeds in clearly highlighting the motivations that make dalit feminism distinct from those in the mainstream movement.

Dalit women in the novel live in constant fear of sexual assault while working in the fields or collecting firewood from the forests. Mariamma, a dalit peasant, is forced into a sexual embrace by the upper caste landlord, Kumarasami ayya (‘master’), while trying to drink water in his fields. When she resists him and runs away, she is warned by her caste members not to tell anybody about it: “that landowner is an evil man, fat with money. He’s upper caste as well. How can we

---

149 There are some exceptional critiques and secondary readings available on Bama’s life and her works. Here is a select list of recommended further reading: see K. A. Geetha (2007), Nishat Haider (2015), K. Latha (2017), and Tanveer Likhari (2007).
even try to stand up to such people? Are people going to believe their words or ours?” (Sangati 20) Ironically, it is the ayya who complains before the headman of the panchayat with a fabricated story that Mariamma was seen in an ‘indecent’ sexual embrace with Manikkam, a dalit boy. What follows is a typical example of how the burden of ‘honour’ falls on the woman and she must therefore pay a much higher price, literally, if she loses it. The panchayat sanctions the insulting and beating up of Mariyamma for her transgression, while Manikkam, despite being held as her co-abettor, is spared such humiliations. He does, however, get fined for the perceived crime along with Mariyamma; but while he gets fined for a 100 Rupees, Mariyamma is fined 200 for the same transgression. Double burden indeed!

The notion that it is only women who get ‘polluted’ out of any sexual advance and men are free from its contamination is advanced as justification for male licentiousness and used as a ploy to control and subdue women’s sexuality. Naattaamai’s advice to the women of his caste when he cautions them to be wary of sexual advances centers on the acceptance of male hegemony in society: “It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies” (Sangati 26). The dalit women are not allowed to attend the meetings of the dalit community and all decisions taken are solely by the male members. But the voices of the women in the narrative, even whilst standing at the periphery of the village council, subvert dalit male notions of chauvinism and their shows of machismo before the women:

What can you say to these men. There’s no way of convincing them of the truth, even when we are sure of it. They never allow us to sit down at the village meetings. They won’t allow us to stand to one side, like this. But it’s only to us they’ll brag. Ask them to stand up to the mudalaali [landlord]. Not a bit, they’ll cover their mouths and their backsides and run scared. (Sangati 24)

The dalit woman’s anxieties in being dalit as well as woman, and the privileging of patriarchal masculinity operating in dalits are convincingly portrayed
as both, a sociologically accurate account and a depiction of dalit women’s dual concerns. The intrusion of patriarchy in dalit society reveals traits usually attributed to the upper caste’s domain. Household and children’s chores and responsibilities fall to the lot of the women in addition to the day-labour they share with their men in the fields. In matters of healthcare and nutrition, the balance is tilted in favour of the male child. The narrator scrupulously notes that both the male and female members are complicit in the patriarchal privileging of the male. The narrative voices this imbalance at times explicitly, but otherwise implicitly throughout the novel.

A boy is breast fed longer. With girls, they wean them quickly, making them forget the breast. If the boys catch an illness or a fever, they will run around and nurse them with the greatest care. If it’s a girl, they’ll do it half-heartedly. (Sangati 7)

Further, the girls are restricted to play only certain kinds of games which are held as ‘proper’ for them. If they dared to play ‘male specific games’ they are criticised as being ‘manly’. Bama skilfully unveils how the normalising of stereotypical gender roles occurs from a young age through her discussion of stories, songs, and childhood games.

The popular “Tale of the Wife of Thiruvalluvar” who used to “pick up the grains of cooked rice that scattered from his leaf with a needle, and rinse them out” (Sangati 30) is presented among dalit children as ideals of wifely virtue. One of the popular songs that the dalit children enjoy singing is about the severe beatings a husband gives his wife because she dared to eat a portion of crab before waiting until her husband had been served (regardless of the fact that it was caught by her in the first place, as the song conveys). Therefore, while playing ‘mothers and fathers’ the boys are served ‘mud rice’ first and the girls, last. These are merely some of the novel’s examples of how ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ virtues come to be inculcated in dalit children during their formative years.

Domestic violence amongst dalits is revealed to be one of the most paradoxical forms of patriarchy’s influence on dalit communities in Sangati. Violence in the hands
of the dalit male appears to be an assertion of their machismo. Expanding on this
problem, Bama shows how domestic violence is justified by its being within the
parameters of family life, sanctified by the often alluded to rule that nobody has the
right to interfere between a husband and wife. Thus, marriage appears to confer an
exclusive right on the husband in matters of how he may treat his wife. Patti’s
younger daughter, Periamma, dies as a result of long-standing ill-treatment from her
husband. On being questioned by the narrator why she did nothing to stop the ill-
treatment meted out to her daughter, Patti’s reply reflects the societal stand on
uncontested ownership rights of men on women:

> Who was there to question the man? Even if the bystanders had tried to stop him, he
woul have shouted at all of them, ‘She is my wife, I can beat her or even kill her if I
want’ (Sangati 10-11).

Such dangerous biases provoke the narrator to question the sanctity of marriage:
“Just because he’s tied a tali\(^{150}\) around her neck, does it mean he can beat his wife as
he likes?” (Sangati 43). In an effort to dig deeper into the impulse of domestic
violence in dalit families, some critics have attempted to trace the genesis of dalit
male violence to the humiliation suffered by dalit men at the hands of the upper
castes. As Shibu Simon has argued:

> Dalit men react to the victimization they suffer at the hands of the upper caste
people by pouring it out on their wives and their daughters. Perhaps, this is one of
the worst tragedies of humanity that the oppressed themselves attempt to fill the
emptiness by reducing their own women to drudgery and further oppression’ (in
Prasad 243).

While his point is well taken, it is highly problematic to trace the genesis of dalit
men’s violence to solely one of transference (with the upper caste as ‘source’) in this
manner. For it appears as if Simon is claiming that the social division of labour
preceeded the sexual division of labour. He appears to have missed the current

---

\(^{150}\text{\textit{Tālī:} the Hindu ceremonial wedding chain tied around the bride’s neck by the groom that functions as a marker of her married status. As Bama’s novel shows, many dalit Christian communities too adopt this custom in their wedding ceremonies.} \)
evidence that tends to show that the first form of a social division of labour was, in fact, precisely a sexual division of labour; or at least, that the sexual division of labour was one of the major forms assumed by the social division of labour, so the two are coeval.

Another significant facet of patriarchy operating in dalits is illustrated through the labour exploitation of dalit women in the novel. While dalit men are shown to work hard to wrest a living amidst a world full of caste disadvantages, it is the dalit women who bear the double burden of working outside as well as within the home. Patti pithily sums up the angst of the woman in the context of their double burden with the addendum of sexual labour as well: “it is best you are born a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our very vaginas shrivel” (Sangati 6-7). Bama highlights the unequal wages paid to women and men for doing the same job as further confirmation of exploiting the dalit woman’s labour:

The women, in any case, whatever work they did, were paid less than the men. Even when they did the same work, they were paid less. Even in the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys always got five or six rupees more. And if the girls tied up the bundles, and the boys actually sold them, they got the better price (Sangati 18).

This is, of course, a universal bias and not confined to dalit women alone. But what Bama is perhaps trying to emphasise is that the discrimination becomes materially more crippling due to the already scanty wages dalit women receive.

Bama finds much to praise in dalit culture and its way of life as well. Far from regarding dalit culture as something to be discarded in the quest for upward mobility, she puts it in contrast with the brahmanical culture and does not find it lacking. She finds various points of departure between brahmanism and dalitism, and all for the better. Her narrative offers these reasons by way of justification: the birth of girls is not considered a tragic burden; the treatment of menstruation as not ‘impure’ but normal; absence of dowry; the lack of restrictions on widows; among
others. Despite their illiteracy, the dalit women in *Sangati* are generally shown to possess a wisdom born of their practical experiences of life. Throughout the novel, Bama, as the ubiquitous narrator, repeatedly voices hope to all the oppressed, and believes that women can do anything if they realise their potential. She intuits that the lack of courage acts as a catalyst for domination: “If we continue to be frightened, everyone will take advantage of us. If we stand up for ourselves without caring whether we die or survive, they’ll creep away with their tails between their legs” (*Sangati* 66). There is much self-reflection in the novel’s dialogues on the factors responsible for the degradation faced by dalit women. There is a call for dalit women to achieve the goal of self-sufficiency through self-awakening and knowledge. And there is a strong and consistent emphasis that ‘women are not weak’; if they seem so, it is only a conditioning of the mind, and something they can emancipate themselves from:

> We must be strong. We must show by our resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as we work hard, so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive (*Sangati* 59).

Bama’s representation of the dalit woman as entirely capable of self-empowerment is a remarkable departure from the representations in dalit men’s writings, true. And these exhortations to ‘act’ and assertions of ‘strength’ are indeed progressive and, arguably, can be empowering in one sense by their very articulation alone. Yet, one wonders if Bama’s novel too does not open itself up to questions of whether or not its determined clarion call unwittingly masks, or glosses over, real conditions of other dalit women that might differ from her own (literary constructions of) context. Is the novel, in its own way, sacrificing the import of ‘other dalit women’s voices’ in its pursuit of a specific emancipatory ideology? In other words, is the ‘speaking voice’ of the novel’s dalit woman (Bama) the same as speaking for other dalit women?
This is the complex terrain traversed by the debates on representation in the wake of Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” But these debates have remained non definitive; for, if we are to interrogate every act of representation and take it to its logical conclusion, then of course, they are always-already compromised. But this epistemological impasse serves us no good in literary criticism; it would spell the end of literary production (and criticism) as we know it.

However, Spivak’s discussion on the differences between political and literary representations offers a useful theoretical vocabulary here to help reframe the dilemma without resorting to easy solutions for the same. In Spivak’s theoretical formulation, while political representation can be framed as vertretung (‘stepping in someone’s place’; say, a politician/activist representing dalits), literary and/or discursive representation can be framed as darstellung (‘to place there’; say, a writer-intellectual writing on dalits). In political representation (in the Spivakian vertretung) the politician/activist represents the entire dalit community and functions as much as substitution as representation. The literary representation (in the Spivakian darstellung), on the other hand, seeks to create a representative portrait through which it represents individuals or communities. In this process of representation, there is much greater room for subjectivity, complexity, and graded differences. In literary representation, the ‘portrayed’ may reveal different aspects of the same identity, or multiple experiences felt at the individual level. And here, the relationship assumed between the ‘represented’ and the ‘one representing’ – the dalit women and Bama – gains primacy, and not the relationship assumed between the reader and the ‘one representing’. This distinction helps reframe the dilemma of Bama, as the ‘speaking voice’ of the dalit woman, speaking for dalit women – not necessarily on behalf of them, or instead of them, but in favour of them, and being on their side.

*Sangati*, thus, sketches dalit women’s experiences in a fairly straightforward commentary on dalit women’s lives. But the narrative sheds light on the (normally out-of-view) peculiarity of experience in being born a woman and a dalit. While it firmly locates itself as a ‘dalit’ narrative, yet, it is constantly undercut and subverted by the writer’s identity as a woman (in addition to being dalit). Bama’s observation on the way women have been treated throughout human history, for instance, touches upon women as a subsect of humanity, surpassing caste and creed:

> When everything is added up and calculated, it seems to me that society is arranged as if God created women only for the convenience of men. In daily practice, women have to make sure that men don’t suffer discomfort, that they are consoled and comforted, all their needs looked after, and all their bodily hungers satisfied. In short, they must be conscious every minute of their day that men are the very centre of their lives* (*Sangati* 122).

It is this blurring of boundaries between ‘dalit’ and ‘woman’, of seeing ‘woman’ in ‘dalit woman’ that gives the writer’s calls for equality between the sexes a solidarity, a universality, that cannot be reduced to dalit castes, or a dalit’s caste, alone.

**PART IV: Closing Comment**

Though writers such as Bama are no doubt dalit writers, their dalit-subjectivity is not static as it is often assumed or reduced to be; rather, it is constantly fluctuating and complicating, compounding and ebbing. Their dalit-subjectivity defines their feminism and their feminism informs their dalit-subjectivity. And these complexities and contradictions involved in the formation of a gendered subjectivity can thus explain, if not affirm, how the feminist impasse in the three contexts explored earlier in Part I may come about.
Conceptualisation of dalit feminism as ‘a’ practice emerging solely out of practices of exclusion in the women’s and dalit movements negates the agency of dalit women. And as discussed earlier in Part II, too much has been presumed about the ‘silence’ of dalit women, and too little has been done to actively counteract the ‘silencing’ of dalit women. And this gap needs to be bridged, to take up on Rege’s suggestion, by interrogating ‘our’ (if we happen to be non-dalit, as I am) received theoretical frameworks.

The chapter has not tried to evade the complex – even messy, one might admit – task of attempting to disentangle the categories of caste, class, and gender in this chapter, in order to examine how they perform and function in the constructions and formations of solidarity. The objective being to question: with dalit politics being a predominantly identity-based politics, what happens to the insider-outsider binary if a non-dalit were to consciously, responsibly, and simply sensibly adopt a dalit politics? As the sections on literary analyses of various texts written by both dalits and non-dalits revealed, while the idea is certainly not impossible and very much available, both dalit and non-dalit writers have struggled to express such solidarity with each other. The challenge has proved to be larger than merely insider-outsider polemics. In order to consciously construct and adopt a dalit politics it requires, at the very least, having to challenge the normative epistemological status of caste and patriarchy. And the intersectional dalit feminist standpoint, as brilliantly exemplified in Bama’s writing, offers an opportunity for building towards a better emancipatory discursive model. For it rejects more completely the “relations of rule” (Rege 524) that inform caste-supremacy, patriarchy, and the quintessentially fractured modernity of the middle-class.

In adopting a dalit feminist standpoint, the non-dalit cannot ‘speak as’ or ‘for’ dalit women, but, as Rege has argued, they can certainly “reinvent themselves as dalit feminists. A transformation from ‘their cause’ to ‘our cause’ is possible, for subjectivities can be transformed” (Rege 525; emphasis added). What this might just
allow is for us to critically and systematically interrogate advantaged positions and to reorient – ‘see’ and ‘hear’ in other ways – the histories and futures of feminism.

Carrying further this discussion on ‘seeing in other ways’, the next chapter will attempt to reimagine dalit narratives through an Ambedkarite perspective in other media. While this chapter has attempted to unpack the intersections of caste, class, and gender, the next chapter will attempt to study dalit cultural production in conjunction with Ambedkarite artists and how they may be positioned in the interstices of caste, nation, and the world.
Works Cited


Liddle, Joanna and Rama Joshi. eds. *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India*. New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1986.


---. *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women’s Testimonios*. New Delhi, Zubaan an Imprint of Kali for Women, 2006.


I offer this image of *Sister Mysore*, whose ritual humiliation I recorded during the Navaratri celebrations of 1981, bent beneath her station at the centre of the throngs who see her form without recognizing her humanity.

– Tartakov\textsuperscript{152}, “Dalit Imagery Seen from the Outside”, p. 242

When I first saw this image, my eye was drawn automatically to the *Sister Mysore*\textsuperscript{153} in the title, who it conveys is the primary subject. But that initial scan largely ignored the crowd lined up in the distance, and thereby the relationship between the two. Yet, as in most cases of visual imagery, the value and meaning in

\textsuperscript{152} Gary Michael Tartakov is Professor of History of Indian Art and Architecture, Iowa State University, Ames (U.S.A.), and specialises in Neo-Buddhist art and architecture.

\textsuperscript{153} Tartakov does not use this title ironically. Hereafter, I will refer to the woman in the photo as *Sister Mysore* as well, since it is preferable to the impersonal “the woman/the subject” in this context, albeit perhaps without the overtones of enforced sisterhood.
the image lies not in the identity of the main subject but in the relationships 
established between the subject and its context. In this case, the throng observing the 
Navaratri celebrations is that context. The paratext accompanying Tartakov’s 
photograph indicates that the significance in the image lies not in the existence of 
Sister Mysore, nor the ‘menial’ job she is engaged in, but in the ‘humiliating’ 
relationship forged between her and those who see her without recognising her 
humanity. Or, as in the manner in which caste and class barriers get erected, those 
who construct their own loci of power by refusing her humanity.

The asymmetric location of her body in the scene, its marked separation from 
the horizon of the crowd lined up in so orderly a fashion behind the policemen, is 
striking. She occupies a space that is apparently off-limits to the common person, yet 
it is far from being privileged. The iconic basket beside her would denote that it is 
excrement that she is cleaning off the street, complete with that twig for scraping in 
her left hand. So we see here, a crowd waiting for their Navratri entertainment to 
begin or resume, while Sister Mysore is stooped over before them engaged in what is 
an act historically rooted in the edicts of the caste system. The ‘humiliation’ in this 
scene is thus not that of the act of cleaning excrement itself, but that of the caste 
system traditionally defining it as such; it serves to ritually punish those condemned 
to the lowest rung of caste opprobrium, as is Sister Mysore evidently, in a public 
demonstration of their supposed impurity. Simultaneously, this public 
demonstration of ritual ‘humiliation’ is a Sanskritisation of the act of ‘menial labour’, 
whereby it reinforces the hierarchical supremacy of the beholders of the scene who 
are not engaged in the ‘impure act’ and thus do not have to suffer such public 
obloquy by their birth and the supposedly degraded karma of their previous lives.

Tartakov’s work of photography serves as a modest but brilliant example of the 
typical quotidian narratives of caste ubiquity available in the routine life of India. 
These quotidian narratives often simply require, among other things, the engaged 
and alert attention of their actors and witnesses for their significance to seep into the
collective consciousness. And visual representations of caste realities are a persuasive medium through which this can be engendered.

I. Introduction

Standard narratives of an identifiable dalit literary movement as we have seen in Chapters One (as a movement having pre-modern and pre-colonial precedents), Two (as a modern movement), and Three (as a movement inextricable from its intersectionality) are no doubt anchored to specific contexts and histories. Yet a different history might also be told, one that begins on a rather different plane, and through a different mode of expression. This alternative pathway (or genealogy) engages with the fraught issue of identity politics informing dalit literary and cultural production today from a fresh perspective.

In this regard, I draw on Aniket Jaaware’s argument regarding dalit cultural production’s capacity to stage the ethical relation in a radical manner. Jaaware has called for a reading of dalit sahitya as “destitute literature”\(^\text{154}\), which views dalit sahitya as forcing the reader to confront the question of ethics in a situation where the social structuring of caste enacts a persistent and brutal dehumanisation of all its subjects. Thus, staging the impossibility of ethics would constitute, for Jaaware, dalit sahitya’s real achievement, rather than its role in giving voice to a reified “dalit experience” as such.

This chapter builds on Jaaware’s argument and approaches such staging of the impossibility of ethics via a broader accounting of the practices of radical empiricism that politicised everyday life – more specifically, what an Ambedkarite politics espouses and practices. To that end, the chapter explores three overlapping themes:

---
\(^{154}\) Jaaware, in Destitute Literature: The First Annual Jotirao Phule Oration (2012), reminds us that, “It is extremely important to remember that the “de” [in destitution, deprivation] is a privative, it takes away, it’s not merely a negative” (Jaaware 33; emphasis in original).
first, the creation of a set of distinctive aesthetic/political agendas in the realm of critical and contemporary Ambedkarite thought and expression; second, the elaboration and representation of such agendas through existential attributes of being dalit via a fairly broad range of representational resources (dalit art works, sculpture and statues, and film); and finally, the affirmations, paradoxes, and challenges posed to established conceptions and/or preconceived assumptions of Ambedkarite identity within these distinct modalities of dalit artistic production.

From the first section on dalit statues and sculptures and the narratives they construct, to representing atrocity in paintings, and finally, in the filmic art of multilayered story-telling, this chapter attempts to locate these sites as posing a challenge to the typically formulaic notions of ‘dalit victimhood’ disseminated in popular discourse. The visual, the literary, the aesthetic, and the political dimensions closely intertwine in these three otherwise different modes of artistic language. Ultimately, the fact that new arts and genres are providing avenues to speak in ‘other’ ways, outside the confines of the paginated book, is an indication that something is changing in the context of dalit ‘texts’ and narratives of caste life.

Caste life narratives have hitherto been typically regarded as literary works. But they can, and have, become the subjects of visual language as well, wherein experiences of caste life contribute to creating visual metaphors as potential critiques of caste hegemony. Caste narratives, within both literary and visual language, have been greatly influenced by the emergence of Ambedkarite social, cultural, and political movements. The impetus for this ‘Ambedkarism’ gaining a substantial following has mostly been localised and community based, and not especially of a pan-Indian form. Thus, it is interestingly multifaceted and heterogeneous in its impulses – what it connotes for the dalits in Kerala varies from that for dalits in Uttar

---

155 I first came across ‘caste life narratives’ in an article by Y. S. Alone in which Alone uses the term quite like one uses ‘dalit life narratives’, only with an especial emphasis on ‘caste’ in order to focus on how caste informs the narrative in that particular context. That said, dalit narratives and caste life narratives are not mutually exclusive; they overlap to a great degree even if they cannot always be taken in equivalence. See Alone, “Caste Life Narratives and Visual Representation”. *Biography*. 40.1 (Winter 2017) 140-169.
Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and so on, and then again, differing laterally within each state too, among the various caste groups. Ultimately however, these diverse Ambedkarite movements all converge in their unanimous challenge posed to brahmanical metanarratives of aesthetic canons as well as the nature of caste-normative language and representation. And within visual media, representation is not limited to a theoretical abstraction, operating on a considerably visible and material level, and empowers people to express their caste experiences in a language not confined to the literary.

In the 1960s, while explaining the initial rise of dalit writings in Marathi, the early proponents of Dalit Literature argued that mainstream Marathi Literature (applies to Indian Literature too) was essentially preoccupied with the life of only a small section of upper caste (particularly Brahmin) society, while the world of the vast majority of Maharashtrians (and Indians) remained, incredibly, invisible. This presented only a fragmented image of society in independent India, and such fragmentation has apparently permeated too, the visual arts and pictorial discourse of contemporary India as well. Indeed, typically celebrated visual images of and from India remain largely blind to the continuing reality of the caste system, untouchability, the excluded life of dalits, and even the very existence of that excluded life. This is true for the historical period as well, says Tartakov, a specialist in Neo-Buddhist Indian art and architecture, in his essay, “Invisibles?” (2012) –

When my study of the visual imagery of the Navayana Buddhist movement and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar led me to search for its precursors, I was surprised to discover how little has been written previously on the subject of India’s visual imagery in relation to the caste system, and initially to suppose that that was because little or no imagery referred to the traditional social hierarchy. Though Indian tradition has preserved a vastly extensive repertoire of Brahmanical visual imagery, I could recognise no obvious images of Dalits there. (Tartakov 3)

Such elision is typical of the systemic exclusion of dalits within the classical Indian social system – not to be seen, heard, or talked about – rendering them
invisible as well as untouchable in most public spaces. While perhaps not as shocking to learn of such sensibilities existing in the distant past, the paucity in representation of dalits in contemporary India’s visual discourse, barring exceptions, strongly suggests that such sensibilities continue to be perpetuated into the present as well. Despite the various constitutional safeguards installed, and increase in public consciousness regarding caste issues, caste’s conspicuous invisibility in the mainstream panorama suggests that we have hidden this reality from ourselves as much as we have hidden ourselves from it. And so the full and pervasive structural import of the caste system has been obscured, with dalit realities reduced to being acknowledged when calculated as necessary (typically, during voting spells) but otherwise ignored in their materiality.

In the case of the disproportionate (if not entirely missing) representation of dalit lives in the everyday popular media, or in the national conversation elicited via visual culture, I argue that it is a collective case of unseeing that gets practiced. Far too many of us, far too much of the time, have been able to live in India, to ponder, work, study, and immerse ourselves in ‘Indian’ or even ‘South Asian’ culture as if dalits weren’t really there. Any survey of public exhibits, commercial galleries, or catalogues and art publications reveals there is not much on caste issues or dalits on view. The popular culture thriving in contemporary India – food and shared food culture, music, television and televised soap operas, cinema, performance arts, pulp fiction, popular romance – is sorely lacking in depictions of dalits; it is a baffling

---

156 The notion of ‘a collective process of unseeing’ is based on what I partially draw from Gayatri Spivak’s critique of the imperialistic nature of mainstream Western academic knowledge production. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999), Spivak analyses the three philosophical traditions of Kant, Hegel, and Marx (as well as the psychoanalytical categories that Freud and Lacan proposed) and argues that the Western literary canon tainted by its imperialistic assumptions maintains an institutionalised ignorance of this fact; a collective cognitive failure that she terms as “sanctioned ignorance” (Spivak 2). Such “ignorance” is then rationalised, thereby sanctioned, proceeding to reproduce and foreclose colonialist structures.

While thought-provoking, Spivak’s interrogation of the nature of collective “ignorance” does not wholly lend itself to the context of collective ignorance within my chapter. In a country like India, ignorance is both, embedded in dominant institutionalised cultural practices and thinking, as well as produced by a localised, native hegemony. Therefore, I prefer to use ‘a collective process of unseeing’ as an alternative to Spivak’s “sanctioned ignorance”, despite the former being, to some extent, informed by the latter.
question really of how a social group that accounts for nearly a quarter billion of India’s population has remained disentitled to that space. The social issues highlighted in Dalit Literature are only sporadically making their way into the world of mainstream drama and cinema, and are yet to make any proportionate impact on industry. The aggressively marketed Incredible India! campaign, for instance, which has exoticised ‘Indian-ness’ to the point of fetishisation, has tellingly abstained from co-opting ‘dalit-ness’ into its obsession with cultural commodification. Current Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s much praised Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (‘Clean India Campaign’) has made no attempt to address the historical stain linking ‘caste’ and ‘sanitation’ in its grand goal to clean up India. There are no images of devadasis to answer the overtly sexualised images of ‘feminine charms’ flooding the advertising industry that are meant to stoke our erotic senses and loosen our purse strings. Such dearth in dalit images in mainstream arenas of public purview is jarring; it suggests an aversion, advertent or inadvertent, to the caste subject which simply cannot be explained away as being casualties of ‘elitism’ or ‘capitalist demand’. It has seriously hindered meaningful attempts to bring dalit visibility to the foreground; the fact being, invisibility implies being unnoted and thus unthought of and unattended to. Indeed, it has kept us from attending to the full range of graded inequality that pervades a caste-based social reality.

Representation in popular media such as Bollywood films and print advertisements often read as if they overlook caste altogether (thus circumventing allegations of discrimination). Thus creating the illusion of transcending the caste system; but, they do not. They offer a universal anonymity in a world where such no such anonymity exists. The everyman and everywoman, indeed the every-child and every-grandparent, that form the stock fillers in popular press are ‘pseudo-savarnas’ (upper-caste), not ‘any-caste’ or ‘no-caste’ bodies. And for the most part, such normalising of savarna hegemony goes unchallenged both by producers and consumers of such visual culture alike. If the savarna ideal has been to avoid
speaking about caste within and outside its world, consequently, it has succeeded in avoiding seeing the dalit castes altogether. But the fact that we cannot see something or someone, or have chosen not to, may leave us so unconscious of their presence (or absence), that we come perilously close to losing track of our relations with them. It is in the context of such imperilment of losing track of relations in the shared space of visual culture, that this chapter has been written.

II. Invisibility of Caste and Caste Life Narratives in Mass Visual Culture

Critical work on modern Indian nationalism and visual discourse helps us look beyond the museum into the visible world as a whole and as such, extends its interests to a wide range of social issues. It opens up by the analysis of nationalism towards parallel and related issues – such as, of the Constitution and development of the modern state, and the democratic structures of this modern state that become the context and test against which the modern caste system can be analysed.

In the 2007 edited volume, *Picturing the Nation: Iconographies of Modern India*, the essays focus on media and subjects as varied as abstract maps and personifications of the nation; visual disguise and British versus Indian distinctions in dress; the complexity of B. B. Mukherjee’s vision of traditional village-India in contrast to Rabindranath Tagore’s; theorising issues of visual practice; how Muslims are represented within or outside the national community; how commercial bazaar art played a role in Nehru’s unifying socialist vision and later, in the divisive RSS vision of the nation; iconographies of Hindu power; and the ever present issue of national regionalism.

One key theme the volume takes up is that of presence: “Just as temple images bear a privileged stature as divine habitations, so too public statues of Gandhi,

---

157 RSS, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (loosely translates to ‘National Volunteer Organisation’ or ‘National Patriotic Organisation’)
Ambedkar, and other heroes of the nation may be seen as containing an essence of those figures” (Davis 29). Or as another contributor, Sandria Freitag, says, “Without public-arena activities, our picture of the ‘nation’ is incomplete, so the essays in the collection take us some distance in understanding in more complex terms, how ‘the nation’ is conceptualised and expressed” (Picturing the Nation 93).

As most other literature on modern India, this volume covers its many themes fairly innocent of any significant attention paid to caste relations. The volume’s liberal vision is primarily secured on the Hindu-Muslim divide as a permissible subject of social criticism and scholarly interest. Nearly half of the essays recognise the division between Hindu and Islamic religious faiths as a major contradiction to the unity of the modern Indian state. Regional linguistic diversity is recognised in one essay; class and gender are recognised marginally elsewhere. But there is only one chapter which takes any notice of caste at all.

The essay by Christiane Brosius discusses two Sangh Parivar artists and how they have identified the importance of winning over minorities for Hindutva politics. As Brosius puts it, “the claim for more political representation by social movements, which had so far been grossly neglected, particularly, the Dalit groups…[led to] campaigns [organised by the Sangh Parivar] in slums and rural hamlets where a majority of those belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Backward Classes live” (Picturing the Nation 182-3). Brosius notes further that representation of Dr. Ambedkar “seems only logical since the Dalit population in India stands at about 170 million [if one counts only Scheduled Castes] and forms an important political pressure group. Losing them as potential supporters would also indicate a loss of legitimacy as a revolutionary mass movement of the Sangh Parivar” (Picturing the Nation 184).

It becomes apparent that, even as the essay discusses caste, it unfortunately does so only in a reductive manner. While dalits and even Ambedkar come in for a
mention, it is not in terms of caste as a subject, merely as an instrument of identity used to label.

Another renowned researcher and visual critic on the theme of Indian nationalism in pictorial discourse, perhaps the best known yet, is the anthropologist Christopher Pinney who has considered caste issues in some of his work. One chapter in his book, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (2004), is devoted to his study of the use of chromolithographs in a village in the state of Madhya Pradesh. As an ethnographic study of a village that is nearly forty percent dalit, Pinney was interested in comparing the ways in which dalits and other castes in the village used imagery. His conclusion is that:

In relation to the ownership of images by different castes there are two contradictory and striking patterns that must be immediately highlighted. The first of these is the overall similarity of deity choice by different *jatis*. There are no remarkable disjunctions in image ownership, *ipso facto*, ritual practice. The most popular deities are so across a wide range of castes. However, the pattern is by no means homogenous. Despite the problem inherent in using such a small sample there are differences in ownership that highlight differences of emphasis in ritual practice. For instance, there are almost twice as many images of Lakshmi in Rajput households than in the similarly sized Chamar household sample group. By contrast, there are more Samvaliyaji images among Chamar households than among Rajputs[...]. Rajputs are more likely to seek *barkat*[...]. through the longer established and more orthodox conduit of Lakshmi; Chamars are more likely to seek their *barkat* through the less orthodox Samvaliyaji (Pinney 187-9).

Earlier on, Pinney highlights the even more significant disjunction between the dalits in the village and the rest of the caste groups, where he tells us, “Chromolithographs assume a specific importance for Scheduled Caste members [of the village] who, in Bhatisuda as in many other Indian villages, are still prevented from entering village temples” (Pinney 183-4).
Pinney’s work is fascinating in how his social anthropological approach, which appropriately engages the issues of caste, is called into the mainstream by his subject: the popular medium of chromolithographic prints. His goal is “not a history of art but a history made by art” and the “study of how pictures were an integral element of history in the making” (Pinney 5). Of particular interest, however, is the neutral tone Pinney adopts when referring to caste in comparison to the motivated attitude he displays towards Hindutva politics. Like his compatriots in Picturing the Nation, Pinney reveals a striking liberal anxiety at the presence of the anti-Muslim chauvinism of Hindutva, but reserves no such anxiety for caste discrimination. He apparently sees religious antagonism as a danger to the nation, far more objectionable – or perhaps recognisable? – than the antagonism of caste.\footnote{For a detailed example of his noncommittal positions on caste in contrast to his animated engagement with Hindu-Muslim anxiety, see in Pinney, “Epilogue: The Recursive Archive”, pp. 202-10}

The study of nationalism in terms of its contribution to creation of the modern state, and in turn the study of democracy in how it engages the development of the modern state once it has been established, cannot fail to engage with caste relations. While there is perhaps no subject more relevant to the development of democracy than class divisions, in India, this requires addressing caste relations equally rigorously as well. As we grow more conscious of how caste is portrayed, it becomes less and less comfortable for us to go along with it and more and more necessary for us to counter it and act democratically. As long as public display of caste hierarchy is allowed to pass unnoticed or uncommented upon, the longer it will continue to be accepted. If the critique of caste is to succeed, and indeed if caste is to be annihilated, it needs to be foregrounded within critical national political issues.

Speaking to such intent, a pioneering attempt in addressing the hitherto dearth in studies of dalit visual discourse is Dalit Art and Visual Imagery (2012), edited by Gary Michael Tartakov. It is a volume dedicated wholly to the visual arts, albeit from a specialised focus on religious visual cultural studies, either produced by dalits or that which renders them the subject. Through its collection of 13 chapters, the book
traces the multiple strategies undertaken by dalits, and the accompanying struggles, to contend with normative notions of religion, culture, and aesthetics. And the methods they adopt to make their presence felt in a world that renders them mute and invisible. The book poses, and speaks to, questions such as: What is dalit visual culture and how does this differ from the mainstream? Why are the images of dalit lives excluded and ignored? How far can these be located through art and other visual images? What are the historical contexts of dalit perseverance in the creation of a Navayana Buddhist tradition, and how have these resulted in making dalit lives visible? The book proceeds to address the politics – and to a lesser degree, the poetics – of these questions. It also attempts to draw dalit reality to the forefront of ‘the pictorial nation’ through interesting case studies. With an exceptional array of visual imagery including photographs, sculpture, temple architecture, chromolithographs, line drawings, paintings, and colour plates, and a combination of some of these in each chapter, the book combines artistic interpretation with the sociological imaginations of the art, images, and events in various parts of India. Tartakov’s edited text succeeds in advancing a subject matter quite rare to the field of religious visual cultural studies (that of the dalit), thus automatically elevating this volume to unique value. Its diligent adherence to “bringing the caste system clearly to our collective sights” throughout all its essays is indeed reason enough to celebrate and applaud the volume.

However, in spite of its rich variety of dalit visual art and numerous other strengths, the book is regrettably lacking in alternative representations of dalits (beyond merely oppressed subjects), or discussions of graded differences (dalits are presented as a singular, homogenised identity), or an alternative politics (beyond that steeped in pathos), or even experiences of conflicts (a crucial aspect increasingly featuring in dalit agency today). With such noticeably out of touch (considering it was published in 2012) modes of imagining dalit identities regrettably dampening the otherwise rich perspectives of art in the book, there is a need for deliberation on,
and regrouping of, discursive strategies; especially in the context of interdisciplinary ‘texts’ and narratives on caste and the dalit. Caste life narratives, as increasingly reflected in contemporary dalit literature, art, and art forms, not only challenge conventional notions of ‘mute caste victimhood’, they also interrogate ideas of ‘modernity’, ‘subalternity’, and the category of the ‘postcolonial’, among others. In failing to attend to these inflections in the evolving discourses on caste and the dalit, well-meaning academics such as Tartakov too inadvertently play a part in typecasting the dalit.

III. ‘Ways of Seeing’ Dalit Narratives

John Berger’s 1972 book159 *Ways of Seeing* had a profound influence on the popular understanding of art and the visual image. Among other things, it makes the powerful argument that writing has its limitations. By itself, writing cannot rebalance the inequities of the present or establish new ways of seeing. The opening to *Ways of Seeing*, arresting in its presence on the cover jacket, offers not just an idea but also an invitation to see and know the world differently:

> Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak. […]
> It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it.

---

159 The book was based on Berger’s BBC television series, also entitled *Ways of Seeing* (1972). In 1969, the well-known British art critic and historian Sir Kenneth Clark hosted a television series which became the basis of his book *Civilization* (also 1969). Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* originated in a four-part television program which was a direct response to Clark and to the conception of art history embodied in Clark’s book and programs.

By raising questions about the social and economic functions of art, Berger challenges the idea that Western art history could be presented as the work of a series of towering artistic geniuses. Berger demonstrates in a variety of ways that techniques for the reproduction of images in twentieth century capitalist society obscure, often to the point of erasing, any meaningful relationship between what reproduced images depict and their historical and social source. (Following Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”) Berger argues that the twentieth century proliferation of reproduced images of all kinds generates what he calls “cultural mystification”. He argues that the uniqueness of artworks is destroyed when they can be photographically reproduced and that such techniques obscure art’s social and political sources. This in turns cuts people off from their past, making it difficult if not impossible for them to situate themselves in history. Thus, “the entire art of the past has now become a political issue” (Berger 26).
The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. [...] When we see, we are not just looking – we are reading the language of images.

Berger’s idea that looking is a political act, perhaps even a historically constructed process – such that where and when we see something will affect what we see – comes across most powerfully when situating the ‘look’ in the context of political otherness. Where the written word may fail, visual language can offer recourse to those seeking to speak and listen in another medium. Dalit artwork is one such medium that has been used to represent atrocity.

III.1. ‘Ways of Seeing’ Dalit Atrocity

III.1.a. Dalit Atrocity and Autoethnographic Art

The Dalit Resource Centre is a department of the Tamil Theological Institute in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, where briefly there used to be a unique programme in the late 1990s sponsoring dalit artists who were creating works on dalit atrocities that were either ongoing or in the recent past. Sadly, the sponsorship lasted no more than a year owing to loss of funding and the programme had to shut down by mid-1999, although not before something noteworthy could come of it while it had been active. A team of dalit artists, most of whom were from Madras (now known as Chennai), secured a place in the sponsorship programme, and was invited to create and share their works on the theme of atrocity. The team had already been creating art works based on the Ramanathapuram atrocities of 1998 and began to document them to build an art archive of the event.

In October 1998, a violent outbreak of caste riots in Ramanathapuram, in the state of Tamil Nadu, saw widespread deployment of arson and other forms of attack that lasted for a period of nearly a week, claiming many lives and large-scale
destruction of public and private property. It is remembered most for the crude manner in which violence had been instigated against the dalits both by the police and by a powerful middle-caste community, the Thevars\textsuperscript{160}, under the active inducement of district-level political factions in support of the Thevar instigators.

Led by well-known artist and Ambedkarite activist Chandru\textsuperscript{161}, the sponsored group included his Arts and Crafts College students: K. Benita Percival, G. Renuka Devi, and C. Porkodi. This collective had personally witnessed and suffered degrees of loss in the violence of Ramanathapuram, as some of them had family there and the rest had community affiliations in the town. It is a rare example of several artists reacting directly to a particular historical event, the caste-Hindu pogrom of Ramanathapuram, even as it was unfolding. A few select images created by the team have been reproduced here from a set of printed facsimiles made available in the (now defunct) journal, \textit{The Colours of Liberation} (2002). The actual works of the artists have been archived on-site at The Dalit Resource Centre, Department of the Tamil Theological Institute, Madurai, Tamil Nadu.

In order to recognise the historical nature of the collective’s interventions, it becomes pertinent to identify that as cultural practitioners, the artists – led by the Ambedkarite thinker and activist, Chandru – position themselves in the interstices of culture and politics. Or in other words, between art and activism. Their quest for a new linguistic idiom in response to the atrocity faced by their community at Ramanathapuram is an outcome of the recognition that most of the existing linguistic options are inadequate\textsuperscript{162} to communicate the expressive needs of an oppressed yet multivocal/multicentered (or ‘polyphonic’ in the Bakhtinian sense) community.

\textsuperscript{160} The Thevar community is technically categorised as ‘Other Backward Castes’ under the Scheduled charter of Tamil Nadu, but wield considerable control and clout in the region.

\textsuperscript{161} Actually G. Chandrasekaran, but he prefers to be addressed simply as Chandru. Based in Chennai, Chandru is a well-respected artist and dalit activist in his own right and has made many of his art works freely available on many occasions to \textit{Dalit Camera, Round Table India}, and \textit{Ambedkar Age Collective}.

\textsuperscript{162} On this, Berger would emphatically agree. In \textit{Ways of Seeing}, language is not the privileged prism through which all that is cultural must be read. Language is not, of course, absent from its concerns. The cover already tells us that it begins with the question of the relation between word and seeing. However, while language is
Here are a few select images reproduced from the collective’s works archived at the Dalit Resource Centre, Madurai:

Fig. 4.2 Help by G. Renuka Devi

present in *Ways of Seeing* it is so only as a subject for analysis. As a method, for Berger, language devolves to sight. Indeed, *Ways of Seeing* is in many ways a critique of whether language is adequate or sufficient enough to encompass the seen.
Fig. 4. 3 Wounded by C. Porkodi
Fig. 4. *Steps* by Chandru
Fig. 4. 5 X-ray by Chandru
III.1.b. Dalit Atrocity and Cinema: A Coinciding World of Narratives in *Papilio Buddha*

*Papilio Buddha* (2013) is written and directed by Jayan K. Cherian, an independent filmmaker and poet from Kerala (residing in New York). It is a Malayalam film with English subtitles, set in the Western Ghats of Kerala, and shot entirely on location.

The film was initially banned by the censor board for its unfiltered language (“the usage of *extremely filthy language* by numerous characters throughout the film”; emphasis mine), graphic violence (“visuals of extreme violence against a woman”),

---

163 When I contacted Mr. Cherian to seek permission to reproduce screenshots of the film within this thesis, he wrote back to say that he has made his film freely available for any and all academic purposes, with the sole request that he be duly attributed in the event of its dissemination for academic intent. I am deeply appreciative of, and indebted to, his generosity.

The film with English subtitles is published on vimeo. The link: https://vimeo.com/141913383
And the password, if prompted: blackbuddha
and sexual nudity. The strongest objections were reserved for its alleged “denigration” of historical leaders EMS Namboodiripad, Ayyankali, and Gandhi, and the controversial showcasing of Buddhist philosophy in a “provocative” eroticisation. The filmmaker comments:

I shot the film with a plan to distribute it in Kerala...The regional censor board in Thiruvananthapuram [Kerala’s capital city] gave us a certificate of refusal, which states that the movie is not certifiable, with or without cuts. We appealed to the revision committee[...]they suggested several changes, around 56 cuts, mutes, and blurrings to the film to get an “A” certificate (Adults only). We could not accept those suggestions, so we appealed to the FCAT (Film Certification Tribunal) in Delhi[...]the FCAT issued the “A” certificate, with the condition that we muted several dialogues, including the reference to Dr. Ambedkar’s quote on Gandhi’s fasting at Yervada jail, which led to the “Poona Pact”. – Cherian

It was selected for one of India’s prestigious film festivals, the IFFK (International Film Festival of Kerala), but the invitation was eventually rescinded.


165 Elamkulam Manakkal Sankaran Namboodiripad (1909-1998), popularly known as simply ‘EMS’, was an Indian communist politician and theorist, who served as the first Chief Minister of the newly formed Kerala state in 1957-59, and then again in 1967-69. As a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI), he became the first leader outside the Indian National Congress to become Chief Minister in the Indian republic. In 1964, he led a faction of the CPI that broke away to form the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)].

166 Ayyankali (1863-1941) was a social reformer in the princely state of Travancore, Colonial India, who worked for the advancement of the untouchables. His efforts influenced many changes in the region that continue to benefit the social wellbeing of Dalits even today. In November 1980, Indira Gandhi had famously unveiled a statue of Ayyankali at Kowdiar square, Thiruvananthapuram (the capital city of Kerala), drawing the national gaze upon the Kerala legend.

167 Ambedkar wrote the following regarding the Poona Pact and Gandhi’s fast in his book, What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables (1946): “There was nothing noble in the fast. It was a foul and filthy act. The fast was not for the benefit of the Untouchables. It was against them and was the worst form of coercion against a helpless people to give up the constitutional safeguards [which had been awarded to them]...It was a vile and wicked act. How can the Untouchables regard such a man as honest and sincere?” (232)

A character in Papilio Buddha refers to this moment in history, and the FCAT wanted it deleted from the scene.

168 “Interview with Director Jayan K. Cherian”. For further details, see Thiara, pp. 3-4
owing to political pressure. Still, Cherian and his team persisted and arranged a private screening in an auditorium near the festival venue, but just prior to the screening, the police arrived at the theatre and shut it down. The audience staged a protest at the festival venue, but it did not change the outcome of the ban, then. Nevertheless, the film was welcomed at the 27th London Lesbian & Gay Film Festival in 2013, with subsequent screenings at other international venues before finally being permitted to screen in India, albeit, in a censored version. It still remains illegal to screen the original version (as supplied on the vimeo link) of Papilio Buddha in India.

III.1.b.i. A Summary of the Film

The film opens with protracted scenes of the rainforest, lasting well over six minutes, rich in silence save for sounds of the lush mountains and rivers encircling the fictional hamlet of Meppara nestled deep within the Western Ghats. Meppara is essentially a dalit settlement that the local government deems ‘illegal squatting’. The story is based on the lives of this group of indigenous dalits who belong to the formerly untouchable Pulayar (or Pulaya) caste. The film astutely probes the new identity politics based on ‘Ambedkarism’ that is gaining momentum among the dalits of Meppara, and in real locales of Kerala, in the milieu of real ongoing struggles for land rights. This band of displaced dalits embraces Navayana Buddhism, largely in the hopes of escaping caste oppression, but also in vehement rejection of a caste-ridden Hinduism.

One of the three main protagonists is a young dalit man, Shankaran, a student of zoology and a Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) dropout, whose introverted
nature, insecurity, and apolitical indifference are a stark contrast to the deep-rooted revolutionary faith and conviction of his elderly father, Kandal Kariyan, another key protagonist. Shankaran (played by S. P. Sreekumar) befriends a white man, an American lepidopterist touring India, named Jack (David Briggs), for whom he helps catch butterflies, including the rare and beautiful ‘Papilio Buddha’, and the two men appear to be romantically involved. While their relationship causes visible displeasure to Shankaran’s father for various reasons, the least of which seems to be homophobia, homosexuality otherwise is of little consequence or taboo within this dalit community.

Kariyan (Kallen Pokkudan) – a one-time communist who quit after being let down by the failure of the Marxist parties in securing equal rights for dalits, and also a staunch environmentalist engaged in conserving the mangrove171 reserves in that region of the Western Ghats – is instrumental in guiding the community’s resistance against the government’s attempts to vacate their settlement. Meanwhile, the third key protagonist, Manjusri (Saritha) – an enterprising and strong-minded dalit woman who works a second job as a rickshaw driver to augment the income needed to run her small, makeshift community school – struggles to cope with prejudice and sexism, both in her male-dominated rickshaw job as well as within her own Pulaya community. Manjusri and Shankaran, in due course of the film, form a sexual relationship that has metaphorical import for compassion, healing, sexual orientation, non-conformity in relation to heteronormativity, and long-forgotten Buddhist tantric practices.

When Manjusri assaults the lecherous rickshaw union leader, Dasappan, in response to being sexually harassed by him, and Shankaran is arrested on the pretext of ‘poaching’ endangered butterflies for Jack, the events spark off two violent

---

171 Mangroves are expansive Rhizophora, a genus of medium height plants that grow in saline coastal sediment habitats in tropical and subtropical areas. These dense varieties of plants have roots submerged in water and are deemed useful in mitigating, if not altogether impeding, the harmful effects of natural calamities, such as tsunamis.
atrocities: the unlawful incarceration and torture of Shankaran, and the brutal gang rape of Manjusri by Dasappan and his cohort of fellow rickshaw drivers. These two incidents serve as the catalyst that politicises and radicalises an already aggrieved community that had been on the receiving end of one too many injustices thus far. It sets off a chain of events culminating in the local government, with a neo-Gandhian group (the Gandhi Service Society) with a strong political reach, and the district police, all working in concert, to enforce a speedy clearing of the dalit settlement. With no protections assured to them or options of rehabilitation, the Pulayas of Meppara resolve to shun the peaceful tactics as prescribed by Gandhi in favour of retaliatory violence and absolute rebellion. Kariyan, an advocate of non-violence himself, is their guide and de facto leader who is by then resigned to the inevitability of violence when faced with a repressive state. In the ensuing clash, the police brutally quell the rebellion and arrest Shankaran, Kariyan, and Manjusri, among others. The film closes on protracted scenes, again lasting well over six minutes, laden with a heavy silence, of the ejected group on the move, yet again, in a soundless mass exodus.

III.1.b.ii. Thematics and Cinéma Engagé

The film brings into acute focus several topical matters: an example of the epic land struggles fought in various regions of the state and across India; the repression and displacement of indigenous people by the powerful political and social establishments; ecocide by indiscriminate deforestation, annexation, and abuse of pristine mountain habitats by the extractive industry, which is sanctioned and empowered by the state; the manner in which ‘atrocity’ has become a recurring trope in weaponising the method to colonise the dalit body and space; the historical crisis in Indian Marxism and the Communist parties [CPI, CPI(M)], and their conflicted status among certain sections of dalits; the challenge posed to heteronormativity and homophobia through the characters of Shankaran and Manjusri; the deep-seated
structural misogyny embedded in India’s collective psyche (makeup?); an eschewing of the stereotypical ‘conventional victims of caste’ in favour of protagonists who adopt a revolutionary politics, are very conscious of their agency – indeed, jealously guard the same – and assert it by readily choosing retaliatory violence while shunning Gandhian satyagraha and non-violence; the convoluted nature of caste informing class and class safeguarding caste in the Indian bourgeoisie; the call to return to forgotten or abandoned Buddhist tantric traditions of that region in Kerala; the filmmaker’s theory of the ‘caste-queer’; and finally, a subtle yet unmistakable portrayal of the impotence of Western intervention in India’s caste crises, through the well-meaning but culpable American, Jack.

This is an exhaustive gamut of issues to cover in just one film and can at times seem overpowering owing to its sheer ambitious reach. One gets the impression that Cherian is attempting to check off a mental list of every informed argument ever made within caste and dalit discourse, and all in the span of a 108 minutes and 17 seconds. Yet, far from being overdetermined, each theme does undeniably touch upon relevant aspects of critical debate on caste and dalits that have, for the most part, simply not formed a part of the national conversation within Indian cinema – at least, not in any attentive or impactful way.  

So when situated in the context of such a lacuna, perhaps one cannot fault Cherian’s extravagant attention to thematics.

172 Mainstream Indian cinema is notoriously escapist, thus readily excusing itself for the invisibility of caste and dalits within its purview. When caste or the dalit does find itself as the subject, it is almost never in a role of any real significance to the scheme of the film. Popular Bollywood cinema is particularly apt at blocking out ‘caste’ and the ‘dalit-self’. In typical populist fashion, it caters unapologetically to dominant caste-class normativity, and the dalit, therefore, does not find proportionate space. Even where there is a dalit protagonist, it is in the capacity of bogus cinematic commitment that hardly ever challenges itself to go beyond a meagre, stereotypical, patronising tokenism that does little to reflect or inspect structural or material realities. Famous Bollywood hits that have cast caste and dalits in such capacities include Ganga Jamuna (1961), Lagaan (2001), and Eklavya (2007), among others.

There are some notable exceptions to this otherwise dominant norm in Indian cinema: Acchut Kanya (Hindi, 1936), Chandidos (Bengali, 1932), Malapialla (Telugu, 1938), Sujata (Hindi, 1959), Chomana Dudi (Kannada, 1975), Indira (Tamil, 1995), and Masaan (Hindi 2015), among others.

And especially in recent ‘parallel/new wave’ cinema, two excellent examples of films that not only foreground caste and the dalit but also, crucially, challenge themselves to go beyond the stereotype of ‘dalit victimhood’, warrant a special mention: Fandry (2013) and Sairat (2016). Detailed analyses on both films can be found in Suraj Yengde’s “Dalit Cinema” (South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 2018).
The real flaw, I would argue, lies not in ambitious overreach but in the banal execution of some of these themes – albeit admittedly only sparingly found in Cherian’s otherwise on-point cinematography – which then undercut the gravitas of their point. The scene I found most discordant was the one in which Shankaran, his JNU friends, and Jack are celebrating SEEM’s (Social and Educational Empowerment for the Marginalised) anniversary over drinks and dinner: the entire segment is full of hackneyed and contrived non sequiturs on “globalisation”, “imperialism”, and “land-rights being wasted on dalits as they would only sell the land off for drugs and liquor”, and (in the context of the scene) simply ill-fitting and incongruous conversational dialogues like “a Jewish-Hindu conspiracy plotting a Muslim genocide”. Or the bit begging plausibility where Shankaran’s friend, Isaac, who is believed to be an anti-caste activist but who considers himself a “brahmin Christian”, calls Shankaran and his family “filthy and unclean Pulayas”, and then dismisses the (perfunctory) rebuke he receives from his friends by claiming “political correctness is not my shit”. To reiterate, it is not the credibility of the thematic content that I find questionable (they are, in fact, absolutely relevant to the structural fault lines becoming increasingly evident within caste discourse today) so much as the contrived and rather maladroit choreography of its framing; one can almost see the invisible strings Cherian is pulling at from behind the scenes in his attempt, whether conscious or unconscious, to deliver cinéma engagé.

III.1.b.iii. Art Imitating Life: Layering of Narratives in *Papilio Buddha*

*Papilio Buddha* invests in indexical images of real places and people, using profilmic spaces and material practices to give voice to the environment, and the dalit rights movement built around this environment. One of the main influences on the storyline was the oppression inflicted upon the DHRM (Dalit Human Rights Movement) activists between 2007 and 2010 by the district police and local political actors, both of whom were largely upper-middle castes. It was an attempt to quell
the stirrings of a dalit uprising that demanded everything from land rights to redressal of historic and ongoing caste injustices, seeking to secure what the DHRM believed were long overdue reparations. The mainstream media and middleclass intellectuals turned a blind eye towards it because dalit movements like the DHRM were framed as terrorist organizations then, and falsely purported to have affiliations with Maoist insurgents. This was the political situation around when Cherian first began to consider making the film. Thathu Annan, the founder of the DHRM, was a close friend of Cherian’s and helped in the research and writing of Papilio Buddha. He and other DHRM activists had undergone horrific torture in police custody by the Kerala police and other casteist entities that were in concert with them. Cherian interviewed several victims of the atrocities and generated a screenplay out of it, and cast several DHRM activists as characters in the movie.173

There is a kind of typage at work in the film’s casting, as well as an engagement with the relationship between humans and the environment that is both material and metaphorical. Perhaps the most interesting of correlations in film characterisation and real-life personality—in the choice of cast and the actual role of that actor in real life—is best showcased through the character of Kariyan and the man who plays him in the film, Kallen Pokkudan. The film very much brings into focus the life and work of Pokkudan himself. 174 A veteran environmentalist, Kallen Pokkudan (b. 1937 – d. 2015), was a well-known dalit rights and environmental activist in Kerala, and the character of Kariyan is a representation of Pokkudan’s long-fought struggle for justice on both these fronts. For those outside India, or indeed, outside Kerala even, who may not know of him or the indelible impact he had on Kerala’s dalit struggle,

173 The DHRM is a much more mainstream dalit organization now; it has become a political party and regularly participates in elections. It is currently thriving under the successful leadership of Saleena Prakkanam, one of the prominent activist leaders of the legendary Chengara land struggle.

the film serves as a wonderful introduction and a tribute paid to the highly-respected figure.

Born into a rural agrarian dalit family of the Pulaya caste – traditionally held as untouchables, relegated to indentured labour, and owned by upper caste landlords – Pokkudan went to school up to the second standard (grade) and was forced to work in paddy fields to survive. As a teenager, he ran away and became an activist in the Communist Party of India (CPI), subsequently participating in the early peasant revolts in Kannur district. At one point, he was even accused of killing a rogue landlord and was jailed for a period on trumped up charges. When the CPI split in 1964, he aligned with the newer bloc, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]. Later, in the 1980s, he left the CPI(M) due his ideological differences based on the issue of caste, which resulted in direct conflict with the party and its members. Another reason, on which he has written about in his second autobiography, was the caste discrimination he underwent as a ‘dalit comrade’ within the party. After his split with the party, and eventual scaling back of his anti-caste activism much to the visible disapprobation of his own dalit community, Pokkudan invested most of his time in environmental conservation from the late 1980s until his death, focusing on the protection of the mangrove reserves in Kerala. He embarked on a mission to plant mangroves across the state’s coastal waters, and is reported to have planted over one lakh (a hundred thousand) mangroves at the time of his death.

The film’s scene too (see figure below), in which Kariyan is shown standing knee-deep in a river planting mangrove saplings, is inspired by the actor’s real toils in conservation. Pokkudan’s movements and gestures in the scene as he interacts with the saplings whilst negotiating the gentle currents of the river are deft and practiced, suggesting the results of a lifetime’s worth of experience in the activity. This scene is rich in unhurried moments of slow cinematic temporality in which the

175 Pokkudan’s body clad in a thin cotton veshti (wide cloth wrapped around a man’s hips), in the act of manual labour, is typical of the popular communist imagery of a karshaka thozhilaali (agricultural labourer), and is a dominant way of imagining dalits – and codifying the dalit body in popular media as no different from the proletariat labourer – in that part of Kerala. Cherian’s representation of the same here is surely not accidental.
spectator spends time simply watching the movement of the mangrove stalks, outside of any apparent narrative moment; a documentary view into an age-old mode of life where the *rhizophora* is just as much the principal as is Pokkudan.

He also founded the Mangrove School in Kannur and taught hundreds of classes across various parts of the state in an attempt to educate the local population about the ecological importance of mangroves. Pokkudan wrote a few books, including *Kandal Inangal* (‘Mangrove Varieties’, 2015) as well as two autobiographies176 – *Kandalkkadukalil Ente Jeevitham* (‘My Life in the Mangrove Forests’, 2002), and *Ente Rashtreeya Jeevitham* (‘My Political Life’, 2010). Fictional though the character may be, *Papilio Buddha*’s Kariyan is unmistakably shaped closely after the Pokkudan’s own indelible legacy, and no doubt, in casting the man himself to play the role inspired after his life’s work, Cherian succeeds in bridging the gap between the metaphorical and the material to a remarkable degree. Not a simple feat to accomplish in either cinematography, or literary writing.

176 See Ranjith Thankappan’s insightful critique on why Pokkudan (who was barely literate and thus compelled to rely on editors to write on his behalf) felt the need to write a second autobiography, in “Life, History and Politics: Kallen Pokkudan’s Two Autobiographies and the Dalit Print Imaginations in Keralam”, in *Dalit Literatures in India*. (eds. Joshi Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak. Oxon: Routledge, 2016) pp. 194-205.
This is a film that is anchored in an unmistakable specificity of ‘localisation’, an insistence on a particularity of context that is both metaphorical and materially linked to objective reality. It is most interesting how the film, in its insistence on such specificity, represents the dalit of Meppara as intimately aligned with nature – a characterisation usually preserved, almost to the point of fixity, for that of the adivasi (member of an indigenous tribe). One can only speculate as to the implications left open by the narrative: is this a countering of such typecasting, or a suggestion of comradeship between dalits and adivasis, or, instead, is it a challenge posed to the very distinction constructed between the unstable categories of ‘dalit’ and ‘adivasi’ itself and thereby an advocacy for the more all-embracing ‘bahujan’? The narrative doesn’t offer much in way of arriving at a definitive conclusion. But of what there is little doubt is that this is a film which summarily criticises the state’s role in displacing the native dalits from their ecosphere, and squarely lays the blame for the ecological devastation in the film’s plot (and in reality) with the Kerala state.

The Western Ghats, where Papilio Buddha was shot, is the last rainforest left in India and one of the most biologically diverse areas in the world; in fact, the eponymous ‘Papilio Buddha’ is an endangered species of butterflies that is native to the region. The Ghats form a long mountain chain (around 1600 km) of forests said to be older than in the Himalayas, stretching from Gujarat to Kerala, and it has been listed as a UNESCO natural world heritage site. But now, this biological ecosphere is facing systematic, incremental devastation by severe deforestation, land grabbing by quarry mafia, and corporate power players from extractive industries. Papilio Buddha visually captures the incremental but all too real horrors of ecocide and ethnic cleansing in a region where indigenous populations have formed a vital relationship with the ecosystem, one of reciprocity where each sustains and protects the other. Furthermore, these are people whose living also depended on the forests they inhabited. As Cherian observes in an interview, “the struggle for the native
butterflies and the struggle for the indigenous people have now become one in the film” (in Thiara 7), and all too real in actual life.

III.1.b.iv. The Form of Metaphor in *Papilio Buddha*

![Fig. 4. 7 (Above and Below: Screenshots of *Papilio Buddha*) Opening scenes from *Papilio Buddha* of the dramatic landscape of the Western Ghats, captured in long shot](image)

Nature is a major character in the film, and long shots with wide lenses have been used to capture the vastness of the Western Ghats’s ecosystem to impressive effect (Figure 4.7). The film’s opening scene, as in several other scenes following, repeatedly constructs the landscape in these long shots, contrasting the human figure as relatively diminutive within a composed, nonhuman environment coded as ‘pristine beauty’. The opening scene then progresses to show Shankaran embedded in the landscape, moving unfettered and at ease with the richness of life abounding
the ecosystem (and death too; for instance, the scene where he finds the dead peacock and lies down beside it, adorning himself with its ornate feathers). But, as the film progresses, human-induced brutality comes to suffuse the landscape. Pastoral pleasure is encroached upon by multifaceted violence, where one protagonist after another (including the Ghats themselves), and eventually, the entire dalit community, has been dispossessed (of rights, land, biodiversity, justice, control and dignity of their own bodies). The dispossessed people and exploited landscape are paralleled, layering the film’s staging of intersectional violence: caste violence, gendered violence, state violence, and environmental devastation. The final scene of the film, which lasts a whole six minutes of no sound, only a combination of stills and movement, comprises a series of long takes of people walking through a landscape in which they now have no place (Figure 4.8). Unlike as in the opening scene, here, the long shots serve to disclose the extent to which dalits who have previously laboured in the landscape are revealed to be unprotected by it; the now deterritorialised environment has come to be coded as ‘detached beauty’.

---

177 In the context of capitalism, globalisation, and the ‘third world’, Arjun Appadurai, in an essay entitled “Disjuncture and Difference”, has argued that deterritorialisation is a cultural feature developed by the “mediatization, migration, and commodification which characterize globalized modernity”. He argues that by people working towards closer involvement with the whole of the world, and working towards shrinking the gap with one another, one may paradoxically be widening the gap with what is physically close to them. This cultural distancing from the locality is intensified when people are able to expand and alter their imagination through the mediatisation of alien cultural conditions, making this culture of remote origin one of a familiar material. This makes it difficult for a local entity to sustain and retain its own local cultural identity, which also affects the national identity of the region.

For further details, see Appadurai pp. 306-7
Colour is also an important storytelling tool in *Papilio Buddha*. Lighting of large portions of the film has been depressed, with the result that a thick shade darkens the visuals, in keeping with the grimness and heinousness of the atrocities being narrated. For the outdoor scenes, they have used available natural lights, and minimalistic motivated lighting for indoor and night scenes. The film photography is graded in a yellowish-black colour to achieve a grainy beige look in order to capture the bleak reality and plights of the main protagonists and the situation of the displaced dalits.\(^{178}\)

Minimalist sound recording has been employed to capture the natural soundscape of biodiversity in the Ghats. In avoiding dubbing or voice-overs, or even

\(^{178}\) The technical details of colour, light, and camera used in the cinematography have been drawn from Cherian’s interview in Thiara (2017).
background sound effects, the film strongly subscribes to a documentary style of filmmaking, thus conforming to that style’s standards of realism in this measure as well. The stark absence of sound – or rather, ‘soundlessness’ – often plays an important role as a poetic complement to the sombre mood of the film. This is most poignantly employed in the closing scenes where the evicted group can be seen emigrating, seemingly towards no particular place. But elsewhere in the film, the same mode of soundlessness, far from being poignant, is charged with an acute sense of heightened energy in various scenes. A fine example of this experimentation is the scene in which Kariyan stares wordlessly at the three framed photographs on the mantel of his hut of ‘EMS’ (Namboodiripad), Ayyankali, and Ambedkar for a long minute and then, with no display of emotion, replaces EMS’s picture with that of the Buddha’s (Figure 4.9). It is an electrifying scene that communicates an entire history of a people in the space of a cinematic minute, made all the more powerful for not a word being spoken nor a sound to break the tension.
III.1.b.v. The Dalit Critique of Marxism

(Scene: Jack, Shankaran, and Kariyan are sitting cross-legged on the floor, sharing a meal that Kariyan has prepared. Jack is looking up in curiosity at three framed photographs lined on a mantel, of EMS Namboodiripad, Ayyankaali, and Ambedkar)

Jack: Shankar, who is that guy with the baby?

Shankaran: Oh, that is my old man’s God. And the baby is me.

Jack: Shankar, is that Shankaracharya?

[Shankaran laughs]

Shankaran: No. He is E. M. Shankaran [EMS], an upper caste communist leader. My father was a devotee of this Shankara and named me after him. [chuckles to himself] Now I am living as an untouchable… with a brahmin name.

[Shankaran turns to his father, Kariyan, and addresses him in Malayalam]

Shankaran: Dad, he is asking about EMS. I told him he is your God.

Kariyan: Once, he was my God… When the land reforms started, he became a brahmin and I remained as an untouchable.179

179 The land reforms of 1957 initiated by the first communist ministry (under EMS) are hailed as the significant contribution to the ‘Kerala model of development’ (which dalit thinkers, especially women scholars and activists, have argued was nothing but an invention by the Left academia, and have questioned this celebrated model of late). Pokkudan’s time spent as a party comrade in the EMS-led CPI(M) engaged in the activities of land distribution at the local level, saw him experience first-hand the issue of exclusion of dalits from these land reforms, putting the lie to the tall claims made by the Left. After the tenancy bill was passed, the party decided not to mediate in any tenancy-related cases (unsurprising, considering that their own upper-caste selves and land-owning families were complicit in the problem); Pokkudan, in his second autobiography, writes...
Shankaran: Then why do you let it hang there?

Kariyan: Once a God, always a God. Let him be there hanging.

It is a scene that offers a succinct view of the dalit critique of Marxism in India, and zeroes in on the critical fault lines existing within Communist spirit and practice. But of course, as the film progresses and we see an escalation in violence perpetrated by the state and the casteist factions around Meppara, Kariyan eventually reverses his opinion on “Once a God, always a God”. In what is one of the most profoundly striking scenes in the film, he eventually dethrones his god, EMS, and replaces him with the Buddha. (Figure 4.9)

IV.3.f. Marxism in India and a Historical Crisis

The Ambedkar-Gandhi, dalit-caste Hindu, clash in ideology was never more marked than during the period of 1930-32, culminating in the Poona Pact, and resulting in Ambedkar’s final disillusionment with Hinduism. Subsequently, he famously announced, in a simultaneous denunciation of Hinduism, his conversion to Buddhism in 1935: I have been born a Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu.\footnote{Quoted in Omvedt, Dalits and the Democratic Revolution (1994), p. 161} In the search for autonomy, and in the face of the fundamentally exploitative nature of the class-caste nexus found in India\footnote{“The architects of which Ambedkar by 1930 had already identified as ‘Brahmanism’ and ‘Capitalism’.,” Ibid, pp. 223}, it had become necessary for dalits to find ideological and organisational alternatives. But Ambedkar was wary of the trends for absorption of dalit movements in their varied heterogeneity that existed during that period. The courting of dalits by Congress factions and Gandhians into their normative folds of Hinduism was nothing new. And while many dalit leaders followed a path of integration (such as the likes of M. C. Rajah of Madras or Arigay Swami of that, like himself, it was a majority of the dalits who lost out on this calculating apathy shown by upper-caste CPI(M) leaders like EMS.
Hyderabad), Ambedkar fought this co-opting tendency tooth and nail in order to maintain the independence of the dalit movement under his leadership.

Meanwhile, even prior to the 1930s, Ambedkar was seeking to find a theory of exploitation and a path to liberation for the dalits. Having rejected the ‘non-Aryan’ race theory for dalits, having forsaken the dubious liberalism of the Congress and the patronising religious reformism of Gandhi, having considered the exploitation of workers and peasants with a rational and secular outlook, the natural direction for Ambedkar to move ahead would have been leftwards: Marxism. By then, Marxism, which had already been strongly established in the West as a coherent theory of exploitation and the path to liberation, was also becoming a force in India. But, Marxism in its embodiment in the Indian communist movement failed to offer a real and effective alternative to address materiality of ‘caste’. What ultimately failed in uniting the Ambedkarite and Marxist agendas during the independence movement was that in the 1932 confrontation with Gandhi and Hindu revivalism, the involvement of the Marxists was conspicuous by its absence. The Marxists were simply uninterested in attending to issues relating to caste and untouchability.182 Many communist cadres were involved in anti-untouchability campaigns at the local levels, Kerala communists being a prime example, and many communists in their personal lives discarded and/or ignored caste distinctions (or at least claimed to). But there was never a programmatic involvement in ‘caste-based social struggles’183 And their intellectual body was equally disinterested in interrogating ‘caste’ as the structural root of exploitation and how that might affect their fundamental understanding of ‘class’ as the basic unit of social analysis.

182 See for example, Raosaheb Kasbe who writes extensively on this issue in Ambedkar and Marx (Poona: Sugawa Prakashan, 1985), or Rajni Kothari’s edited volume, Caste in Modern Indian Politics (Poona: Orient Longman, 1970)

183 Omvedt’s “Marxism and the Communists” offers a brief but helpful critique of communism in 1920s-1930s Kerala, in Dalits and the Democratic Revolution (1994), pp. 181-182
Thus, when confronted by the Ambedkarite version of fighting for the untouchable’s rights, and his firm refusal to allow their movement to be subsumed within the leftist struggle (by both, the socialists in Congress and the communists), it became easier for the communists to denounce Ambedkar as ‘pro-British’, ‘separatist’, and ‘opportunist’. They also treated caste prejudice as only bourgeois divisiveness, made no effort to go into the specificities of caste exploitation, and simply expected the untouchables to join the ‘democratic revolution’ without offering a single concrete programme for fighting structural caste or untouchability. The challenge that caste poses to orthodox Marxism’s privileging of class (in determining social relations) – in that caste is very much a determinative factor of social relations in India – has also played a considerable part in how the ideologies of Ambedkar and Marxists do not necessarily converge.

However, move about 50 years onwards of the Poona Pact debacle, and the ideologies still seem to differ. Here is the legendary communist leader and Marxist intellectual from Kerala, EMS Namboodiripad, chiding the Ambedkarite agenda in his historical analyses in *History of the Indian Freedom Struggle* (1986), a text that continues to be held in the highest esteem today:

> However, this [stress on ‘caste’] was a great blow to the freedom movement. For this led to the diversion of the people’s attention from the objective of full independence to the mundane cause of the upliftment of Harijans.
> (Namboodiripad 492)

There is much that stands out in EMS’s view, besides the overt intolerance of it. Not only is class positioned as the *only* factor worth addressing or theorising, but there is also a ‘hierarchy’ of factors established, and the esteemed communist leader gives himself the authority to decide on this hierarchy. Such indifference towards structures of caste and untouchability, and the concerns of dalits, has remained a

---

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*, p. 183

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*
central and critical lacuna within Marxist practice (and orthodox Marxist intellectuals) in India today, thereby constituting continuity in the crisis of incommensurability between Ambedkarite and Marxist politics. And this incommensurability has also translated into a source of growing division and conflict, across the political spectrum of the Indian left and the Ambedkarite dalits.

III.1.b.vi. Uncovering Fault Lines in Kerala’s Marxism in Papilio Buddha

As such, the left liberal space in Kerala, which has only ever allowed room for a Marxism moored to Sino-Soviet models of Communism, has historically rendered any discussion regarding the political dalit (asserting materiality of caste) as structurally invisible. By design, caste concerns have intractably been assimilated within the framework of class. Hence, when Pokkudan first joined the Communist party, as did most of the labourer class Pulaya community, he became a ‘communist by caste’, as caste and class-consciousness conflated mutually in the peculiar socio-historical context in which caste determined the base of the social structure. I say peculiar because the Pulayas have only come to occupy the labourer classes owing to their historic caste occupation in the first place\textsuperscript{186}. The same co-opting impetus driving Kerala’s Marxist left has also patronised the notion of the dalit karshaka thozilaali (agricultural labourer) as the objectified radical self of the proletariat\textsuperscript{187}.

Thus, within such a context, the narrative of Kerala’s dominant Marxists would typically locate the image of Pokkudan, clad in only a thin veshti, knee-deep in the river planting mangroves, within the framework of karshaka thozilaali – as the apolitical premodern caste self of an ‘agricultural labourer’ engaged in planting mangroves; not as the ‘Pulaya-self’, nor as a ‘dalit agricultural labourer’. Incidentally, this fits well within Gandhian ideology too. For the Gandhian environmentalists, the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{186} But this is nearly impossible to historicise without resorting to speculations of caste and untouchability’s historical origins.
\item \textsuperscript{187} See Thankappan, pp. 198-205, for a detailed analysis
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
envisioned eco-politics of Pokkudan would merely serve to fix Pokkudan to nature; an objectified traditional premodern notion of the dalit that they would dearly love to revive as ‘anti-modern’. Both the Marxist and the Gandhian narratives conveniently mask the question of caste, and thereby, succeed in appropriating, assimilating, and nullifying the political dimensions of the dalit’s caste-self. The politics of this imagined modern figure of landless agricultural labourer sans caste specificity then rekindles the same caste structure that determines the social power relations and political imagination, in perpetual continuity.

It was therefore inevitable that Pokkudan began to distance himself from the CPI(M) as caste-based discriminatory experiences burgeoned, and the ideological blindness shown by communist intellectuals (and especially EMS) towards the caste question made him realise the limitations of Marxism in addressing the dalit life-world. His estrangement from communism led to the pursuit of newer understandings of community, and the latter only became stronger after his reading of Ambedkar.

Perhaps the most grotesque manifestation in the film of the spectre of caste adapting to the framework of communism, and the resultant caste chauvinism it reproduces, is the scene of the gang rape of Manjusri by the union leader Dasappan and his band of rickshaw drivers. Besides being a graphic layering of deep rooted misogyny and power abuse, the scene also drives home the casteist impulse behind the violence. The rendering of Manjusri’s already abused, unconscious body further debased as Dasappan contemptuously urinates on her, while adding a torrent of verbal abuse throughout the incident in the form of casteist slurs, is the brutality of casteist and gendered dehumanisation of the dalit body taken to its heinous extreme. And in this, the atrocity of rape serves as a weaponised method. The setting on fire of Manjusri’s rickshaw afterwards is yet another assault intended to dispossess her of her independence and means of livelihood. And the stickered images of Che Guevara, Gandhi, and the Hindu god Shiva, gleaming tauntingly in the firelight on
the rickshaws of the perpetrators as they drive away from the scene of the atrocity, are an ironic symbolism suggestive of a hypocrisy inherent in not just Kerala’s communist ideology but also Gandhian and Hindu ideologies as well.

III.1.b.vii. The ‘Caste-Queer’ and Buddhist Tantra

The counter-culture and counter-ideology proposed in the story are presented as entirely outside the Hindu philosophical fold as well as outside the normative folds of Kerala’s communist ideology. Cherian, who also strongly foregrounds queer theory in his other films, speaks of identifying as ‘caste-queer’ in an interview:

What I mean by “caste queer” is a person who does not subscribe to any caste identity and refuses to conform to any social identity forced upon them by birth. “Caste” is intrinsically oppressive and any form of caste practice is insane; I personally reject the caste system, which is rooted in Hindu Dharmashastras that legitimatizes the doctrine of Chaturvana. As Babasaheb Ambedkar explains in his Annihilation of Caste, “Caste has killed the public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu’s public is his caste. His responsibility is to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden, and morality has become caste-bound”. It is one of the most dangerous tools of oppression that human beings have ever invented. So I like to call myself a “caste queer”.

---

188 See, “Censor Board’s Rejection of Film on Kerala Dalits Triggers Debate”.
The sex scene between Manjusri and Shankaran can be read as such a quest for an alternative tradition, ideology, and spirituality. ‘Manjusri’, the name of the character in the film, is not accidental. ‘Manjusri’ is a Buddhist deity, often depicted as a Buddha holding a sword in one hand and a book, Prajnaparamita, in the other. If we recall, this scene follows in the aftermath of two important events: first, a dejected Shankaran abandoning his friends, unable to ignore their casteist mind-sets any longer; and second, his incarceration and torture by the police. In the scene, Shankaran and Manjusri are depicted sitting in Yab-Yum position (Figure 4.10); Yab-Yum is a common symbol in the tantric tradition of Buddhist art of India, Bhutan, Bhutan 189.

---

Nepal, and Tibet. It represents the primordial union of wisdom and compassion, depicted as a male deity in sexual union with his female consort. The male figure represents compassion and skilful ‘means’ while the female partner represents ‘insight’. In this tantric tradition, sexual intercourse becomes a prayer, an initiation, and a spiritual act. Kerala has had a long tradition of Buddhism before the brahmanical religion now known as ‘Hinduism’ cast its dominance in the region, primarily by annexing Buddhist temples. Several ‘classical’ Hindu temples and deities in Kerala were originally Buddhist, and have only subsequently been co-opted by Hinduism. This scene can thus be understood as an evocation of long forgotten tantric traditions of a long forgotten Buddhist history. And arguably, its remembrance is in itself a political act in the prudish, self-censoring cultural context currently prevalent in Kerala. But whether it is intentionally designed to incite any new evangelical Buddhists, as claimed by the censor board, is inconclusive.

### III.2. ‘Ways of Seeing’ Celebration of Ambedkarite Identity in Commemorative Statues

Especially in commemorative architecture (monuments, memorials, historic markers, museums), we learn whose histories are legitimate, which narratives are superfluous (or symbolically omitted), or which images are embraced as part of our official, national accounts of origins and destiny. We learn who is allowed to speak for history, who is allowed to speak for “us”, and whose voices will always be considered marginal to the main event.

– Margaret Farrar

---

190 This is a commonly-known, but simplified, understanding of Kerala and its history. For a detailed analysis on the same, I would recommend S. N. Sadasivan’s *A Social History of India* (2000) or Paul Groner and Akira Hirakawa’s *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna* (1993).

Drawing on Foucault’s work on the relationship between space and power, Farrar suggests that those in power employ built space as a vector of power. The situation is circular: power shapes space and vice versa. Space legitimises and ennobles some groups and excludes, denigrates, and silences others. Commemorative architecture is supremely exclusive, she says, and visually amplifies messages of communal belonging or segregation.

So it would come as no surprise that the great stimulus to popular sculpture in Maharashtra – and onward to all of India – was not an aesthetic circumstance but a political one. And it began with the discovery of the power in civic monumental imagery by the followers of Ambedkar. Figurative sculpture has been one of India’s major arts since the earliest times. Images of Buddhist stupas, and later the Jain and Brahmanical temples, constitute one of the most significant records of India’s early history. But this was almost exclusively a ritual and decorative art found in the relatively segregated confines of the traditional centres of temple and home shrines. In contrast, the British brought to India the idea of the civic monument: an image of an important secular official who could appear as a public standard-bearer of the community identified with him. Thus the British devoted some of the Indian riches to the erection of statues trumpeting British virtue in the form of generals, viceroys, and wealthy merchants. Subsequently, as they rose to power and prominence within the Raj and since Independence, various Indian communities and institutions have raised their own images in the form of significant politicians, regional heroes such as Shivaji, and most prominently, the great hero of the national independence movement, Gandhi.

For the Maharashtrian dalits this public celebration of popular cultural heroes could be turned into yantras (symbolic instruments or powerful tools in Hindu rituals) of political empowerment available even to those at the bottom of the social ladder. They began to use their new-found symbol, beginning with the image of Ambedkar, as a device to force open the doors that for so long had barred them from
public spaces. This has come to be a crucial method through which dalits have not only reclaimed a space for themselves in visual culture but also used it as a measure to gauge their social progress. And judging by the slew of Ambedkar images dotting India’s vista today, it augurs well by such a measure indeed. The following discussion focuses on the provenance of what seem to be two prototypes based on which the current torrent of public images of Ambedkar has emerged, and on the highly debatable issue of who defines the meaning of popular imagery and how its value is accrued.

III.2.a. Memorialising Babasaheb\(^{192}\): Impulses of Sanskritisation and Vernacularisation

From the birth centenary year of Ambedkar in 1991 onwards, statues of the dalit leader have been erected all over the nation, and indeed around the world too. Of most consequence are those in the region of his birth and in the smallest hamlets and towns, at rural crossroads and bus stands. Though many of them are particularly handsome works of art, these images are significant precisely by the simple facts of

\(^{192}\) As Ambedkar is fondly addressed in India.
their existence and their prominent location in public spaces. There, they are more than merely a fitting tribute to an iconic leader; they are dramatic assertions of the dalit community’s call to be recognised as an active part of India’s public life. There, even more than Ambedkar the architect of the Constitution or the founder of Navayana Buddhism, the statues represent ‘Ambedkar, the dalit’ who prevailed over historical odds and overcame economic and social prejudice to occupy a prominent place in public life. There, his presence manifests the demand of those who have for so long been violently prohibited from full social participation; a demand to be seen and recognised. Among the most interesting aspects of these statues across India are their relatively consistent symbolism, and the manner in which this symbolism has been constructed (and replicated across the country), as both bear important implications as to what Ambedkar has come to mean for the dalit – and the wider non-dalit – communities.

Towards this, I draw from Tartakov’s work on Navayana Buddhist art and architecture. Tartakov spent some time in India in the 1990s, studying Maharashtra’s Buddhist sites and also mapping the genealogy of Ambedkar statues across the state and the South of India. In an essay entitled, “The Symbols of Navayana Art: Maharashtra”193, he charts and documents the various images of Ambedkar and Navayana Buddhism produced and circulated in the Buddhist viharas (small shared community spaces, originally of the Buddhist type) of Maharashtra and other regions. He also interviews the artists behind these creations in order to establish a provenance of sorts for the art works that he has documented. He identifies that the very earliest and the most famous of Ambedkar images is the bronze sculpture facing the Oval Maidan, southwest of the old Legislative Assembly (now the Institute of Science) in Mumbai (See figure above). As the plaque on its base proclaims, this is the work of Brahmesh V. Wagh, commissioned in 1959 by the Mayor of Bombay’s City

---

Council, P. T. Borale (a dalit himself), and unveiled in January 1962, less than a decade after Ambedkar’s death in December 1956.

Wagh’s crafting of Ambedkar shows him as an orator, dressed as a Bombay legislator, lawyer, and teacher (see figure above). Wagh had said that he liked to think of Ambedkar as a teacher, in the sense of a great man lecturing the nation; that was how he came up with the full length upright posture of Ambedkar standing with his right arm raised whilst signalling with the index finger. It is certainly not an image taken from one of the many famous photographs that have been the basis for so many subsequent paintings and graphic representations. When Mayor Borale was asked about the pose and gesture, his answer was much the same: that was how he remembered Ambedkar, as a debater and a teacher, addressing his own community and the nation. The left hand, held in a lightly balled fist behind his back, and the right hand with its upraised finger, both reinforce this intended interpretation. And Borale divulges that he had expressly asked Wagh to convey this desired symbolism, of ‘the teacher’, through his work when the latter was offered the commission.

There are, of course, other important sources for the pose. As a student trained in the classical tradition of Bombay’s J. J. School of Art, Wagh speaks of the canonical influences on his creative choices. In particular, he mentions being inspired by the figure of the Roman general addressing his troops – and specifically cites the most famous among them: Julius and Augustus Caesar. Ambedkar’s image is thereby linked with those of legendary leaders from around the world. Foreign as it may seem at first, it may well remind us that both in the influences he drew upon and in

---

194 Based on an interview by Tartakov with Brahmesh V. Wagh at his studio in Chowpatty, Mumbai, in December 1992. See Tartakaov, pp. 88-97
195 Based on Tartakov’s interview with P. T. Borale at his home in Dadar, Mumbai, in January 1993. See Tartakov, pp. 88-97
196 See Tartakov, p. 92
the reach of his own influence, Ambedkar – much as modern India aspired to be – was an international presence, not a parochial one.

Returning to the symbolism of the upraised finger, any follower of Ambedkar’s work would also recognise it, unconsciously if not consciously, as the teaching mudra (‘gesture’) chosen by Ambedkar to mark every page of his ground-breaking work, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (posthumously published in 1957) (Figure 90). For the Navayana Buddhists (who form a large percentage of Ambedkar’s followers), its generalised significance as a teaching gesture adds a weighted charge to the symbolism in the sculpture’s upraised finger. Of course, other symbols are as present and pertinent. The urban business suit, shirt and tie, the glasses, and the pair of pens in the lapel of his pocket are all meaningful. And they have also invited their share of criticism in the suggestion that the costume is ‘too Western’ and urban to be truly representative of a largely rural, Indian people. Yet, the resounding popular defence of Ambedkar’s penchant for suits offers an interesting rebuttal to such criticism: the suit in the twentieth century (and today) is no more a ‘Western’ outfit than an
'international’ one (or it has come to be so), and thus, it is ‘Indian’ as well. Although, admittedly, there can be no disputing that it is indeed a symbol of the ‘urban’ and certainly identifies with the city. The point is not, however, where Ambedkar came from, but where he went, and where dalits aspire to go. It is an image of a literate, learned man whose intelligence, will, and hard work enabled him to overcome his caste constraints and travel across the symbolic progressive world (England and the United States of America), and one who made his success in the modern town.

Indeed, even among the more varied popular images of Ambedkar in the inexpensive colour chromolithographs found in both urban and rural homes and shops, it is those that show him in the blue suit, white shirt, and red tie that predominate (Figure 4.11). Elsewhere in other recurring images, some show him in the long white gown of his Buddhist conversion, or the Nehruvian bandgala 197 of his years in the Cabinet [Figure 4.12]. But it is the guise in the blue suit – of the international student, lawyer, legislator, and urban intellectual – that resonates most with his followers.

197 often called the ‘Nehru jacket’; not to be confused with the ‘Mao jacket’
Fig. 4. 11 (reproduced from Johannes Beltz) *Life Moments of Ambedkar*. Chromolithograph on paper acquired in India in 1994 by Johannes Beltz, artist unknown
More commonly seen than the specially commissioned bronze images by artists such as Wagh (which are fairly expensive) are the desi cement or plaster images that can be afforded by the smaller countryside neighbourhoods and villages. One such example is the 15 feet tall statue holding pride of place in the centre of Kadambarahalli village in Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu (Figure 4.14)\textsuperscript{198}. Here,

\textsuperscript{198} The full name of the village is ‘Kadambarahalli Ambedkar Nagar’, and the population of the village is wholly accounted for by Scheduled Castes. Dharmapuri district in Tamil Nadu used to be called ‘Dhammapuri’, as in ‘Town of Dhamma’, and was once a noted centre of Buddhist activity.
Ambedkar is in the full colour vision that bronze cannot manage but cement can: blue suit, white shirt, red tie, usually with glasses (though not in this figure), pens in pocket, an arm raised (or as in this figure, resting by his side). In addition is one more important element: the book. In his left hand he holds the Constitution of India. Often, this book is inscribed with the word ‘Bharat’, forestalling any speculation as to which book it might be. His principal role in the framing of the Indian Constitution continues to be told as one of Ambedkar’s most prestigious accomplishments in the establishing of the modern Indian state. And it is an accomplishment which dalits freely lay claim to with great pride as a demonstration of their ability, as dalits, to be fully contributing members of the national community. As one looks at statues of Ambedkar around India today, one cannot imagine them without the book nor remain oblivious to the book’s symbolic value.

The image of Ambedkar with the book began to appear nearly as early as the image of him with his hand raised and finger pointing in readiness to teach. Tartakov traces possibly the earliest one to a small township named Harsul in Maharashtra199, created by Ramachandra Bandu Sasamkar, and inaugurated on 3 March 1962200 (Figure 4.13). Located strategically by the roadside next to the Great Trunk Road which links to the famous ancient Buddhist sites of Aurangabad and Ajanta, the statue (in full colour too in actuality, unlike the greyscale I have unfortunately had to rely on in Figure 4.13) enjoys a great deal of visibility and a steady traffic of onlookers. Unlike Wagh, Sasamkar was not a trained artist, but a village carpenter and builder in a variety of materials. Like Wagh, he was himself not a dalit but a talented local artisan commissioned by the dalits of Harsul to produce an image for

199 There are no actual records available of provenances of all Ambedkar statues across India, so this claim is hard to conclusively confirm or refute. But until such time as (if or ever) Tartakov is proven wrong, I am content to cautiously accept his argument.

200 The date of inaugurating Harsul’s statue of Ambedkar is noted in its painted inscription below the actual memorial. See Tartakov, pp. 93-97, for further details.
them. Tartakov makes a compelling case for the images by Sasamkar and Wagh to be the basic models from which the ideal Ambedkar monument has grown. Sure enough, virtually all of the full-length Ambedkar statues visible anywhere, in India or otherwise, appear to include a combination of either or both, the upraised right arm and finger of Wagh’s work and the book held in the left hand of Sasamkar’s work. (Figure 4.14)

---

201 Interview by Tartakov with shilpakar (sculptor) Ramachandra Bandu Sasamkar at his home in Shillod in March 1996. The interview also indicates that the Harsul statue was paid for by a collection made by local dalits. See Tartakov p. 93-97 for further details.

202 See Tartakov pp. 93-94
Fig. 4. 13 (Reproduced from Gary Michael Tartakov) Painted cement statue of B. R. Ambedkar in Harsul, Maharashtra, by Ramachandra Bandu Sasamkar, 1962
If we accept that Wagh and Sasamkar are to be credited with creating the prototypes for a vast majority of the Ambedkar memorials found to date, the fact that
their source lies with the common people from Harsul as well as the elite, international fine art tradition, is one of great consequence. Far too often we hear of Sanskritisation and the hegemonic influences that elite models have over common culture, without hearing nearly often enough of the counterhegemonic phenomenon of vernacularisation – *Prakritisation*, if you will – by which the culture of common folk influences the elite in the formation of a shared culture. In this case, we have an example of both forms at work: as sanskritising as the common village use of the pointing hand may be by some measure, the presence of the book is just as clearly a vernacularisation.

If we accept too that one of the most powerful functions of popular art is for every recognisable image to identify its subject in relation to its context, erecting Ambedkar’s image in a town square or at a village bus stop becomes neither a novelty nor a bit of superficial decoration of an ardent fan following. It becomes a bold and proud proclamation of a people historically violently restricted from access to public spaces: that they will no longer be kept from participation in public life. It becomes a symbolic reclamation of their dispossessed right to belong. Indeed, the all too frequently occurring incidents of vandalism on Ambedkar images, both in Mumbai and Harsul and regularly across various parts of India, are testimony to that recouping of power and how it has evidently succeeded in upsetting the dominant status quo.

---

203 Examples of the images of Ambedkar and other identifiable dalits being vandalised are well known and constitute recurrent news in press reports. At Harsul, a vandalism attack from a few years ago has forced the local people to build a protective enclosure around that monument.

204 I am aware that there are vastly differing contexts surrounding monuments and their functions around the globe. A topical example is perhaps the recent controversy raging over historic statues in the U.S.A in 2017: is the confederate monument a symbol of historic oppression to be torn down, or a historical monument to be preserved? The escalation of the issue across the country culminated in an incident around the confederate monument of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia. Protestors comprising both, those who wanted the monument torn down and those who did not, marched *en masse* for their causes. In the ensuing violent clashes between both groups and the police, a young activist was tragically killed when a white nationalist ran his car into the protesting crowd.
III.2.b. Mayawati’s Monumental Legacy

The memorial buildings and statues commissioned by the dalit leader Mayawati during her four terms in office as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (between 1995 and 2012) are the most conspicuous expressions of such reclamation of power and construction of dalit visibility. And in Mayawati’s case, it gains the addendum of also establishing visibility of the dalit ‘self’. The sheer number of memorials, coupled with their monumental scale, arguably makes Mayawati the single most prolific architectural patron in India since the British Raj commissioned New Delhi in 1911. The cast of characters in Mayawati’s sculptural programs include notable dalits and those who championed them. Primarily among those given pride of place, and often duplicated at several sites in Uttar Pradesh, are: Ambedkar; Jotirao Phule (1827-1890), a campaigner for the education of women and lower castes; the Buddha, who preached against casteism and whose teachings many dalits have consequently adopted; Kanshi Ram (1934-2006), who was the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Mayawati’s mentor and predecessor; and of Mayawati herself. With the ubiquity of dalit statues liberally scattered across the

Preceding the confederate monument issue was, of course, the student-led movement and protest, “Rhodes Must Fall”, in Cape Town that saw the removal of the commemorative statue of Cecil Rhodes from the University of Cape Town in 2015. It subsequently led to a wider movement to ‘decolonise’ education across South Africa.

In my view – pertaining to statues and memorials in all three contexts, of Ambedkar, US confederate monuments, and Rhodes – statues and monuments, like any work of art in shared public spaces, are not merely about the ‘past’; they are almost always also about the ‘present’. Any search for justice and equality in the ‘present’ requires an honest interrogation of the ‘past’. And this can take on the forms of both, tearing down past symbols of historic oppression and building new symbols to reclaim dispossessed space.

A useful text (thanks to Neil Lazarus) on this issue has been Annie E. Coombes’s History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa (Durham: Duke UP, 2003)

Although her surname is Das, Mayawati (b. 15 January, 1956) is referred to exclusively by her first name. Mayawati is an Indian politician who served four terms as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state. She is the national president of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which focuses on a platform of social change for the Bahujans – i.e. the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Castes (OBC), and other religious minorities.
state, and the capital Lucknow in particular, Mayawati’s commissions have made an indelible mark on Uttar Pradesh’s urban fabric.

Melia Belli has analysed the intersections of caste, gender, and visibility at two famous memorials commissioned by Mayawati in Lucknow – the Ambedkar Memorial and the Prerna Kendra (a crematory memorial). In her article, “Monumental Pride: Mayawati’s Memorials in Lucknow”206, Belli (drawing from Manuela Ciotti207) writes that:

The memorials aim to empower dalits through twin strategies...[which Ciotti refers to as] ‘presence in space,’ and ‘presence in time,’ both of which have been denied to the dalit [emphasis in original] community for centuries. While the former offers visibility, the latter presents an illustrious dalit history, in which its members may take pride and aspire to a better future. When criticized for such flagrant expenditures, Mayawati consistently asserts that the memorials fulfill [sic] a vital social role...“the statues have given Dalits a place in the history of this country, nobody can change that.” (Belli 86)

---

206 Published by Freer Gallery of Art, The Smithsonian Institution, Department of the History of Art, University of Michigan, 2014.

As already established, historically, dalits were denied a presence in space and time. It is therefore not surprising that the territorial claiming of physical space and the marking of it with dalit historical figures – a visual demand that they be recognized – are integral components of Mayawati’s radical brand of dalit assertion. Since Mayawati first came into office in the mid-1990s, dalit statues in public spaces, particularly those of Ambedkar, have increased exponentially. First elected to power in 1995, she immediately began her campaign of building memorial parks and tirelessly pursued it every time she came into office thereafter (1997, 2002, and 2007).
“Today, in this new urban landscape of Lucknow, Ambedkar has a more conspicuous public presence than Gandhi does. At the main intersection of Hajarat Ganj, a fashionable historic shopping district, an older statue of Gandhi has been joined by a larger and newer Ambedkar companion across the street” (Belli 87). Such visual one-upping was surely not unintentional and in fact, has become a trope in many of her commissions, alluding to the historic dispute between Gandhi and Ambedkar (c.f. ‘The Poona Pact’; discussed in detail in Chapter 2). While Gandhi is popularly honoured as ‘the father of the nation’, dalit leaders such as Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram, and particularly Mayawati have publicly criticised him on the basis that he did nothing to improve their situation. In memorialising notable figures from her own community through buildings and statues, and renaming districts after them, “Mayawati was subscribing to and amplifying performances of autonomy established by the independent nation” (Belli 82).
Fig. 4. 17 (Reproduced from web) Dr. B R Ambedkar modelled after Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial; inscribed on the base in Hindi: ‘My life struggle is my message’. Bronze sculpture, commissioned by Mayawati, Ambedkar stupa, Ambedkar Memorial, Lucknow. Artist unknown

Belli also convincingly argues that “the forms and decoration of the memorials highlight the absence of earlier dalit leaders and present Mayawati as their legitimate

---

208 Ambedkar has never said this. The misleading placement of the phrase, masquerading as a quote attributed to Ambedkar, cast permanently in bronze no less, is entirely the concoction of Mayawati, who commissioned the sculpture. For whatever reason – and she may very likely be responding here to Gandhi’s “My life is my message” – she seems to prefer it to the more popularly circulated slogan of Ambedkar’s: “Educate, Organise, Agitate!”.
**political heir** [emphasis mine]” (Belli 85) (Figure 4.15). Not surprising then that she has invested so heavily in a politically charged visual culture and performances of her own charisma. I draw further attention to Belli’s insights on the ‘narrative of legacy’ that Mayawati’s memorials are invested in constructing (Figures 4.15 and 4.16):

[...with all of her commissions, Mayawati’s choice of materials was well informed and meaningful. Red sandstone and white marble have been the preeminent building materials for royal and government structures in North India since the fourteenth-century Khilji Sultan Ala-ud-din’s commission of the Alai Darwaza at the Qutub complex in Delhi. Following the Khiljis, other Delhi Sultanates, the Mughals, several Rajput dynasties, the British, and finally the independent nation of India employed these building materials for their political structures. Mayawati’s use of these materials brings her into the visual language of North Indian rulership.

Chunar sandstone is deeply associated with the third-century BCE Mauryan emperor Ashoka, who was a great patron of Buddhism and its arts. In an effort to associate herself with one of the greatest figures from Buddhist history, Mayawati similarly erected dozens of Chunar sandstone columns on the grounds of her monuments.[Figure 4.15] Her pillars are not facsimiles of the Ashokan pillars. While the former are constructed exclusively of sandstone and present a variety of animals, upturned lotuses, and wheels on their capitals, Mayawati’s pillars are more uniform. Their bronze capitals are capped by wheels borne on the backs of four addorsed elephants. Here, the elephants carry polysemic meanings: they are symbols of Indic authority; are associated with Ashoka, as they are featured on several of his capitals; and are the BSP party symbol. The association between Mayawati and Ashoka has not been lost on her community. Biku Chandra Ma, a dalit Buddhist monk[...] proudly asserted: “Mayawati is just like a modern-day female Ashoka” (Belli 96).

It would not be farfetched to infer from Belli’s analyses that the abundant, richly adorned, permanent architectural commissions are not sites built to honour the Buddha, nor Ambedkar or Kanshi Ram, but Mayawati herself (Figures 4.15 and 4.16). Her memorials’ aspirations are not limited to noble ideals of commemorating dalit heroes of the past alone, but also speak to their patron’s greatest aim – to secure her continued leadership in Uttar Pradesh. From commissioning memorials of herself, to
publicly laying the foundations of the most grandly prominent of them, Mayawati was partaking in an established expression of her own charisma, in what Sara Dickey has termed “Indian person-centred politics”\(^{209}\). Participating in public cornerstone-laying ceremonies amid much fanfare is a common means by which an Indian politician spreads awareness of his or her ‘person’. A critical reading of her vigorously promoted memorial landscape reveals it to be suggestive of power through (literal and figurative) monumental scale, visibility through prominent locations, opulence through use of expensive building materials and spectacular effect, and, interestingly for their historic implications, control over access\(^{210}\).

Notwithstanding that she was shaping herself to be a populist leader, in flaunting her command of the very best materials and artistic skill available as well as her lavish displays of personal wealth, she participates in well-established acts of upper-class privilege and entitlement. Far from being a meek disenfranchised member of the formerly untouchable *chamar* community gingerly testing newfound dominion, Mayawati was ruthlessly staking spatial claim and cultural capital for herself amidst Uttar Pradesh’s brutal political landscape with unapologetic self-promotion laced, arguably, with unabashed vanity as well. In such staking of equity in political *vice* as much as political virtue, she has equalled, if not surpassed, the scores of Indian politicians and their unsubtle methods of laying claim to power.

Whatever her ultimate political fate or the durability of her meticulously constructed legacy, one cannot deny that Mayawati has given dalits an equitable share in the urban fabric of India’s largest state. Her grand memorials announce messages of dalit pride and empowerment through a visual language that is at once recognizably authoritative and unique to the dalit experience. However, while she claims to speak for her community, whether Mayawati’s ‘monumental presence’ is


\(^{210}\) The rally grounds of Ambedkar Maidan, for example, remain closed to the public and are not open to casual visitors. Their stated function has been to host political rallies only but not to accommodate social events such as weddings or concerts. So far, only the BSP has organised rallies there.
realistically indicative of how far dalits in Uttar Pradesh have come or that it is the exceptional case of one wealthy dalit politician (among other such exceptions in fields outside of politics) is perhaps the real challenge yet to be gauged with any material accuracy. And to return to Farrar, it remains to be seen if, through Mayawati’s memorials, dalits actually will be granted a legitimate history and their voices thus will cease to be ‘considered marginal to the main event’. Surely the greatest mark of the memorials’ success would be if they could actually alter the quotidian realities of living community members. But as a matter of fact, surveys of visitors to the memorial parks and focused interviews with dalits in Lucknow and its rural neighbourhoods confirmed that while the parks are perceived as symbols of dalit pride and heritage, they are not, however, considered conducive to building face-to-face interactions of communities, nor are they considered to be environmentally friendly\textsuperscript{211}.

Thus, it would appear that while Mayawati’s commissioned memorials have created symbolic capital for the dalit communities in the public sphere, as how Wagh’s and Sasamkar’s sculptural models have, her strictly regulated memorials have been remiss in creating social and environmental capital on par with those of the largely unregulated and organically sprouting Ambedkar statues from elsewhere in the country. And unlike in Wagh’s and Sasamkar’s cases, there appears to be no organic synthesis of Sanskritisation and vernacularisation; only a meticulously constructed neo-Sanskritisation of sorts.

IV. Closing Comment

From the first section on representations of atrocity in art works, to the section on the filmic art of multi-layered story-telling, and the final section on

\textsuperscript{211} See Sinha, p. 43
commemorative statues and sculptures, there are at least a few critical cases that have been made.

This chapter has located the above three sites of cultural production, driven by the unapologetically identitarian Ambedkarite impetus, as posing a challenge to the typically formulaic notions of ‘dalit victimhood’ disseminated in popular discourse. The works considered in this chapter however do much more than simply interrogate formations of caste and religion in India. Indeed, their critical import derives from their dual dispositions towards terms of power (re)claimed and determinations of identity-based difference. No doubt, the Ambedkarite impetus driving these cultural expressions and productions rests on the opposition between socio-religious (and statist) power and the power that the dalit subaltern has hitherto been disentitled to, which power they then resolutely set about to (re)claim. Forged within the authoritative grids of caste-class-gender, nation and state, and modernity and history, the power and domination that the Ambedkarite position instinctively seeks to repel while also staking a determined claim to are shown as perpetually being in a state of flux, with one impulse constantly extending and exceeding the other.

In addition to offering valuable insights into the narratives they construct and their Ambedkarite persuasion, such dalit cultural expressions and productions also invite us to not only reconsider our ‘ways of seeing’ but re-orient our hermeneutic understanding of reading itself. The visual, the literary, the aesthetic, and the political dimensions closely intertwine in these three otherwise different modes of artistic language. Ultimately, the fact that new arts and genres are providing avenues to ‘speak’ (and ‘see’) in ‘other’ ways, outside the confines of the paginated book, is an indication that something is changing in the context of dalit ‘texts’. And no doubt, this can only mean an augury of promise and possibility for both, the production and the reception of dalit art and culture. And all things being equal, Sister Mysore may incidentally come to constitute the canon in the process.
Works Cited


CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to explore how dalit apperceptions have come to be reframed through the political, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of representation in a diverse range of dalit ‘texts’. In engaging with works, thinkers, and ideas spanning a broad historical period – from the twelfth century to the twenty first – it has allowed this work to chart the modes and means through which the identity of ‘dalit’ (including the conceptualisation of ‘dalitness’) has travelled.

Bracketing off the so-called ‘popular’ literature produced by dalits – typically, the autobiography – as the genres of any real socio-political consequence and/or value, especially by the publishing industry, seems somewhat irresponsible since it paves the way to recurrent arguments that patronise dalit literatures as being merely autobiographical. It restrains dalit literatures only to the contours of lived experience and veils the mediating process that is at work in any writing. It would therefore be significant, and rewarding, for dalit literatures and their critiques to think beyond literary realism and autobiography. While mainstream academia and literary circles have, unsurprisingly, tried to pigeonhole dalit texts and play down the role of the imaginary, the dalit intelligentsia too have tended to fall back on the same for its perceived lack of political impact. Dalit and non-dalit writers, thinkers, critics, and academics have sometimes been ensnared in possibly inevitable internal debates about the origin, status, and the ways in which dalit literature should be approached. The scope and impact of the literatures themselves may consequently not have been as far-reaching as they should have been. It would be more fruitful to push these debates into the background, widen the contours of those literatures to include newer avenues for expression without losing their specificities, and write yet unwritten histories of dalit literatures that have so far been unimaginable in the dominant discourse.
The search for a *New Alphabet* – which this thesis also posits is well (with)in *Sight* – therefore, has taken on board a variety of meanings in its journey throughout the work. When considering the breadth of history and time canvassed throughout the chapters One to Four – i.e., from at least the twelfth to the twenty first centuries – naturally, the idea of the ‘new’ is shown to be constantly adapting itself. For, if or when we break with the paradigm, what then is becoming ‘new’?

The First Chapter on the Vīraśaiva vachana practice attempted to reframe, with renewed emphasis, on the *literariness* of the movement (thus challenging the way it has hitherto been defined predominantly as a *bhakti* movement) in order to showcase how it remains a relevant precedent for dalit *sahitya*. Chapter Two searched for a new framework of critique of modern Kannada dalit literature and found it in the Gandhi-Ambedkar paradigm. Chapter Three set about to disentangle the intersections of caste-class-gender in studying constructions of solidarity to reveal that ‘identity’ continues to be the sole ‘alphabet’ reigning supreme in the fraught politics of gender, caste, and class. Chapter Four sought to understand the affirmations and contradictions present in an Ambedkarite mode of representing dalit life narratives via a new way of ‘seeing’ and ‘reading’ dalit texts in other media. As for the question of how long does any of the above remain ‘new’ before it is lost to sight, I am reminded of the wisdom in Ramanujan’s words: *Defiance is not Discontinuity*. Indeed, a rejection of or an alienation from an immediate system (or environment, or ideology) does not necessarily mean a complete break from an older ideal; on the contrary, it can indeed mean continuity with an older ideal, and yet be infused with new dissent. And it can only be in the best interests of dalit discourse that these new(er) and/or renewed ideals I have posited soon be replaced with even newer ones, to be continued thus until, one has to believe, one or all of them have been realised.

As in any major research undertaking, there is always regret for what it has not been possible to include. The final chapter on dalit narratives in other media, already
a large chapter on its own, has been unable to accommodate the rapidly burgeoning field of dalit digital narratives. There is some very exciting and challenging work being undertaken by online platforms such as Video Volunteers, India Unheard, Dalit Camera, and Round Table India. There is also an immense amount of regional, national, transnational, and cross-cultural potential in dalit narratives and dalit discourse that has remained untapped either by this project, or by dalit discourse on the whole. For instance, the spirit for transracial solidarities that Ambedkar first engendered in his personal communiques with W. E. B. DuBois back in 1946\textsuperscript{212}, has been relegated to the gallery of history in contemporary discourse. There is much that overlaps as well as sharply diverges in Dalit and Black discourse. Yet, very little comparative research has been undertaken on the same. Another regrettable lacuna is the stark absence of ‘other’ dalits in a predominantly ‘Indian’ dalit discourse: there is a worryingly persistent idea that dalits are always-already of Indian-origin. Literary studies on dalits from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and so on, are simply non-existent.

That said, however, it is also no doubt a very exciting and challenging time for academics and theoreticians who now find before them a vast body of comparative study awaiting exploration. Dalit literature and discourse are only just beginning to gather momentum. And this thesis hopes to have made a modest yet impactful contribution towards the current discussion as well as hopes to have embarked on a pathway to future avenues. Like the saintly ancestor of dalits, Manteswamy, Dalit Literature was at first barred from entering the metropolis of Literature too. But now, after centuries-worth of a long struggle, it has come a long way: it has entered the cities; it is challenging hegemonies; it strives to change our understanding of (wo)man, society, history, and literature. And it is no more the out-caste at the city gate.

\textsuperscript{212} Among many sources on this topic, one is Manan Desai’s “What Ambedkar wrote to DuBois”. https://www.saada.org/tides/article/ambedkar-du-bois [Accessed 12 July 2018]


---. “Who were the Shudras?” The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchable in BAWS 7 (1948).


“Arundhati Roy Replies to Dalit Camera”. Round Table India: For an Informed Ambedkar Age. Round Table India, 15 Mar. 2014.


---. *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics*. Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003.


Liddle, Joanna and Rama Joshi. eds. Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India. New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1986.


Murti, Cidananda M. “Basavanna-na Tripadi”. Mysore, Samsodhana Taranga, 1966, pp. 190-204


“The Brahmin Double: The Brahmanical Construction of Anti-Brahminism and Anti-Caste Sentiment in the Religious Cultures of Precolonial Maharashtra”.


---. *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women’s Testimonios*. New Delhi, Zubaan an Imprint of Kali for Women, 2006.


