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Dalit: the making of a political subject

The earliest, though not the first, uses of the term 'dalit' are to be found in Ambedkar's writings.[1] Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), the major ideological source of today's dalit politics in India, conceived the category 'Broken Men' (a literal translation of the Marathi word *dalit*) in his attempt to reconstruct the history of the untouchables in India. Taking a cue from Maxim Gorky's ideas on the shared space between science and literature, Ambedkar believed that historiography was not a practice defined by the primacy of archival evidence; rather it is a creative art, and history, a work of art.[2] He tried to grasp the reasons for the Hindu–untouchable divide as a product of the historical dialectic.

According to this account, during the transition – uneven and located in heterogeneous time – from nomadic tribes to the settled agricultural society, the conflicts between different tribal groups over the means of production resulted in the defeat of certain tribal groups, which thus lost their status among the tribes that were beginning to settle down. The surviving members of the erstwhile tribal groups were the 'broken men'. They were broken men because they were now reduced to fragments, stray individuals, owing to the collapse of the community. This resulted in the 'broken men' scattered in all directions. The broken men, having lost their means of subsistence and means of production, were reduced to homelessness and economic dependency. They later got into a relationship with the settled tribes, with the mutual understanding that the broken men would ward off the nomadic tribes from looting the settled tribes and the settled tribes would provide subsistence and shelter for the broken men. They then entered the service of the settled tribes, undertaking to protect them from attacks by other tribes in return for food and shelter. Untouchability is later imposed on the broken men by the Hindu civilisation.

For Ambedkar, the coming into existence of the broken men was an historical event brought about by objective social conditions. Though this is the case not just in the subcontinent of India, what is specific about the Indian case is, unlike other parts of the world, the class of broken men was kept away from the remaining society permanently, because of the Hindu civilisation and untouchability, the evil that it gave rise to. What is central to the concept

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of dalit (broken man) is its distance from Hindus both spatially and socially. Ambedkar's eloquent phrase 'outside the fold' captures his idea about dalits as staying outside the Hindu order, the caste system.[3] Moreover, what also distinguishes the dalit is that it is not a part of the whole (Hindu society) but a 'part apart'.[4] It is worth noting that the major contestation between Ambedkar and Gandhi during the round-table conferences of the 1930s in London was on the same lines; while Gandhi argued for untouchables to be treated as part of the Hindu community, Ambedkar wanted untouchables to be recognised as a separate community.

Despite the fact that Ambedkar reconstructed the history of the untouchables and noted the political significance of the term 'dalit', it needs to be acknowledged that he was using various terms to talk about the oppressed classes. For instance, in different contexts he used different terms such as untouchables, outcastes, depressed classes, Buddhists.[5] What is perhaps common to these terms is a political determination to avoid indigenous terms that give a suggestion of dalits being a part of the Hindu world. Secondly, it needs to be a term that firmly locates the untouchables outside the Hindu order and recognises them as a separate element in the larger society.

There have been several terms used in general parlance to refer to the untouchables – for example, panchama, avarna, outcastes, untouchables, scheduled castes (SC), depressed classes, harijan – and they have gained prominence in specific historical contexts. Some of these are very old and traditional – like panchama and avarna – while others were fashioned in colonial times to classify population segments for purposes of governance – depressed classes, scheduled castes etc. – or to provide a compensatory identity within a Hindu order – 'harijan'. In independent India, the terms that continue to be used from the colonial period are SC and harijan, one governmental, the other ideological, and dalit is different from all of these in being a political *self*-designation, which is subject-constituting in a new and different way.

It is useful to note the singularity of the term dalit by way of delineating its ideological foundation as well as by way of showing its difference with the other categories in use. 'Avarna' is an ancient category that still enjoys certain currency in modern times. According to the varna system of hierarchy, it is the Brahmin who is on top; then come Kshatriyas and Vaisyas. These three classes are called 'twice born', *dwijas*, and the 'once born' sudras occupy the fourth position in the order. However, all four classes are called savarnas (literally 'with varna'), and the ones who lie outside the fourfold varna order are called avarna ('not-varna'). Within this logic, the untouchables are the avarnas. Panchama ('fifth') is another category to incorporate the untouchables as the fifth order. The problem with these categories is that they belong to the Hindu

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regime of truth. The former excludes and the latter includes the untouchables precisely to place them as inferior either outside or inside the varna order.

The category 'untouchable' came into existence due to the colonial administrative practices of the British, particularly with the 1901 census that inaugurated Sir Herbert Risley's ambitious project of the classification of castes.[6] Amidst the anomalies of classificatory confusions, the category 'untouchable', a translation of the Sanskrit term *asprusya* emerged, and it had soon gained preference over the category 'depressed classes'. 'Depressed class' was a category used in the reformist discourse of the local elites and a few European missionaries around the turn of the twentieth century. In the early decades of the twentieth century the governmental category of 'untouchable' slipped into the realm of the social, and the term 'untouchable' gained prominence gradually.[7] Scheduled castes (SC), a constitutional category created to construct the subject of state welfare, refers to the untouchable groups in the 1936 schedule for the purpose of implementing special electoral representation in the Government of India Act 1935, and later the same schedule was reproduced in the 1950 President's Order on Scheduled castes with few changes.[8] Interestingly the 1950 order implied that schedules castes necessarily practise Hinduism. Amendments were made to include the Sikhs and Buddhists later. However, official records of the Indian state continue to describe untouchables as Hindus. The implication of this is that only so long as the untouchables claim Hindu identity are they entitled to the welfare measure and special representative provisions. Scheduled Caste, in short is a category officially tied to Hinduism and so 'purely' a category for state policies for the welfare of untouchables.

In the 1930s Gandhian nationalist politics attempted to engage with the problem of untouchability with the dual aim of at once drawing the large population of untouchables into the nationalist politics and retaining them as lower castes within the Hindu majority. Not surprisingly, Gandhi's effort to engage with the problem of untouchability was structured in a particular reformist fashion and the name Harijan was apt for such a reformism. Gandhi is said to have borrowed the name from the fourteenth-century Gujarati poet Narsinh Mehta. Harijan literally meant children of God. In Narsinh Mehta's work the term is used to refer to the community of devotees, in which caste and creed have no place. Gandhi, by using it exclusively to refer to untouchables, was distorting the meaning of the term in *bhakti* literature. Gandhian reform effectively produced the harijan subjects, who are considered inferior beings, their emancipation at the mercy of good Hindus. Gandhian politics attempted to persuade the Hindus to have mercy on the harijans and uplift them from their pitiable condition. Gandhi also conceived this Hindu burden of emancipating the harijan as a penance for the sins the Hindus had committed. He understood untouchability as a problem of

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mindset and never succeeded in grappling with the structural basis of caste that reproduced inequalities in different strata of social life.[9] Unlike Ambedkar, Gandhi believed in both the abolition of untouchability and the preservation of caste hierarchy at the same time. Till the end of his life, Gandhi defended the varna order which placed people in a hierarchy of ranks tied to professions based on birth rather than ability.

A radical construction of the term 'dalit' is more closely associated with the Dalit Panthers Movement of Maharashtra. The popularity of the term dalit was achieved in the 1970s thanks to the formation of Dalit Panthers in 1972, a radical political movement that challenged the hegemony of Hindus and the power they wielded in the realm of culture and politics. Many of the founding members were themselves charismatic political leaders and very powerful creative and critical writers.[10] Dalit Panthers took the dalit political subject beyond the problem of untouchability and created a broader base for their political activities.[11] The Dalit Panthers Manifesto defined dalit as a collective that is being politically and economically exploited in the name of religion. Having the critique of majoritarian Hindu religion central to its politics, Dalit Panthers included scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, neo-Buddhists (untouchables converted to Buddhism during and after Ambedkar's historic public act of converting to Buddhism in 1956), the working class, landless poor, peasants and women as part of the collective called dalit. Baburao Bagul, one of the eminent writers of that epoch claimed in his essay on dalit literature, 'Dalit is the name for total revolution; it is revolution incarnate.'[12] Revolutionary ideas were prominent in the Dalit Panthers movement despite the fact that there were strong criticisms of Marxist theory and practice and also a determinate move towards Buddhism as an emancipatory space by a section within the movement. The Dalit Panthers Manifesto of 1973 unambiguously pronounced its radical politics. Advocating a complete revolution, the manifesto stated that society cannot be transformed by legalistic appeals, requests, concessions and elections. 'Our ideas of social revolution and rebellion', it further stated, 'will come into full being with the help of a steel strong vehicle'.[13]

Thus the Dalit Panthers movement produced the dalit as the subject of revolutionary politics. Highly critical of the Indian communist parties for their opportunism, parliamentary politics and endless compromise on political matters of various kinds, Dalit Panthers accused the Left parties of being a hindrance in any social transformation, and emphasised the need to combine the class struggle with the struggle against untouchability and to raise their voice against sociocultural domination along with economic exploitation. Equally critical of the post-independence Indian national state, Panthers questioned the very idea of independence and noted that the struggle for independence was under the leadership of national capitalists, landlords and

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feudals for their own benefit, and the result was that the face of the administrative class changed from the British rulers to the local dominant classes. Panthers critiqued the policy measures and other activities of the state. In other words what political theorists have described as a passive-revolution state was called into question by the Panthers. Dalit politics, however, became a pan-Indian phenomenon in the 1980s, especially after the spread of the movement to the southern states of India.[14]

Another popular way in which the dalit subject was articulated was by claims on culture. There have been practices of politics in which dalit culture has been invoked and in some cases Dalit-Bahujan culture.[15] There are at least two kinds of discussion about culture. Raj Gowthaman, a prominent dalit writer in Tamil, uses the term dalit culture to refer to the need for the emergence of a new political culture where equality and dignity occupy the centre stage.[16] Gowthaman has tried to define specifically a political culture of the dalits, which involves building solidarities among the oppressed groups across nationality and language. For Gowthaman, what has been regarded as lower, mean, vulgar and obnoxious by the dominant Hindu norms could be productively used to rebel against and destroy the Hindu culture. The elements of resistance in the marginalised groups could be used to build a culture of protest. What is notable in Gauthaman's formulation is that dalit culture does not yet exist but that there is a need to evolve a culture of that kind against the existing dominant Hindu culture. According to this view dalit culture remains political, participating in acts of defiance against the dominant culture by practising a protest culture.

The more common discussion on dalit culture, however, largely revolves around the themes of food, music, language/dialect, forms of worship etc., and considers dalit as an anthropological subject. Historically, a section of untouchables were forced to associate with dead animals, and engaged in making a range of leather products including the dappu (a kind of drum). In the 1980s, dalit movements in Tamil Nadu urged dalits to refuse to play dappu at Hindu functions, or to remove dead animals, especially cows, or to eat the flesh of dead cattle etc. However, in the next decade there emerged a new breed of political thinking, which claimed beef and the music of dappu as symbols of cultural pride. However, one encounters two contradictory logics in operation in the contemporary politics around beef eating and dappu music. If one logic is close to what I have described earlier in relation to Gowthaman's conception of dalit culture as a political form to counter the Hindu culture through protest culture, the second treats beef eating or playing dappu as a cultural practice of dalits which in certain ways effectively produces an anthropological subject. It is also to be noted here that the Hindu majority vehemently opposes the eating of beef and considers the cow holy. From the nineteenth century onwards, the holy cow has remained a symbol to stir up

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anti Muslim sentiments and identify Muslims as national enemies. In this contemporary context the second logic reduces the universal cause of dalits fighting the anti-democratic forces into a particular argument of protecting their own cultural practice. As a result the centrality of the problem further slips into the domain of an argument for cultural rights or tolerance for different cultures.[17]

A major contribution to the concept of dalit as a cultural identity is Kancha Ilaiah's book[18] *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, which was published in 1996. A blend of autobiographical and quasi-anthropological narrative, the book attracted both severe criticism and appreciation. It was translated into several Indian languages later and arguably remains the most popular monograph on caste for the past two decades. For Ilaiah, though the term 'dalit' was revolutionised by the dalit movements to consider the oppressed groups in a broader sense that would include the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward classes, this particular perception did not gain currency in the popular imagination. Ilaiah coupled the term dalit with bahujan (the oppressed majority), a category prevalent in the anti-caste tradition and popularised in the electoral domain by the Bahujan Samaj Party and its founder Kanshi Ram. The term 'dalitbahujan', according to Ilaiah, means 'people and castes who form the exploited and suppressed majority'. Despite the contradictions among these castes, what supposedly weaves them together as dalitbahujans are the shared cultural and economic experiences and the knowledge of production practices that they possess in common. Ilaiah has argued that the dalitbahujans are of a different cultural bloc from the Hindus in terms of familial relationships, rights enjoyed by women, religious practices, food habits, ideas about property, human relationship, etc. The book attempted to present the life events of dalitbahujans in detail from birth to death in order to demonstrate how they are entirely different from those of Hindus. Polemical in nature, the book was a stringent critique of all the Hindu practices and rightly occupied a significant place, especially at a time when Hindutva forces were gaining popular support and propagating anti-Muslim and anti-reservations sentiments.

Perhaps the inbuilt contradiction in the title of Ilaiah's book is the symptom of the conceptual problem the book suffers from. On one hand, the title claims a space outside Hindu religion, and on the other, it identifies the critique as sudra (the lowest varna in the Hindu order). The problem of course is not merely conceptual, since it is extended to the state of affairs the book captures. The very explanation offered by Ilaiah is ambiguous enough: 'I have retained the word "Sudra" so that the readers can easily understand where the critique has come from.' This formulation neither widens the base of the term dalit nor grants it adequate transformative potential, since it proposes the need to

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combine dalit with another category, 'bahujan'. Dalitbahujan is a category that snatches away the lower-order sudras from Hindu and sutures them with untouchables.

Even a cursory reading of the book will show that the subject of dalitbahujan is constituted by their cultural practices and beliefs, which are, according to Ilaiah, entirely different from those of Hindus. The two cultures suggested are non-dialectical in nature as if they inhabit entirely different worlds. The dalitbahujan culture is egalitarian and very different from the hierarchical culture of Hinduism. This leads to the valorisation and celebration of the dalitbahujan culture, which most of the time is at odds with what is actually happening in dalit politics today.[19]

Another popular conception about dalit could be drawn from the experiential narratives of dalits. Enormous amounts of creative writing have come out of the dalit movements across India; especially the autobiographical narratives by dalit writers who foreground the experience of caste and untouchability as central to the dalit identity. Largely written in vernacular languages, the works have been translated into English in the past few decades. With their rich accounts of the nuances of caste(d) life, dalit women and men writers have certainly contributed to the understanding of what it means to be a dalit in public spaces, institutions, working environments, cities and villages etc. Myriad caste-based discriminations and humiliations have been brought to the attention of the public by these writings, along with the narrative of the subject's protest against the system. Also, in a certain sense, dalit autobiographies are able to critique the objective knowledge claims in the entire body of sociological and anthropological literature on caste, and provide a subjective understanding about caste. However it is also the case that dalit autobiography in certain ways caters to the reading public's need to feel pity and sympathy for the oppressed as a way of assuaging their own feelings of guilt. While the market finds it profitable to publish more, readers both in the classrooms and in the middle-class households receive these works with sympathy. Moreover, dalit autobiographies directly confront the experience of violence, both symbolic and structural, by describing it in realistic terms. As a result, the trauma associated with the narrative does not allow anyone to think critically about the issue; rather, it simply invites pity.[20] By portraying pathetic conditions of dalit lives and the trauma undergone by the writer, dalit autobiographies have mostly engendered sympathy, but on the other hand have also served as a resource for the theorisation of dalit lives.

Dalit subjective experience and the ethics of theorisation has become a subject of profound philosophical discussion in the recent past.[21] Gopal Guru has developed a conceptual field to discuss the singularity of dalit experience, and the concept of humiliation is central to his recent work. Rather than considering the known categories of discrimination or exploitation that have

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a hold on class relations, Guru has emphasised humiliation as an experience of untouchability in the dialectical relationship of caste. Guru's recent works on humiliation and the theorising of dalit experience has posed fundamental questions to the social science domain of knowledge acquisition and insisted that theorising needs to be an ethical act involving self-reflection.[22] However, it would not be wrong to say that the idea of politics has taken a backstage in the philosophical turn, and ethics has been given centrality.

In fact there are two mutually conflicting currents of thinking about dalit which place politics at their centre. In 1999, P. Thangaraj, a dalit intellectual and a prolific writer largely unrecognised, engaged critically with Ambedkar's conception of politics, which argued for the annihilation of caste.[23] Ambedkar's undelivered speech titled 'Annihilation of Caste' has been a historic document that has viewed caste as necessarily an evil; he argues that, since nothing productive can be achieved with caste, before any social transformation can occur caste must be annihilated.[24] Thangaraj, concerned about the increasing violence against untouchables by the majority Hindus, and the practical possibilities of resistance, emphasised the need to rethink the politics of annihilation of caste. For Thangaraj, annihilation of caste was a mirage; within the liberal democratic set-up of India, the political situation is not conducive to such a stand and any politics needs to be conceived taking into account questions of what is possible. Though there has been a bit of economic and educational development among the untouchables, neither the educated nor the economically well-off untouchables could overcome caste. The political power and the media were unreachable owing to the power of the wealthy dominant classes and religions. No political party had any serious programme for the annihilation of caste, and though caste was legally abolished, untouchability was everywhere. Pointing to the practical conditions and problems of untouchables, Thangaraj suggested that a political strategy should be evolved whereby untouchables might organise their concerned communities and protect themselves from the Hindu caste attacks. He also cited the examples of Mahars of Maharashtra, Chamars of Uttar Pradesh and Madigas of Andhra Pradesh to show how these communities have protected themselves from Hindu attacks by a process of educating and improving the socio-economic conditions of their caste members. He insisted that it is important to safeguard one's own caste from the dominant classes before thinking of liberating the caste and the entire society through annihilation of caste.

Writing in 2005, Raj Gowthaman launched a severe criticism of Thangaraj's ideas about dalit politics.[25] Gowthaman observed that the politics of annihilation of caste is simply about shifting the entire society into an acceptance of modern social relationships; not about one caste annihilating another. Further, he criticised Thangaraj's pessimistic tone and maintained

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that, historically, the politics of strengthening one's own caste has been taken up by several sudra castes and their socio-economic status has not noticeably been changed. Even if such a politics were to be adopted, it could only be a strategy for the time being and should not be the ultimate goal. He also observed that, instead of defeating Brahmanism, this politics places the untouchables within the structure created by Brahmanism.

The intellectual clash between Thangaraj and Gowthaman is just an indication of two entirely different ways of thinking about dalit politics today. It is also a conflict of opinions on the nature of the political subject, dalit. Gowthaman argues for a politics with the universal objective of emancipating the world in the course of its own emancipation, an ambitious transformatory project whose aim would be to transform the conditions that define the social relationships. Thangaraj, on the other hand, argues for the immediate safeguarding of one's own place in the existing order by the affirmation and assertion of ones own caste, and postpones the transformatory project to an indefinite future. In Thangaraj's view, politically conceived dalit identity and the caste identity of the untouchables happily merge.

Not surprisingly, arguments similar to those of Gowthaman or Thangaraj have dominated recent discussions of dalit politics. Anand Teltumbde, a dalit thinker and activist with an interest in bringing Ambedkar and Marx closer, argues for the politics of annihilation of caste. Teltumbde insists that, because it is necessarily a divisive force, nothing constructive can be built on the basis of caste. For him, dalits have to transcend caste to destroy the caste system, rather than strengthening and organising around it. Though there is a truth in this diagnosis of the problem, this view is sometimes quick to offer the programmatic solution of forming a class basis by rejecting caste affiliations.[26] While it argues that the dalit political subject can emerge only in a class space, and precisely by negating caste, the opposite view shows the impossibility of such a casteless subject. It has been noted by scholars that the possibility for the emancipation of dalits today finds its place not in the politics of the annihilation of caste – thinking of caste simply as an instrument of oppression – but in affirming one's own caste as a sign of solidarity and power, self-respect and identity and pride in the group.[27] It is also a fact that in today's dalit movement one finds these two currents of thinking – both affirmation of caste and annihilation of caste – coming together. The Arunthathiyar Movement – a subordinate subgroup within the larger dalit group in Tamil Nadu, which is said to have created solidarity within their own caste – is representative of this phenomenon.[28] Arunthathiyars have launched a dual critique of caste. Firstly, they problematise the nature of the socio-political relationship of castes within the dalit community and the ostensible unity. This critique discloses the nature of caste practice and hierarchy within scheduled castes. Caste-based segregation – untouchability, discrimination,

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dependency – are just some of the issues that point to the internal caste structure of the dalit community. Secondly, because of this unequal positioning within the community, the material benefits meant for the community, educational and employment opportunities and so forth, are largely taken over by the dominant groups within that community, and the subordinated groups are left suffering deprivation. While the first critique is in tune with the logic of annihilation, the second one is about the affirmation of caste in securing a place for itself in the public domain.

While the argument for annihilation of caste proposes a politics of emancipation that calls for the immediate removal of the conditions that preserve and reproduce caste, the argument for the affirmation of caste locates itself firmly within the existing conditions – so much so that the subject of this politics itself is produced by that same condition. In the former, the political subject is dalit, 'a part apart', broadly identified with SCs, tribes, workers, landless poor peasants, women, emergent classes, and so forth. In fact, identification is the factor that brings these two apparently different political stances closer together. In both cases, the subject is identified with a part: in the former it is a part apart but nevertheless a part, while in the latter it is also a part – part of a caste. If one were to conceive an idea of dalit beyond these two political currents, it would need to be beyond identification, a process of dis-identification whereby the political subject withdraws from belonging to any part and becomes a part of no part.[29] In other words, this process also involves a dis-identification from pre-established identities; the dalit as a transformative category – as a part of no part – could only emerge from a liminal in-between space.

Notes

1 B.R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?*, in *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol.7 (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1990). For a sociological account of the term 'dalit', see, John C.B. Webster, 'Who is a Dalit?', in S.M. Michel (ed.), *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values* (New Delhi, Sage 2007), 76–88.

2 Ambedkar conceived the reconstruction of the history of the origin of untouchability 'analogous to that of the archaeologist who constructs a city from broken stones or of the palaeontologist who conceives an extinct animal from scattered bones and teeth or of a painter who reads the lines of the horizon and the smallest vestiges on the slopes of the hill to make up a scene. In this sense the book is a work of art even more than of history.' See Preface, *Untouchables*, 4.

3 B.R. Ambedkar, *Outside the Fold*, in *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol.5 (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1989), 19–26.

4 Ambedkar makes this assertion in Bombay legislative assembly on 27 October 1939. See, *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol.2 (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1991), 261.

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5 See Gopal Guru, 'Politics of Naming', *Seminar*, 471 (1998), 14–18. A pioneering work on the names used to refer to untouchables and their political significance.

6 For a detailed account of the history of the term 'untouchable', see Simon Charsley, 'Untouchable: What is in a Name?', *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2:1 (1996), 1–22.

7 For a discussion on the preference of the term 'untouchable' by Justice Chandravarkar of Indian National Congress and affirmation by the then Maharaja of Baroda, Sayaji Rao Gaekwar, see Charsley, 'Untouchable', 6, 7.

8 Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 121–47.

9 For a scathing critique of Gandhian reform, see B.R. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, in *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol.9, (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1991).

10 For a collection of writings that came out of the dalit movement from the state of Maharashtra, see Arjun Dangle (ed.), *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1992).

11 For a recent study on the Dalit Panthers and their political activities, see Anupama Rao, *Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2009), ch.5.

12 Dangle, *Poisoned Bread*. 289.

13 See 'Dalit Panther Manifesto', in Joshi, Barbara (ed.), *Untouchables! Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement* (London: Zed Books, 1986), 141–7.

14 The following two volumes bring together the dalit writings from the four states of south India: K. Satyanarayana. and Susie Tharu (eds), *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India – Dossier 1: Tamil and Malayalam* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011) and *From those Stubs, Steel Nibs are Sprouting: New Dalit Writing from South India. Dossier 2: Kannada and Telugu* (Noida: HarperCollins, 2013).

15 Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Calcutta: Samya, 1996).

16 Raj Gautaman, *Dalith Panpaadu* [Dalit Culture] (Puducherry: Gowri Pathippagam, 1993).

17 *Anveshi* Broadsheet on the issue is representative. It has pieces representing both the logics of discussing beef. The editorial presents the problem ambiguously as political and cultural at once. See Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, *Broadsheet on Contemporary Politics*, 1:4 (2013).

18 Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*.

19 For instance, land struggle is a major agenda in dalit politics today. Ilaiah's claim that private property is an alien idea to Dalitbahujan culture neglects the history of dalits being kept away from owning land. (Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, 42).

20 In a way, the dalit experiential narratives/autobiographies also, unlike the forms of poetry and fiction, failed to create what Wallace Stevens called 'description without place'. Description without space, according to Žižek, 'is not a description which locates its content in a historical space and time but a description which creates, as the background of the phenomenon it describes, an inexistent space of its own, so that what appears in it is not an appearance sustained by the depth of reality behind it, but a decontexutalised appearance, an appearance which fully coincides with real being. See Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 5.

21 Gopal Guru (ed.), *Humiliation: Claims and Context* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (eds), *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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22 Since Guru's works are seminal and need a special elaborate discussion, I do not intend to enter into that here.
23 See P. Thangaraj, *Saathi Olippin Varalatru Padipinai* [Historical Lessons in Annihilation of Caste] (Chennai: Puratchikanal, 1999).
24 B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, in *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol.1 (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1979), 23–80.
25 Raj Gowthaman, *Dalithiya Arasiyal* [Dalitist Politics] (Chennai: Parisal, 2005)
26 Drawing on Ambedkar, Anand Teltumbde reasserts this view throughout his works. See Anand Teltumbde, 'Rethinking Strategies for Dalit Movement: A Concept Note for Discussion' (unpublished); Ambedkar Memorial Lecture, delivered at Ambedkar Habba, Spoorthi Dham, in Bangalore on 14 April 2011; *Anti-Imperialism and Annihilation of Castes* (Dombivali: Ramai Prakashan, 2005).
27 Satyanarayana and Tharu, Introduction, *No Alphabet in Sight*, 13, 14.
28 M. Mathivannan, *Ul Othukeedu: Sila Parvaikal* [Inner Reservation: Some Perspectives] (Chennai: Karuppu Pirathigal, 2007); Ezhil Ilangovan (ed.), *Adhiyaman Araikooval*, (Coimbatore: Adi Tamizhar Peravai, 2003).
29 Jacques Ranciere has called this process subjectivisation. See 'Politics, Identification and Subjectivization', *October*, 61, *Identity in Question* (1991), 58–64.

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