

# **Dalit Writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Activism and Literary Aesthetics in Contemporary India**

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## Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the relationship between Dalit activism and literature through an analysis of literature published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I argue that contemporary literature has a fundamentally different relationship with the activist project than that of forty years ago. Since the inception of the Dalit Panthers in the early 1970s, Dalit literature has been inextricably tied to the activist project, with many Dalit activists using literature as an extension of their activism. In this thesis, I argue that this close relationship has changed as we have entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I argue that although contemporary Dalit literature often reflects the concerns of political and social activists, contemporary writers are becoming ever more concerned with literary experimentation and innovation. This focus on literary style and form comes at a moment when writers are beginning to represent Dalit communities in a more positive light, rather than focusing on the pain and degradation of Dalit lives. This combination has created a different kind of Dalit literature that is radically different from its predecessors. I explore what kind of relationship this literature has with the contemporary activist and political world, whilst also exploring how Dalit art and culture has the potential to inspire a new generation of Dalits and give them a feeling of self-respect. This thesis also explores how Dalits turn to other religions in a bid to reject the dogma of Hinduism which sees them as untouchable, as well as analysing the use of Dalit gods within contemporary Dalit literature. This research offers a radically different perspective of Dalit literature that does not position it as a sociological account of Dalit life. Instead, this thesis views Dalit literature as art in its own right that is infused with the creative energy of Dalit communities. This creativity, in the form of Dalit literature, points towards a positive route towards self-respect for Dalits that does not need to rely on the narratives of suffering upon which Dalit literature was founded.

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## Introduction

*The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.*<sup>1</sup>

Rohith Vemula

Dates. Dates are important markers in every facet of daily life; of nation building; of understanding our history. There are many dates that are central to these concepts within the Indian context, which have helped to shape and galvanise the idea of independent India. Take, for example, 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947, the day that gave birth to two new nations.<sup>2</sup> 30<sup>th</sup> January 1948, the day the Father of the Nation was assassinated. 14<sup>th</sup> October 1956, the day the Father of the Indian Constitution disowned Hinduism and embraced Buddhism. 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992, the day the Babri Masjid was torn to the ground by a group of Hindu activists, triggering a significant amount of violence and civil unrest.<sup>3</sup> These dates have become fixed in the psyche of modern Indians from across the social spectrum, offering a variety of meanings for different communities across the subcontinent. 17<sup>th</sup> January 2016 has become a date that is set to join these other memorable moments within the development of modern India. On this date, a young Dalit PhD student took his life, jolting the nation to turn its attention to the issue of caste in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The suicide of Rohith Vemula can be seen as a lens through which we can begin to view caste in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as his case shows how caste has been able to adapt to the developing structures of contemporary India. The events before and after Vemula's death link to multiple strands that run throughout this thesis such as caste identity, discrimination, and how caste functions today.

There are many accounts of Vemula's life written by his friends and associates focusing on their activism at the University of Hyderabad.<sup>4</sup> This is not the place to retell those stories. Instead, I

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation is taken from Rohith Vemula's suicide note. To read it in full, see <<https://thewire.in/caste/rohith-vemula-letter-a-powerful-indictment-of-social-prejudices>> [accessed 15th August 2020].

<sup>2</sup> Although Pakistan Independence Day is celebrated on August 14<sup>th</sup>, the Indian Independence Act (1947) states that both Pakistan and India became independent nations on the 15<sup>th</sup>. See UK Government, *Indian Independence Act (1947)*, 1947, p.3 <[https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1947/30/pdfs/ukpga\\_19470030\\_en.pdf](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1947/30/pdfs/ukpga_19470030_en.pdf)> [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020]; Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight* (London: William Collins, 2017), p.277.

<sup>3</sup> Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (London: Macmillan, 2007), pp. 637-640.

<sup>4</sup> See Nikhila Henry, *The Ferment: Youth Unrest in India* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2018); Sudipto Mondal, 'Rohith Vemula: An Unfinished Portrait', *Hindustan Times*, (2016) <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/static/rohith-vemula-an-unfinished-portrait/>> [accessed 24 August 2020]; Praveen Donthi, 'How caste shaped the experience of Rohith Vemula and other students at the University of Hyderabad', *The Caravan*, (2016) <<https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/caste-shaped-experience-rohith-vemula->

wish to focus on two key incidents related to Vemula's life and death that begin to expose the ways in which caste operates today, particularly in Narendra Modi's India. The first incident occurred before Vemula's death and can be cited as one of the reasons that led to his suicide. On 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2016, Vemula and four other Dalit PhD students were suspended from their hostels after a complaint was filed against them by N. Sucheel Kumar, a leader of the student wing of the BJP the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP).<sup>5</sup> The complaint was filed due to an altercation that had occurred between the ABVP and the Ambedkar Students Association (ASA), in which Kumar claimed to have been assaulted. The suspension of Vemula and other students was the result of pressure being applied by the BJP government onto the university administration. Multiple letters were sent by the Ministry of Human Resource Development showing their concerns about the 'anti-national activities' at University of Hyderabad, and suggesting that Vemula and others should be punished for such activities and for the alleged assault on Kumar.<sup>6</sup> The letters were linked to the then union minister for Labour, Bandaru Dattatreya, who described University of Hyderabad as 'a den of casteist, extremist, and anti-national politics'.<sup>7</sup> After Vemula and his friends were suspended, they were forced to sleep outside on campus. Fifteen days later, Vemula was found hung from the ceiling fan in the room of a friend.

What this particular strand of Vemula's story highlights is the institutional casteism that exists in the Indian academy today, as well as the lengths that the government will go to fight Dalit protest. Vemula and the ASA were targeted because they were Dalits and championed the Dalit and minority cause.<sup>8</sup> The ASA and the ABVP are two student organisations at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. However, only one had its members suspended and labelled 'extremist', which is ultimately down to the pervading caste culture that exists on Indian university campuses. The case of Senthil Kumar is another example of how caste discrimination manifests in Indian universities. In 2008, the PhD student killed himself after his university would not provide him with a supervisor, leading to him to struggle with his studies and failing one his courses, prompting the university to suspend his stipend.<sup>9</sup> The case of Senthil Kumar is one that is common for Dalit PhD students. One of the core functions of the ASA is to help Dalit students navigate the obstacles placed in their path during their studies. Praveen Donthi quotes a Dalit student as saying: 'my parents gave me birth [...] But the rest, the words I speak, the chai I drink, the scholarship I draw, the dignity I have is all thanks to Ambedkar and the ASA named after him'.<sup>10</sup> Caste discrimination, then, has adapted itself to the modern

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students-university-hyderabad> [accessed 24<sup>th</sup> August 2020]; Rohit Vemula, *Caste Is Not a Rumour: The Online Diary of Rohith Vemula*, ed. by Nikhila Henry (New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Henry, *The Ferment*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Henry, *The Ferment*, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Henry, *The Ferment*, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Vemula frequently attended protests against the discrimination of Muslims. See Henry, *The Ferment*, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> See: Ramanathan S, 'Rohith Wasn't Alone, It is Not Easy Being a Dalit Science Scholar', *The Quint*, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2016 <<https://www.thequint.com/news/india/rohith-wasnt-alone-it-is-not-easy-being-a-dalit-science-scholar>> [accessed 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020].

<sup>10</sup> Donthi, 'How caste shaped the experience of Rohith Vemula'.

university system. The letter writing campaign by the BJP government that triggered Vemula's suspension is also evidence of how prevalent caste discrimination has become post-2014. The electoral victory of the BJP and Narendra Modi in 2014 (followed by another large victory in the 2019 election) has meant that many attitudes that bubbled under the surface of Indian society have now exploded into clear sight. Of course, caste discrimination has existed in India for hundreds of years.<sup>11</sup> But what the election of the BJP has done, in many respects, is give the general public permission to openly attack Dalits and other minorities. The ideology of Hindutva, which celebrates the tradition and primacy of Hinduism, is at the core of the BJP, and ultimately singles out Dalits and minorities such as Muslims. It is this ideology that allows figures such as Dattatreya to label Dalits 'anti-national'.<sup>12</sup> Hindutva allows right-wing views to come to the fore in the national landscape. For example, the issue of cow protection, and so-called 'cow vigilantes', has been tied to right-wing forms of nationalism since the colonial period. As Kalpana Jain notes, cow protection was rooted in the idea 'to save Hinduism from Islamic and Christian influence'.<sup>13</sup> This often led to attacks on cattle farmers, and people who ate beef, many of whom were Muslim and of lower caste. With cow protection inherently being about the 'protection' of Hindu values, it was able to be adopted by the right-wing group the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS) alongside its political branch, which in its current form is the BJP. Jain notes that since 2015, a year after the electoral victory of Modi and the BJP, there was a rise in the number of 'emboldened vigilante groups', and attacks on Muslims for eating beef.<sup>14</sup> These public displays of discrimination are exacerbated by politicians such as Dattatreya who directly fan the flames of caste discrimination. His interference in the case of Vemula exemplifies how volatile the current political climate is for Dalits and other minorities and the risk that the current government poses to the progress that has been made to protect Dalits and end caste discrimination.

The second incident of note in the case of Rohith Vemula occurred after his death and concerns something that is discussed in-depth throughout this thesis: caste identity. After Vemula's death, several politicians claimed he was not a Dalit, causing an inquiry to be triggered. It has been reported that this claim was made to avoid certain individuals being charged under the Prevention of Atrocities (SC/ST) Act, charges that the ASA amongst others wished to bring to those it felt were responsible for Vemula's death.<sup>15</sup> The claim was that Vemula was in fact a member of the Vaddera caste (which is classified as Other Backward Caste), as opposed to being a Mala.<sup>16</sup> Vemula's mother is a Mala, who was adopted by a Vaddera woman, and subsequently married to a Vaddera man.

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<sup>11</sup> The *Manusmriti*, a legal text from around 5 CE, details the rules that certain social groups should follow, thus solidifying caste hierarchy which breeds discrimination. I discuss this in greater length in Chapter Two, pp.53-54.

<sup>12</sup> I will discuss why Dalits are often called 'anti-national' in more detail below.

<sup>13</sup> Kalpana Jain, 'Cow Vigilantes and the Rise of Hindu Nationalism', *Kennedy School Review*, 19, (2019), 37-42 (p. 38).

<sup>14</sup> Jain, 'Cow Vigilantes and the Rise of Hindu Nationalism', p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Donthi, 'How caste shaped the experience of Rohith Vemula'.

<sup>16</sup> Other Backward Classes is the legal name for a collection of caste groups. These castes are economically and socially above Dalits but below Brahmins.



Vemula, along with his siblings, were in possession of Caste Certificates proving that they were Dalits. However, the enquiry into Vemula's caste status concluded that he was a Vaddera. It argued that there was no proof that Vemula's mother was a Mala as she did not know the names of her parents, rendering the Caste Certificate of Vemula void.<sup>17</sup> What is interesting about this decision is that it was made on the basis that there was a lack of empirical evidence that his mother was a Dalit; because there is no proof, she is not a Dalit. This evidence-based process of determining caste identity is fundamentally opposed to the nature of caste itself and the ways the structures of caste discrimination are enforced. By the logic of caste and the doctrines of Hinduism, Dalits are spiritually impure; they are the embodiment of ritual pollution. The touch of a Dalit can make a person or object impure. One is born a Brahmin because of good karma and born a Dalit because of bad karma.<sup>18</sup> A certificate issued by the Backward Class Welfare Department cannot remove karma. What this 'issue' surrounding Vemula's caste proves is the absurd nature of caste logic. For his entire life, Vemula was treated as a Dalit, but when treating him as a Dalit would result in legal repercussions, his Dalit identity was denied. To put this into perspective we must ask - would Bandaru Dattatreya touch Vemula's mother after the State declared that she is not a Dalit?

The issues surrounding caste identity are ones that run throughout this thesis, and in many ways tie together the worlds of Dalit activism and culture. In this thesis, I will explore how activist and cultural concerns are represented in contemporary Dalit literature, and how the renderings of these issues by Dalit writers may be different to how they are represented in the activist realm. In doing so, I will focus predominantly on literature published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As the case of Rohith Vemula has shown, caste has been able to adapt to the contours of modernising India and find its place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover, the developments of Dalit activism and literature that took place in the 1990s, with Dalits beginning to enter the academy in large numbers and a growth in the publication of south Indian Dalit writing, mean that Dalit literature published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century represents something different to previous writing by Dalits. Dalit literature written in the 1970s and 80s was ultimately tied to the activist experience; I argue that contemporary Dalit writing explores

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<sup>17</sup>Ashok Kumar Roopanwal, 'Report by the Commission of Inquiry Regarding the Death of Shri Chakravarti R. Vemula, a Research Scholar at the University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad', *Ministry of Education* (2017), pp. 35-38.

<[https://www.mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/documentreports/JusticeAshokKumarRoopanwalReport.pdf](https://www.mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/documentreports/JusticeAshokKumarRoopanwalReport.pdf)> [accessed 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020].

<sup>18</sup> Johannes Bronkhorst defines Karma as follows: '[a] belief in rebirth and karmic retribution implies, primarily, that one will reap the rewards of the seeds one sows in this life, normally in a next life. Good deeds will give rise to agreeable forms of rebirth, bad deeds to disagreeable', see Johannes Bronkhorst, *Karma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), p. 4. It can be said, therefore, that Dalits are born as untouchable and at the bottom of the societal ladder because of bad karma generated in previous lives. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar attempts to redefine karma, rooting it in the 'here and now' as opposed to rebirth, as he argues that the Buddha did not believe in the soul, which therefore removes the possibility of rebirth based on karmic energy. Ambedkar believed that 'The doctrine of past karma is a purely Brahminic doctrine [...] It has been bodily introduced to Buddhism by someone who wanted to make Buddhism akin to Hinduism', see B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 182. In Chapter Two, I discuss dharma, a related concept that roots rebirth in one's fulfilment of societal roles, p. 54-55.

multiple aspects of Dalit life that may, on the surface, appear to be at odds with the traditional mode of Dalit activism. A focus on Dalit culture and gods, for example, highlights an aspect of Dalit life that certain activist strands wish to forget. From the Ambedkarite point of view, which is rooted in a rejection of Hinduism, Dalit cultural tradition represents a past in which Dalits were tied to Hinduism. Rejecting this cultural history through finding and creating new histories repositions the Dalit narrative outside of Hinduism and caste constructs. However, as Chapters Three and Five of this thesis discuss, Dalit culture is not necessarily viewed as something that needs to be forgotten about. Instead, Dalit writers use Dalit culture to find self-respect and challenge caste structures. A celebration rather than a rejection of Dalit cultural history is something that I argue is central to Dalit writing published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and I will explore how this view is positioned in regard to activist dialogues surrounding Dalit culture. The Ambedkarite mode of Dalit activism is rooted in its rejection of Hinduism and embraces Buddhism as the religion of choice for Dalits. However, the texts discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis complicate this narrative. Instead of fully championing the idea of converting to Buddhism and showing how conversion can change the lives of Dalits, these texts demonstrate how the daily lives of Dalit Buddhists can remain unchanged, and that many communities revert back to the rituals of Hinduism. The neat ideas that are presented in the world of Dalit activism are therefore complicated in the literature of Dalit writers. This, represents a certain disconnection between the worlds of Dalit activism and literature – something that is markedly different from previous conceptions of Dalit literature. Below, I will discuss in depth how my analysis of contemporary Dalit literature is different from previous discussions, and how my thesis fits in the fields of Dalit studies, Dalit literature studies, and postcolonial studies more broadly.

Sharmila Rege, writing in 2007, shares an anecdote about how a proposed postgraduate course focused on Dalit studies at her university was forcibly renamed ‘Caste Studies in India: 1990s and After’.<sup>19</sup> This fixation on ‘caste’ rather than ‘Dalit’ highlights a trend in academic discourse on Dalit issues that has been entrenched for decades. As Rege shows, ‘the institutional possibilities of Dalit studies as an academic field with clearly mapped scope and boundaries [were] still being debated’ in the mid-2000s.<sup>20</sup> Nearly a decade later, Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana published the first edited collection that attempts to define the scope of this new discipline.<sup>21</sup> Both Rege, Rawat and Satyanarayana point to the 1990s as a defining moment that gave birth to the field of Dalit studies, as this decade saw a renewed focus on Dalit politics led by a new generation of activists. As Rege discusses, there were numerous moments that contributed to this including:

the birth centenary of Dr. Ambedkar [...] the emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party, implementation of the Mandal Report and the consequent violent opposition and debate in the media and academia. The ‘emergence’ of dalit feminism and the challenge it posed to the

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<sup>19</sup> Sharmila Rege, *Dalit Studies as Pedagogical Practice: Claiming More Than Just a ‘Little Place’ in the Academia* (Chennai: Madras Institute of Development Studies, 2006), p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Rege, *Dalit Studies as Pedagogical Practice*, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana, *Dalit Studies* (London: Duke University Press, 2016).

construction of dalits and women as consistent case was also a crucial force in the constitution of dalit studies.<sup>22</sup>

I will discuss how some of these moments, such as the birth centenary of Ambedkar, contributed to a rise in new Dalit literature in south India in Chapter One, but it is important to discuss here how some of these moments helped define this new field of Dalit studies. Significantly, the findings and the implementation of the Mandal Commission report (1980) had an unquestionable impact on Indian society and politics in the 1990s. The Mandal Commission sought to evaluate the social and economic situation of the OBC's, and ultimately recommended that a 27% reservation should be implemented in areas such as public sector jobs, university places, and schools.<sup>23</sup> When added to the pre-existing 22.5% reservation in place for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, this would mean that 49% of India's citizens would have the potential to benefit from reservations. What these reservations can and cannot achieve must be stressed here. As Gail Omvedt argues, 'caste-based reservations cannot remove poverty, cannot end economic exploitation; they cannot "uplift the poor" [...] What they can do is end the caste-monopoly of organised sector jobs, especially of the public sector'.<sup>24</sup> This is a monopoly that has 'arisen out of a heritage of thousands of years of caste reservation in India in which Shudras and ati-Shudras were forbidden access to power, wealth and status'.<sup>25</sup> The implementation of these recommendations in the 1990s triggered a wave of public outrage from upper-caste communities labelled as 'Forward Castes'. The argument of this group (predominantly consisting of Brahmins) was that this level of reservation was unfair and would lead to "'dangerous" doctors and engineers' who were 'given admission into engineering and medical colleges under the reserved quota' with fewer than minimum marks.<sup>26</sup> This argument was that the success of the 'Forward Castes' was ultimately based on merit, and that reservations stripped it away. As K. Balagopal ironically suggests: 'everybody has suddenly made the unbelievable discovery that there is something called "merit" which has been in the possession of the Indian elite all these days, and which is now sought to be destroyed by V P Singh [the then Prime Minister] to please the wretched talentless backward castes and get their vote'.<sup>27</sup> Simultaneously, the Forward Caste community were both denying caste, stating that they had reached their position in society on their own merit, and acknowledging caste by stating the OBC's should not be entitled to reservations.

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<sup>22</sup> Rege, *Dalit Studies as Pedagogical Practice*, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> B.P. Mandal, 'Report on the Backward Classes Commission' (Government of India, 1980), p. 58. <<http://www.ncbc.nic.in/Writereaddata/Mandal%20Commission%20Report%20of%20the%201st%20Part%20English635228715105764974.pdf>> [accessed 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020].

<sup>24</sup> Gail Omvedt, "' Twice-Born" Riot against Democracy', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25:39, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1990, 2195-2201 (p. 2196).

<sup>25</sup> Omvedt, "' Twice-Born" Riot against Democracy', p. 2196.

<sup>26</sup> K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, 'Introduction', *No Alphabet In Sight: New Dalit Writing From South India* ed. K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011), pp.1-69 (p .5).

<sup>27</sup> K. Balagopal, 'This Anti-Mandal Mania', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25:40, 6<sup>th</sup> October 1990, 2231-2234 (p. 2231).

Although the protests against the implementation of reservations were not directly aimed at Dalits, they battled against the protests as they were ‘quite aware that twice-born opposition is not simply to “OBC” reservations but to any kind of reservations, and that if they succeed in beating back the Shudras on this they will next move to push back the dalits’.<sup>28</sup> Importantly, both Dalits and Adivasis were lending their support to the widening of reservations even though they would not directly benefit from it in order to defend the right to reservations more broadly.<sup>29</sup> These debates and protests that followed the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report ‘opened up perhaps for the first time in Indian history a national debate on caste which took place in the media, universities, Parliament and the courts as well as in social and political organizations’.<sup>30</sup> As Satyanarayana and Tharu argue, ‘in this moment of crisis, caste surfaced as a radically transformed phenomenon, giving rise to a new language of Indian politics’.<sup>31</sup> This transformation, I argue, is rooted in the fact that caste identity transitioned from being hidden by an individual to being actively expressed. As Omvedt argues, the debate surrounding reservations, as well as reservations themselves, ‘bring into the realm of consciousness and public action a caste hierarchy that already exists’.<sup>32</sup> These very public discussions of caste enabled Dalits to discuss caste issues in spaces and in ways that were previously unavailable.

It is this new language and means of discussing caste that developed in the post-Mandal 1990s that contributed to the formation of Dalit studies. This was particularly enabled by the rise in the number of Dalits entering the academy. As Rawat and Satyanarayana note, ‘the entry of social groups who have often been the *subject matter* of academic scholarship rather than the *actors* in the production of that knowledge is perhaps the most significant recent development in India’.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Alok Mukherjee argues that ‘discussions of the literary and cultural representations of marginalized and dispossessed people, such as members of India’s untouchable and aboriginal communities, has, for the most part, been based on the writings of upper caste writers’.<sup>34</sup> Gopal Guru adds that ‘prior to the 1990s, continuous marginalization and ghettoization implicitly suggested that the so-called Dalit question failed to attract any serious attention from the intellectual mainstream’.<sup>35</sup> Through Dalits entering the academy, they are able to conduct vital scholarly work from a Dalit perspective. This research, as Rawat and Satyanarayana note, ‘consciously retain[s] an activist

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<sup>28</sup> Omvedt, “‘Twice-Born’ Riot against Democracy’, p. 2195.

<sup>29</sup> Adivasi is the collective name for India’s tribal communities. Omvedt, “‘Twice-Born’ Riot against Democracy’, p. 2195.

<sup>30</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Omvedt, “‘Twice-Born’ Riot against Democracy’, p. 2199.

<sup>33</sup> Rawat and Satyanarayana, *Dalit Studies*, p.3; emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> Alok Mukherjee, ‘Translator’s Introduction’, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2004), pp. vii-x (p. vii).

<sup>35</sup> Gopal Guru, ‘The Indian Nation and its Egalitarian Conception’, *Dalit Studies* ed. Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana (London: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 31-53 (p. 31).

sensibility'.<sup>36</sup> In doing so, we can begin to set the parameters of Dalit studies that Rege suggested were being debated in the mid-2000s. Dalit studies is the study of caste and Dalit issues from a Dalit perspective that has an activist edge embedded. What makes this scholarship different from previous work on caste (mainly conducted by the elite and upper castes<sup>37</sup>) is that it incorporates the categories of humiliation and dignity.<sup>38</sup> This seminal work emerging from the 1990s was only possible as it was from the point of view of Dalit academics, and therefore had a vital Dalit perspective. Dalit academics were able to draw upon personal experience in their analysis of caste and Dalit issues. This has led to 'substantial work [that] has been done in Dalit studies, on caste, marginality and on the emergence of the Dalit struggle in the 1970s, on its constant reinvention of itself to this day, as well as the role of literature in the Dalit social and political protest'.<sup>39</sup> It is this work by Dalit academics that defines and articulates Dalit struggles, and has allowed international scholars to engage with these debates. Through engaging with the categories of humiliation and dignity, Dalit scholars have been able to open the eyes of international scholars and thus enable us to engage with Dalit issues from these perspectives. Although we can never feel the humiliation that Dalits endure, the fact that Dalit studies as a discipline incorporates humiliation and the quest for dignity into its basic framework enables us to approach Dalit literature from these points of view.

Although Dalit studies appears to offer us a useful framework for studying and analysing Dalit literature, the reality is quite different. In fact, Dalit literary studies in many respects has represented only a small section of Dalit studies. As Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak note, 'we knew that there was a substantial divide between Dalit studies, as they had been developing over the past couple of decades, and Dalit literatures, which were often granted a much smaller portion of the general interest'.<sup>40</sup> This could be for a number of reasons, ranging from availability and translation (which will be discussed below), to the fact that a number of Dalit academics that entered the academy in the 1990s were concerned with tackling the elite and upper caste stranglehold over the social sciences. I argue that the core reason why the study of Dalit literature has only occupied a small space in Dalit studies is due to the ways in which Dalit literature was conceptualised in the 1970s, which has, in many ways, endured into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Dalit literature of the 1970s was primarily associated with the activist group the Dalit Panthers, and was a literature of protest. As I will discuss in more depth in Chapters One and Three, the main purpose of this literature was to inform and expose. It was necessary to inform Dalits of their oppression in order to build a firm activist base, as well as to expose the horrors of the caste system to

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<sup>36</sup> Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana, 'Introduction', *Dalit Studies* (London: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 1-30 (p. 3).

<sup>37</sup> Rege, *Dalit Studies as Pedagogical Practice*, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Rawat and Satyanarayana, 'Introduction', p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, 'Introduction to the Second Edition: Taking stock, updating, moving forward', *Dalit Literatures in India* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1-11 (p. 3).

<sup>40</sup> Abraham and Misrahi-Barak, 'Introduction to the Second Edition', p. 1.

the rest of Indian society, and the world. Activist-writers of this generation such as Arjun Dangle and Sharankumar Limbale both conceptualise the purpose of Dalit literature in this vein. Dangle argues that ‘this literature of the Dalits is intimately related to social reality and is not imaginary or entertainment-oriented’,<sup>41</sup> whilst stating that ‘Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of [Ambedkarite] awareness’.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Limbale argues that ‘it must be kept in mind that any aesthetic consideration of Dalit literature must be based on Ambedkar’s thought, and that this literature’s literary value is embedded in its social value’.<sup>43</sup> What these two conceptualisations of Dalit literature focus on is the political and social value of the texts. Ultimately, Dalit literature must translate the radical politics of Ambedkar whilst being rooted in the social realm that represents the daily struggles of Dalit life.

This mode of analysing Dalit literature has remained intact nearly fifty years since the Dalit Panthers’ formation. For example, both Sharmila Rege and Pramod K. Nayar have sought to define Dalit autobiographies as ‘testimonios’.<sup>44</sup> In his analysis of Bama’s landmark autobiography *Karukku*, Nayar states that:

in most cases *testimonio* narratives are documents of atrocities and suffering, bringing one into contact with the victimized. The testimonio is the voice of one who witnesses for the sake of an other [sic], who remains voiceless. That is, the speaking subaltern subject of the narrative gives voice to the lived experiences of herself and of those who are victims of social and linguistic-literary marginalization.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, in her study of Dalit autobiographies written by women, Rege declares that ‘in a testimonio, the intention is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group’s oppression, imprisonment and struggle’.<sup>46</sup> Both of these contemporary conceptualisations of the Dalit autobiography bear similarities to the way in which Dangle and Limbale frame their interpretations of the purpose of Dalit literature. By viewing the Dalit autobiography as a testimonio, it becomes a piece of ‘evidence’, which complements the logic that the function of Dalit literature is to inform and expose. As a piece of evidence, the Dalit autobiography as testimonio does its part to expose the caste system. Dalit autobiographies as testimonios are seen as ‘documents’, as Nayar suggests, rather than literary texts. This is emphasised by Rege who states that the intention of the testimonio is not ‘one of literariness’.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Arjun Dangle, ‘Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future’, *Poisoned Bread*, ed. Arjun Dangle (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Limited, 1992), pp. 234-266 (p. 255).

<sup>42</sup> Arjun Dangle, ‘Introduction’, *Poisoned Bread*, ed. Arjun Dangle (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Limited, 1992), pp. xi-xv (p. xi).

<sup>43</sup> Sharankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2004), p. 20.

<sup>44</sup> Pramod K. Nayar, ‘Bama’s *Karukku*: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 41.2 (2006), 83-100 (p. 84).

<sup>45</sup> Nayar, ‘Bama’s *Karukku*: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio’, p. 84.

<sup>46</sup> Sharmila Rege *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonies* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013) p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> Rege *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, p. 17.

Links to this traditional way of analysing Dalit literature can be found in studies of Dalit literature today, even from an international perspective. In the introduction to *Dalit Text: Aesthetics and Politics Re-imagined* (published in 2020), Judith Misrahi-Barak, K. Satyanarayana and Nicole Thiara state that ‘Dalit literature is ultimately a literary expression of the Dalit movements in India and it contributes to shaping those struggles’.<sup>48</sup> They further argue that

Dalit literature in India is written by a generation of militant Dalits with a Dalit consciousness. It explores the world with insights that came from the writers who belonged to the untouchable community and had first-hand experience of Dalit life. Dalit life experience, insights and aspirations inform and shape Dalit literature.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, Abraham and Misrahi-Barak acknowledge that ‘Dalit literatures have so far been considered mostly as literatures that document a social, economic and political situation, and not literatures in their own right’.<sup>50</sup> Both of these arguments (put forward in ground-breaking volumes on Dalit literature) are strikingly similar to the traditional mode of analysing Dalit literature. They both speak to Dalit literature being a literary expression of the Dalit movement, which is inevitably tied to depicting social reality and Ambedkarite politics. The above quotation from *Dalit Text* takes this alignment a step further by drawing on the militant nature of Dalit literature and activism. Although they are correct in highlighting this militancy, as the activism of the Dalit Panthers as well as their literature can be described as militant, stating that ‘Dalit literature in India *is* written by a generation of militant Dalits’ is substantially incorrect.<sup>51</sup> On the contrary, there have been generations of Dalit writers post-Dalit Panthers that have written in completely different modes. Writers that I engage with in this thesis such as Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy, N.D. Rajkumar, and C. Ayyappan, could not be described as militant.<sup>52</sup> Although the editors of *Dalit Text* and, to a lesser extent, *Dalit Literatures in India*, appear to align themselves with the traditional mode of analysing Dalit literature, they also point towards something new. In *Dalit Text*, the editors argue that there is ‘excessive emphasis on the sociological significance of Dalit literature relegat[ing] it to the social and political domain’ and believe that ‘these approaches undermine the significance of Dalit literary intervention as mainstream modern Indian literature’.<sup>53</sup> Abraham and Misrahi-Barak make a similar point in relation to the literary value of Dalit literature. They argue that:

most of the debates around/about Dalit literature have failed to acknowledge adequately the new vocabulary of imagination and aesthetical sensibility which have been produced by these literatures. These cannot be reduced merely to an engagement with victimhood or to the mere denouncement of the abominable mistreatments lower castes and Dalits have been subjected

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<sup>48</sup> Judith Misrahi-Barak, K. Satyanarayana, and Nicole Thiara, ‘Introduction’, *Dalit Text: Aesthetics and Politics Re-Imagined*, ed. Judith Misrahi-Barak, K. Satyanarayana, and Nicole Thiara (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1-13 (p. 3).

<sup>49</sup> Judith Misrahi-Barak, Satyanarayana, Thiara, ‘Introduction’, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, ‘Introduction to the First Edition Dalit literatures in India: in, out and beyond’, *Dalit Literatures in India*, pp. 12-24 (p. 14).

<sup>51</sup> See Chapter One of this thesis, pp. 35-38.

<sup>52</sup> It is important to note that this does not make their writing any less radical, which is continually addressed throughout the thesis.

<sup>53</sup> Misrahi-Barak, Satyanarayana, Thiara, ‘Introduction’, p. 2.

to, from a political or sociological point of view [...] Dalit literature today has established itself as a new mode of literary/aesthetic imagination and writing, challenging traditional aesthetic criteria and practices.<sup>54</sup>

Both *Dalit Text* and *Dalit Literatures in India* emphasise the need to focus academic attention on the literary qualities of Dalit literature, rather than solely focusing on the sociological aspects of the texts. There appears to be a tension, therefore, in current Dalit literary studies between what it 'should' do and what it 'would like' to do. By going back to the political and militant origins of Dalit literature, *Dalit Text* recounts the typical theoretical approaches when analysing Dalit literature what 'should' be included in such an analysis. However, through highlighting the need for a shift to an analysis of the literariness of Dalit literature, both *Dalit Text* and *Dalit Literatures in India* point to an emerging mode of analysis within in the field. This new mode of analysis is ultimately rooted in the recognition that there is more to Dalit literature than pain and suffering. Through focusing on the literary qualities of Dalit literature such as narrative form and experimentation, as well as exploring different themes that are presented in the texts, this new mode of analysis enables new and different discussions about Dalit literature that would otherwise be difficult to have whilst viewing Dalit texts through the limited lens of pain and suffering.

Although there have been different ways of conceptualising Dalit literature, with this thesis offering a new mode of reading and analysing Dalit literature, one theme that remains constant in academic discourse is the recognition of how radical Dalit literature is. Although this radicalism, in terms of politics and aesthetic, will be discussed frequently throughout this thesis, I wish to foreground these discussions by addressing how a particular kind radicalism has been instilled within Dalit literature since its conception. This radicalism in Dalit literature resists and challenges Indian literature through bringing caste issues into the literary realm, whilst doing so in a particular kind of Dalit language. Ulka Anjaria notes that there is a standard narrative of how the Indian novel in English (the significance of the 'English' will be discussed below) developed:

This history would begin with the nineteenth-century indigenous elite's first dabbling in the writing of English, influenced by colonial education and the allure of modernity [...] It might then take us to the movement known as 'progressive writing' in the early twentieth century, when the novel was put to the service of a range of nationalist visions [...] It would then linger a bit at 1981, when, it is said, the Indian English novel finally found form with the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.<sup>55</sup>

This narrative of the development of the Indian English novel, Anjaria argues, has been solidified by postcolonial studies, as postcolonial scholars have 'done much to determine what Indian literature – and the Indian novel in particular – is as an object'.<sup>56</sup> What this basic and accepted narrative

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<sup>54</sup> Abraham and Misrahi-Barak, 'Introduction to the First Edition', p. 21.

<sup>55</sup> Ulka Anjaria, 'Introduction: Literary Pasts, Presents and Futures', in *A History of the Indian Novel in English*, ed. Ulka Anjaria (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp.1-30 (p.1).

<sup>56</sup> Ulka Anjaria, 'Introduction', p.2. Italics in original. I will discuss below the position that Dalit literature occupies in contemporary postcolonial studies, and how the current frameworks that the field offers may not be suitable for the study and analysis of Dalit literature.



highlights is how necessary the interventions of Dalit literature have been over the past half a century, whilst demonstrating how radical Dalit literature is in the face of mainstream Indian literature.

As can be gleaned from the narrative sketched by Anjaria, the Indian novel has historically been a realm dominated by the elite and the upper castes. Forged by the colonial encounter, the 'indigenous elite', who were predominantly members of the upper castes, were the groups that engaged with the British most during the colonial period.<sup>57</sup> As these groups began to learn English, they were the ones that first attempted to write in the novel form- a form that had been alien to the literature of the subcontinent. As these upper caste groups were the first to commandeer the novel form, it was the experiences of these groups that were represented in the novels that they wrote. Caste issues, for example, were not often the subjects of these novels. Even though Mulk Raj Anand's famous novel *Untouchable* was the first Indian novel in English to feature a Dalit protagonist, the protagonist is used to celebrate Gandhian nationalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which offered little hope for the Dalit community.<sup>58</sup> As S. Shankar notes, it is not until Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) that 'we once again encounter Dalit characters whose caste status is fully acknowledged and explored'.<sup>59</sup> Caste issues, therefore, have been widely absent from the Indian novel in English.<sup>60</sup> Dalit literature challenges this through bringing caste issues to the fore and creating a space within the literary world for Dalits. Dalits have long been silenced in the literary space by elite and upper caste writers who have dominated literary discourse and defined what can and cannot be discussed in literature. Dalit writing shatters this through its bold statements about caste, daring to present a version of Indian life that many mainstream writers are not willing to do.

As I discuss in my introduction to the Dalit Panthers in Chapter One of this thesis, the writing that they pioneered in the 1970s was radical not only in terms of literature written in English, but also in Marathi. The language that Dalits use in their writing is another way in which Dalit literature departs from and challenges Indian literature that came before it. As I discuss below in relation to the difficulties of translating Dalit literature into English, Dalit writers often employ a non-standard version of language in their texts. This language is often colloquial, harsh, and uses words that one would not find in standard forms of the language. The cultural critic Raj Gauthaman, for example,

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<sup>57</sup> This is discussed in greater depth below, see pp.21-24.

<sup>58</sup> I discuss this in greater depth in Chapter One, see pp.30-32.

<sup>59</sup> S. Shankar 'Teaching Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*: Colonial Context, Nationalism, Caste', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 4:2 (2017), 332-341 (p.340).

<sup>60</sup> Caste issues are also little discussed in critical studies of Indian literature. In such studies, Dalit literature is given little or no attention, which further illustrates the importance of Dalit literature in representing the often silenced voices of the Dalit community. Examples of generic studies of Indian literature that partly engage with caste issues include: *A History of the Indian Novel in English*, ed. Ulka Anjaria; G.J.V Prasad, *Writing India, Writing English: Literature, Language, Location* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011); Sourit Bhattacharaya, *Postcolonial Modernity and the Indian Novel: On Catastrophic Realism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

encourages Tamil Dalits to write and speak in ‘cheri Tamil’.<sup>61</sup> ‘Cheri’ is the Tamil word for the area of a village where Dalits live. Gauthaman, therefore, is making references to a specific kind of Dalit language- a language that has the potential to disrupt caste hierarchies. As I discuss in Chapter Three, Gauthaman argues that aspects of Dalit culture such as language can be used to form a ‘protest culture’ that resists the casteist principles of Hindu culture.<sup>62</sup> Through writing in this kind of language, Dalit writers are able to challenge the idea of what Indian literature is by writing in a language that is not considered as standard, and therefore not the kind of language that ‘should’ be used in literature. Writing in this kind of language also challenges the tradition of Indian writing in English. As discussed above, learning English has historically been tied to the upper caste elite. Dalits, therefore, have predominantly written in their own languages before being translated into English, with only a few examples existing of Dalits writing in English.<sup>63</sup> This fact further shows how Dalit writing departs from existing Indian literature. As many members of the Dalit community across India may never learn English, Dalit writing that is written in a specific kind of Dalit language resists many of the elitist principles that are engrained in Indian literature.

Dalit literature also challenges classical forms of Indian literature such as the epic. Two of the foundational texts in Indian literature, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are examples of epics. They tell the stories of some of the central figures in Hinduism, and move between storytelling, philosophy, and religion.<sup>64</sup> As these texts form some of the foundations of Hinduism (including caste structures), the stories of Dalit communities are not commonplace in the narratives that they construct.<sup>65</sup> G. Kalyana Rao’s novel *Untouchable Spring*, which is the focus of Chapter Three, seeks to challenge these texts by writing an epic about the Dalit community. Although not an epic in length, *Untouchable Spring* uses the themes of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* such as war and traveling on great adventures, but instead makes them Dalit and caste focused. The ‘adventure’ or ‘journey’ here is the experiences of the Dalit community from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The ‘war’ is the war on caste that these communities help to progress throughout the novel. As Alladi Uma and M. Sridhar argue, *Untouchable Spring* subverts the idea of the epic by placing Dalit lives at the centre of the novel. They write: ‘if Arthur Miller subverted the meaning of tragedy in his *Death of a Salesman* and insisted that the failure of an ordinary man is fit enough material for a tragedy, Kalyana Rao does

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<sup>61</sup> Raj Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Protest Culture: The First Stage’, in *The Oxford Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* ed. Ravikumar and R. Azhagarasan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 263-271 (p. 268).

<sup>62</sup> See pp.80-82.

<sup>63</sup> Examples include: Sujatha Gidla, *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* (London: Daunt Books, 2018); Yashica Dutt, *Coming out as Dalit* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2019). Interestingly, these are examples that have come via the diaspora, with both Gidla and Dutt currently living and writing in the United States of America.

<sup>64</sup> The *Mahabharata*, and extracts from it, will be discussed and analysed in Chapter Two, pp.56-59.

<sup>65</sup> As I discuss in Chapter Two, the famous *Bhagavad Gita* section of the *Mahabharata* solidifies the idea of the varna system of social organisation as a system decreed by God. See pp.57-59.

this with reference to the epic'.<sup>66</sup> Instead of focusing on great heroes such as Ram and Arjuna, or gods such as Krishna, Rao places normal Dalit characters and their culture at the heart of his epic. This is used in combination with the kind of Dalit language that has been discussed above. Uma and Sridhar note that the novel is written in a 'combination of "standard" language as well as the "ordinary" language'.<sup>67</sup> This 'ordinary' language is the language spoken by Dalits. Through using this kind of language, Rao further challenges the epics that would have been originally composed in Sanskrit. This language was the language of the upper castes, and Dalits were historically denied the opportunity to learn it. Rao's 'Dalit epic', therefore, uses 'ordinary' language to depict the lives of 'ordinary' Dalit communities, rather than depict gods and heroes in a language out of bounds for most. These points lead Uma and M. Sridhar to ask the question: 'who is to decide what is grandiose?'<sup>68</sup> This is a question that Dalit literature wishes to answer. In the face of Indian literature, both historically and in recent memory, in English and in other languages, Dalits have routinely been denied a presence. Their stories have not been seen as worthy enough to be shared on the page, and their language has not been viewed as refined enough to be published. Dalit literature, as well as Dalit studies, does much to reconfigure what 'Indian literature' is. Whether it be using non-standard dialect, or directly subverting classical forms, Dalit literature challenges the ideas of Indian literature in radical ways, creating its own space in the literary world.

As Dalit literary studies grows, particularly outside of India, an issue that can be found is the struggle between an academic focus on 'classic' texts and the need to engage with new and different literatures that represent different contexts. Abraham and Misrahi-Barak note that certain Dalit texts 'have become classics in the Indian context, and have been available for some time in English and in other languages. Yet, the attention seems to have been focused only on a few texts instead of taking stock of the general movement'.<sup>69</sup> Such texts include Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, as well as Dalit Panther writing by Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, and Baburao Bagul. The popularity of these texts is ultimately rooted in the fact that they have existed in English translation for a significant amount of time. This has enabled them to be discussed by a number of academics both inside and outside of India for a number of years. This attention focused on a small group of core literary texts is coupled with the fact that a number of book-length academic studies on Dalit literature by academics outside of India have focused on Hindi Dalit literature.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, these studies on Hindi Dalit literature engage with

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<sup>66</sup> Alladi Uma and M. Sridhar, 'Translators' Note', in G. Kalyana Rao *Untouchable Spring* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2011), pp.275-283 (p.279).

<sup>67</sup> Uma and Sridhar, 'Translators' Note', p.279.

<sup>68</sup> Uma and Sridhar, 'Translators' Note', p.278.

<sup>69</sup> Abraham and Misrahi-Barak, 'Introduction to the First Edition', p. 12.

<sup>70</sup> Nicole Thiara and Judith Misrahi-Barak, 'Editorial: Why Should we read Dalit Literature?', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 54:1 (2019), 3-8 (p. 6.). See, for example, Laura Brueck, *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Toral Jatin Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste* (New York: Fordham University

literature written in Hindi as opposed to English translation. For example, Laura Brueck's article in the Dalit literature Special Issue of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* engages with texts that are 'either not yet translated into English, or are in the process of being translated'.<sup>71</sup> These two facts surrounding the primary material used in Dalit literature studies represent a significant problem. There is a certain stagnation in the field, as similar arguments surrounding the same literary texts are often produced, creating a lack of new and original work. Moreover, the fact that only a small selection of texts is regularly engaged with creates a vacuum in which only certain Dalit experiences are discussed. As can be seen by the list above, many of these 'classic' texts were originally written in either Marathi or Hindi. This comes as no surprise, considering the Dalit/Ambedkarite politics and activism that emanated from Maharashtra, alongside the dominance of Hindi. These texts, therefore, offer windows into specific cultural and geographical contexts, and ignore the experiences of Dalits from south India, for example.

It is indeed surprising that critical studies on Dalit literature have not engaged with Dalit literature from south India considering the publication of a number of anthologies of south Indian Dalit literature over the past decade. For example, K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu have edited two influential anthologies of south Indian Dalit writing. The first, *No Alphabet in Sight* (2011) features a number of poems, short stories, novel extracts, and critical works, that have been translated from Tamil and Malayalam. The second, *Steel Nibs are Sprouting* (2013), features similar work that has been translated from Kannada and Telugu.<sup>72</sup> Both of these anthologies (or 'dossiers' as the editors prefer to call them) also feature extensive introductions that contextualise the literature both culturally and politically. Similarly, Oxford University Press has published a series of anthologies of translated Dalit literature from south India, including *The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing* (2012), *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* (2012), and *The Oxford India Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing* (2016).<sup>73</sup> These anthologies represent a wealth of translated material, much of which had little visibility prior to being published in the anthologies. They are therefore vital resources that offer a multitude of different voices from different backgrounds. Through engaging with the material published in the anthologies, we are able to explore a new dimension to Dalit literary studies and can begin to assess how caste functions and is represented in literature from across India as a whole, as opposed to in certain regions and contexts.

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Press, 2013); Sarah Beth Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>71</sup> Thiara and Misrahi-Barak, 'Editorial: Why Should we read Dalit Literature?', p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, *Steel Nibs are Sprouting: New Dalit Writing From South India* (London: HarperCollins, 2013).

<sup>73</sup> M. Dasan, V. Pratibha, C.S. Chandrika, Pradeepan Pampirikunnu, *The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012); Ravikumar and R. Azhagarasan, *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012); Purushotham, Gita Ramaswamy, Gogu Shyamala, *The Oxford India Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

As I have outlined above, there are two core points that need addressing as the field of Dalit literary studies advances. The first of these is a focus on the literariness of Dalit literature, which is at the heart of this thesis. Although an analysis of the political aspects of these texts is necessary for exploring how these texts relate to activist concerns in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, assessing the texts as literary texts is a vital component to my overall analysis. Not only are these texts radical in terms of politics, but they are also radical in terms of form, structure, and language. Treating these texts as literary texts as opposed to ‘documents’ means that this thesis serves as a departure from previous modes of analysing Dalit literature. In doing so, I am drawing on the arguments that are beginning to be made in *Dalit Text* and *Dalit Literatures in India* that point to a lessening emphasis on the political and social commentaries that Dalit literatures make whilst emphasising the literary value of the texts. I am also drawing on the arguments made by Nicole Thiara in her essay ‘Subaltern Experimental Writing: Dalit Literature in Dialogue with the World’.<sup>74</sup> Here, Thiara calls for the ‘comparative study of the formal innovations of Dalit fiction’ that are ‘rooted in local Indian realities, subaltern vernacular traditions, and histories of anti-caste resistance; aim to challenge upper-caste and bourgeois aesthetics; and envisage a world free from caste discrimination’.<sup>75</sup> My thesis views the ‘experimental’ aspects of Dalit literature in these terms, and argues that an analysis of the literariness of Dalit literature does not detract from the politics of the text but, in fact, complements it.

The second point to be addressed with respect to the future development of Dalit literary studies is the focus on a small group of core primary texts. My thesis challenges this by engaging with a number of primary texts that have had very little to no academic attention. Many of these texts were initially published at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with Rao’s *Untouchable Spring* being published in 2000, for example. Even since the publication of the English translation in 2010, very little critical work has been conducted on this text.<sup>76</sup> It is vital that texts such as *Untouchable Spring*, that are rich in formal experimentation, are brought to the critical attention of Dalit literature studies. A majority of the primary texts that this thesis engages with have been translated from multiple south Indian languages; as I discussed above, it is important that there is a new focus on the voices of Dalits from different areas of India, as they can provide different cultural, geographical, and political dimensions to the discussion of Dalit literature.

Furthermore, this thesis differs from other critical interventions into Dalit literature with the inclusion of two extensive introductory chapters. As Misrahi-Barak and Thiara note, ‘the study of Dalit literature requires an in-depth contextual knowledge that may not have been so urgently necessary for the analysis of South Asian literature written in English’.<sup>77</sup> This has two critical

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<sup>74</sup> Nicole Thiara, ‘Subaltern Experimental Writing: Dalit Literature in Dialogue with the World’, *Ariel*, 47:1-2, (2016), 253-280.

<sup>75</sup> Thiara, ‘Subaltern Experimental Writing’, p. 232.

<sup>76</sup> The small amount of work that has been conducted on this text is focused on the representation of Christianity in the text. I discuss this in greater depth in Chapter Three, pp.89-91.

<sup>77</sup> Thiara and Misrahi-Barak, ‘Editorial: Why Should we read Dalit Literature?’, p. 7.

consequences. The first is that Dalit literature has been largely ignored by the field of postcolonial studies, thus limiting the study of Dalit literature internationally (this will be discussed in greater depth below). Secondly, little knowledge of the caste system and untouchability makes accessing Dalit literature a challenge for any reader, both in and outside of academia. As one of the fundamental principles of Dalit literature has been to inform society (both Indian and global) about the horrors of caste discrimination, the lack of contextual knowledge from the point of view of the reader renders the text, to some extent, unintelligible. As the editors of *Dalit Text* note, ‘both readerships [knowledgeable and not knowledgeable about Dalit literature] need critical tools to be able to contextualise the literature, read it more astutely, analyse it and possibly teach it’.<sup>78</sup> I believe that this thesis offers these critical tools that are necessary to both readerships. Chapter One gives a schematic overview of the history of Dalit politics and activism stretching back 150 years. It provides introductions to the key ideas of important historical figures such as Jyotirao Phule, Iyothee Thass, Periyar, and Dr B.R. Ambedkar. As well as introducing these historical figures, I also introduce the Dalit Panthers, and how their activism led to the rise of Dalit literature. For a less knowledgeable reader, this will help contextualise activist concerns in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that often draw on the thoughts and writings of these earlier activists. For the knowledgeable reader, it will help link these historical figures and movements together by presenting this information in a methodical manner. Chapter Two will also serve as a vital resource for the less knowledgeable reader, particularly insofar as to understand the complexities of caste. In this chapter, I draw out the differences between varna, jati, and caste and explore how these systems of social organisation have both religious and spiritual underpinnings. As caste is a social system that has no direct counterpart in the West, an introduction into how it works, and how these three social categories are used in daily life, will be vital for readers to fully understand the caste contexts of Dalit literature. This chapter will also be useful in the teaching of Dalit literature, as the above quotation from *Dalit Text* notes. If the study of Dalit literature is able to find a place in postcolonial studies, this will undoubtedly lead to Dalit literature being taught on postcolonial university courses. It is vital, therefore, that students and teachers alike fully understand the way that caste functions, if they are to engage fully with Dalit literary texts. Chapters of this nature do not feature in any other book-length study of Dalit literature, making this thesis a unique and important contribution to the growing field of Dalit literature studies.

One of the main issues that is often discussed in postcolonial studies is translation. All of the texts that I engage with in this thesis have been translated into English from various Indian languages. This is also the case for a number of the theoretical sources with which I engage. The issue of translation is something that haunts these texts, as well the study of all texts that are read in translation generally. As Misrahi-Barak, Satyanarayana and Thiara note, ‘translation moves the texts further away from themselves and yet it is also, as always, a life-furthering endeavour, creating *another*

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<sup>78</sup> Misrahi-Barak, Satyanarayana, Thiara, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

text'.<sup>79</sup> When one translates a text from one language to another, a fundamentally new and different text is created. This fact often generates debate surrounding the authenticity of the translated text. How does this 'new' text capture the essence of the original? Can English, as is the case here, fully interpret the nuances of the vernacular originally used? I will go into this in more detail below, but I first wish to explore how these issues can be overcome through the close relationship between writer and translator. These close relationships are often found between Dalit writers and their translators. The Tamil Dalit writer Bama and the translator Lakshmi Holmström are a fine example of this relationship. Holmström translated Bama's landmark autobiography *Karukku*, as well as her novel *Sangati*. We get a fascinating insight into their relationship thanks to the digitisation of some of Holmström's letters and notebooks that have been collected by the South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive. In a letter written by Bama on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1998, she lists a number of Tamil word meanings about which Holmström had asked for clarification. For example, Bama writes: 'p.67. Para 4. [phrase written in Tamil] – School managed by nuns'.<sup>80</sup> In the creation of this 'new' text (the English translation of *Karukku*), Bama has remained an important architect. It is this back and forth between writer and translator that is crucial to the translation process and is what Holmström terms 'translations as conversations'. As she writes in one of her notebooks:

translations are conversations, almost by default any act of translation has to be some kind of conversation [between] 2 or more individuals, texts, [languages], societies, cultures, and sometimes nations – It acquires a completely different significance in a (post) colonial context, just as it always does when the target language is 'dominant' in more than one way.<sup>81</sup>

This process of viewing translations as conversations is one that was also employed by Rowena Hill whilst translating the poems of Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy. She notes that as Chinnaswamy's English began to grow, the pair were able to 'discuss the poems in detail'.<sup>82</sup> She continues:

at all stages, our attention was focused on the words, the matter, of the poems- anecdotes and history mostly came separately, over coffee- and his presence, our joint concentration, made the texts more accessible, somehow more friendly. I'm well aware it's not often possible for a translator to have this kind of backing from the author.<sup>83</sup>

These close relationships between Dalit writers and their translators help to combat the issues that arise when creating the new translated text. Through this act of conversation, the text becomes the product of the Dalit writer and the translator.

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<sup>79</sup> Misrahi-Barak, Satyanarayana, Thiara, 'Introduction', p. 6 emphasis in original.

<sup>80</sup> Lakshmi Holmström, 'Letter from Bama Faustina, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1998', *South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive*. <<https://sadaa.co.uk/archive/literature/lakshmi-holmstrom-mbe/letter-from-bama-faustina-letter>> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> August 2020].

<sup>81</sup> Lakshmi Holmström, 'Translations as Conversations- Notebook', *South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive*. <<https://sadaa.co.uk/archive/literature/lakshmi-holmstrom-mbe/translations-as-conversations-notebook>> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> August 2020].

<sup>82</sup> Rowena Hill, 'Translating Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy' *Before it Rains Again* (Liverpool: erbacce-press, 2016), pp. 94-96 (p. 94).

<sup>83</sup> Hill, 'Translating Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy', p. 94.

Although this idea of translation as conversation does well to attempt to make the translated text as authentic as possible, one aspect of Dalit literature that makes it so radical is ultimately lost in the translation process. The coarse and colloquial language that Dalits often employ in their writing, and the impact that this usage has on the literary environment into which the text is published, is something that translation is unable to capture. When read in the vernacular, Dalit literatures challenge mainstream Indian literature through their use of a language that is not seen to be 'literary'. Dalits often speak, and therefore write, in 'non-standard' forms of language that deviate from many rules and codes of the 'standard' form. Maya Pandit highlights this in her discussion of translating Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prisons we Broke* from Marathi to English: 'the Mahar dialect of Marathi with which the events are narrated echoes with cadences of varieties used by old people, women and young men; there is fun and humour in the account'.<sup>84</sup> The difficulty of translating this kind of language is intensified when writers juxtapose this language with the 'standard' forms of vernacular. As Pandit goes on to explain in an analysis of a section of *The Prisons we Broke*, 'suddenly Kamble switches mid-sentence over to the standard language; crossing over from her identification with her community, she stands outside of it commenting upon their pathetic condition'.<sup>85</sup> By slipping between standard Marathi and Mahar dialect Marathi, Kamble reinforces this difference in language. This nuance proves highly challenging to translate into English, as although the words can be translated, the essences of them cannot. It is impossible to render into a different language the subtleness of dialect.

Similarly, the ways in which caste is integrated into different Indian languages is difficult to translate into English, as Pandit explains: 'such intertextuality is a tough challenge for the translator simply because she or he has to transfer caste politics into a language which has no caste significations or hierarchies'.<sup>86</sup> English is not a vehicle designed to articulate caste and the way that caste penetrates daily speech. The way Dalit writers use English in combination with their first language is also something that is lost in the translated text. As Laura Brueck notes in her discussion of the difficulties of translating the short stories of Ajay Navaria, 'one of the defining elements of Navaria's prose is his strategic and self-conscious use of English. Unfortunately, there appeared to be no straightforward way in which to mark his use of English in the translated versions without distancing unduly from the shape of the stories themselves'.<sup>87</sup> In a similar vein to Kamble's shift in dialect, the reason and purpose behind Navaria's use of English is something that cannot be communicated to the reader of the translated text. Interestingly, Brueck provides a solution to this, writing that 'I urge anyone who reads these translations, but can also read Hindi, to seek these and his

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<sup>84</sup> Maya Pandit, 'Translating Dalit Literature: Redrawing the Map of Cultural Politics', *Dalit Text: Aesthetics and Politics Re-Imagined* (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 166-180 (p. 172).

<sup>85</sup> Maya Pandit, 'Translating Dalit Literature', p. 172.

<sup>86</sup> Maya Pandit, 'Translating Dalit Literature', p. 172.

<sup>87</sup> Laura Brueck, 'Translator's Note and Acknowledgements', *Unclaimed Terrain* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013), pp. 196-197 (p. 196).



other stories out in Hindi as well'.<sup>88</sup> This almost self-deprecating statement from Brueck ultimately gives primacy to the Hindi versions, and reinforces the issues associated with translation within her own translations. It is unfortunate, then, that this complex and radical aspect of Dalit literature is unable to be discussed in a full and rich way by using only texts in English translation. As this thesis will show, however, there are many other aspects to these texts on a literary level such as form and style that are radical and can still be analysed productively in translation.

Although the study of Dalit literature in translation may appear limited, it is vital that translations exist to further its readership and study, and thus highlight the issue of caste to a large audience. The need for translation is not just limited to the audience outside of India, but also within the subcontinent too. Schedule Eight of the Indian Constitution lists twenty-two different languages (English not included) that are spoken in various states and regions across the country.<sup>89</sup> Although some of these languages have similar roots, meaning that many individuals are able to speak and read multiple languages, many Indian languages are very different. Dravidian languages such as Tamil, for example, are vastly different from Hindi, and would require an individual to learn the language from scratch. As this is the case, an individual who speaks and reads Hindi, and who has no knowledge of Tamil, would be unable to read Cho Dharman's *Koogai* in its original Tamil. English, therefore, acts as a medium that allows readers and researchers from across India to engage with a variety of regional Dalit literatures. The study of Dalit literatures in English within India has therefore become common practice and allows for a richer and varied discussion. It is also important that more Dalit literature is translated into English so that scholars can apply theoretical approaches to these texts that have been written in English. As Alok Mukherjee argues, there is very little Dalit literature (or discussions of Dalit literature) that appear in English, which constitutes a 'major gap, given that much of the theorizing in India and abroad, whether from Marxist, postcolonial or subaltern perspectives, has been in English'.<sup>90</sup> The lack of Dalit literature in English translation, then, causes a disconnect between the literature and the theoretical frameworks that scholars use to discuss Dalit literature. Furthermore, Mukherjee notes that there is little critical writing on Dalit literature that has been translated into English.<sup>91</sup> Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, an important critical work in Dalit literary studies, has been made widely accessible because of Mukherjee's English translation. The writings of Raj Gauthaman, which play an instrumental part in the overall argument of this thesis, have also been translated from Tamil into English. It is vital, therefore, that more scholarship on Dalit literature and culture that has been written in Indian languages is translated into English, in order to generate good quality scholarship that engages with multiple regional contexts, and a selection of theoretical material that creates dialogues between academics from India as well as the West

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<sup>88</sup> Brueck, 'Translator's Note and Acknowledgements', p. 197.

<sup>89</sup> *The Constitution of India*, p.221 <<http://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/COI-updated.pdf>> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> August 2020].

<sup>90</sup> Mukherjee, 'Translator's Introduction', p. vii.

<sup>91</sup> Mukherjee, 'Translator's Introduction', p. vii.

Although there are inherent problems with translation, as detailed above, I argue that the close relationships that Dalit writers are able to have with translators are key to creating good quality translations; though there is a need for more literature to be available in English, the quality of the translated material should not be compromised. Through a close relationship that results in the translated text being the product of both writer and translator, rather than just the translator, we can be sure that the best possible ‘new’ text is created.

One of the most obvious ways to frame a discussion of Dalit literature would be through a postcolonial lens. As Laetitia Zecchini notes, Dalit literature on the surface seems to lend itself to a postcolonial reading: ‘one of the relevant premises of postcolonial theory is to rethink the “center” from the peripheries; the West from the perspective of the non-West; nationalism from the those that nationalism renders homeless and stateless; disciplines; modernity, history and other so-called universal or global categories from non-Western locations and narrations’.<sup>92</sup> The ways Dalit writers write from the periphery in terms of language (as discussed above), physically, in terms of Dalit dwellings existing on the edges of villages, and culturally, with Dalit culture existing away from the Brahminical centre, appear to fit well with the postcolonial idea of revaluating the ‘centre’. However, not only is this a simplification of the radical nature of Dalit literature which ignores many of the complexities of the texts, it is also profoundly wrong to view this revaluation of the center on the same parameters that postcolonial studies set. As Zecchini notes, Dalit literature ‘cuts across some of the most common colonial/postcolonial binaries’ and in many ways complicates the relationship between Dalits and (post) colonialism.

One of the main complications that renders the analysis of Dalit literature in a postcolonial framework complex is that the subject of Dalit literature is oppressed from *within* rather than from an invading force. As Alok Mukherjee writes, ‘[Gayatri Chakravorty] Spivak posed the question [Can the subaltern speak?] with reference to the colonizer-colonized framework within which much of the theorizing about postcoloniality and subalternity emanating from Indian and metropolitan intellectual circles has taken place’.<sup>93</sup> Dalit literature takes the coloniser/colonised binary and, in Mukherjee’s words, ‘explodes this binary and exposes the inner contradictions that it conceals’.<sup>94</sup> Dalits, in terms of caste, are oppressed ideologically by Hinduism and physically by Brahmins and members of the castes that are above them in the caste hierarchy, as opposed to the ideology of imperialism and the physical occupation of land by colonisers. Dalit literature, therefore, constructs its own Dalit/non-Dalit binary in its evaluation of caste that highlights the oppression that comes from within India. Laura Brueck describes this characterisation as ‘Good Dalits and Bad Brahmins’ where the ‘Dalit is

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<sup>92</sup> Laetitia Zecchini, ‘No Name is Yours Until You Speak It’: Notes Towards a Contrapuntal Reading of Dalit Literatures and Postcolonial Theory’, *Dalit Literatures in India 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, ed. Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 68-85 (p. 69).

<sup>93</sup> Alok Mukherjee, ‘Reading Sharankumar Limbale’s *Towards and Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: From Erasure to Assertion*’, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2004), pp. 1-18 (p. 2).

<sup>94</sup> Mukherjee, ‘Reading Sharankumar Limbale’s *Towards and Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*’, p. 2.

drawn without exception as a blameless figure and the Brahmin or other upper-caste person is characterized as ruthless and exploitative'.<sup>95</sup> This characterisation highlights how different this oppressive relationship is in relation to the postcolonial colonised/coloniser. As Mukherjee argues, Dalits do not fit into a 'colonial structure, but in the caste-based social, cultural, and economic structure of Hindu society [...] Dalits are the upper caste Hindu's Other'.<sup>96</sup> As I will show in this thesis, the complexities of the relationships between Dalits and the upper castes in terms of religious and cultural intertwining makes caste oppression markedly different from colonial oppression.

The root cause of Dalit oppression being from within rather than from an invading force is something that postcolonial studies has failed to fully grasp. Writing in 2004, Mukherjee argues that a reason a number of radical Indian critics with backgrounds such as Marxism and postcolonialism have not engaged with Dalit literature is because it does not fit within the neat binaries that postcolonialism sets: 'in fact, it complicates them exposing how a subjugated society such as that of pre-independence India could, simultaneously, be a subjugating society and how, in postcolonial India, that subjugation could continue'.<sup>97</sup> The position of the Dalit in both pre- and post-independent India does not fit well into the neat definitions of the colonial oppressed that postcolonial studies contends with. On the contrary, the Dalit in some instances goes completely against these definitions through engaging with the British in order to end caste oppression. We are able to see this clearly in the relationship between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr Ambedkar, whose opinions of and interactions with the British were quite different and caused a major rift between the pair. Although I will go into their differences in depth in Chapter One, it is worth discussing briefly here. Gandhi's position in relation to colonial rule is clear and well documented, and his main goal along with the Congress was total *swaraj*.<sup>98</sup> The *swaraj* movement fits into the postcolonial binaries of coloniser/colonised, with the movement representing a wish to oust the British from India and end colonial rule. Ambedkar, however, was not as keen to position himself in this binary. He saw independence as an opportunity to make radical changes to Indian society in which caste could be annihilated. To do this, he needed the support of the British. This strategy had historical backing as the activist Jyotirao Phule of the 19<sup>th</sup> century partook in similar conversations with the British. As Mukherjee notes, both Phule and Ambedkar did not 'automatically embrace the nationalist anti-colonial movement [...] [they were] prepared to enter into strategic conversations with the colonial rulers for obtaining remedies for centuries of caste oppression'.<sup>99</sup> This has led to Dalits often being labelled as 'anti-national', particularly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What this shows, then, is that Dalits in colonial India were primarily concerned with fighting against caste rather

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<sup>95</sup> Brueck, *Writing Resistance*, p. 86.

<sup>96</sup> Mukherjee, 'Reading Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards and Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*', p. 2.

<sup>97</sup> Mukherjee, 'Reading Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards and Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*', p. 17.

<sup>98</sup> See: David Arnold, *Gandhi: Profiles in Power* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001); Kuruvila Pandikattu, *Gandhi: The Meaning of Mahatma for the Millennium* (Washington DC: The Council for Research In Values and Philosophy, 2001); Sunil Khilnani, *Incarnations: India in 50 Lives* (London: Random House, 2016).

<sup>99</sup> Mukherjee, 'Reading Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards and Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*', p. 6.

than against colonialism. It was caste that dominated their daily lives and was the main source of their oppression. As Zecchini argues, ‘Dalit writers and activists are much more concerned with deconstructing Hindu and Brahminical knowledge than with deconstructing colonial knowledge’.<sup>100</sup> It was not colonial knowledge that rendered Dalits as untouchable. Therefore, it was more urgent that Dalits sought to deconstruct Brahminical knowledge and use the British colonial regime and impending independence to their advantage. The current situation of Dalits in 21<sup>st</sup> century India proves this point. Although the British left India over seven decades ago, caste has not disappeared and the position of Dalits in society has remained unchanged. In *Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in 21<sup>st</sup> Century India*, Dalel Benbabaali and Alpa Shah note that ‘social discrimination marks the contours of poverty in India; that certain social groups- India’s low castes and tribes- are overwhelmingly represented among the poor’.<sup>101</sup> Dalits, therefore, have continued to remain at the bottom of India’s social and economic hierarchies into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As Dalits have a complex relationship with (post)colonialism and do not fit into the classic binaries that it constructs (such as coloniser/colonised) their literature has been mostly ignored by the field of postcolonial studies. As the study of Dalit literature has grown both inside and outside of India, the fact that postcolonial studies fail to engage with Dalit literature has become increasingly more obvious. In the Introduction to *Dalit Text*, Misrahi-Barak, Satyanarayana and Thiara note that

this neglect is all the more surprising, perhaps, considering how crucial the concept of subalternity is in postcolonial studies. The apparent interest in silenced and oppressed people in postcolonial studies sits uneasily with the relative marginalisation of Dalit literature in this discipline. It is therefore important that postcolonial studies engage with this emerging field in order to remain relevant and avoid inadvertently contributing to the silencing of this important and radical literature.<sup>102</sup>

Similarly, Misrahi-Barak and Thiara stress the importance of the inclusion of Dalit literature in postcolonial studies to:

push the boundaries of current postcolonial literary criticism [...] The literature produced by some of the most silenced communities in India cannot continue to be ignored, even though engagement with Dalit literature challenges the way postcolonial studies is conceptualized and taught.<sup>103</sup>

I argue that this point made by Misrahi-Barak and Thiara is central to the exclusion of Dalit literature from postcolonial studies: the theoretical underpinnings of postcolonial studies do not provide the language with which to engage with Dalit literature on a substantial basis. Furthermore, I argue that the analysis of Dalit literature within a postcolonial framework, alongside classic postcolonial theory, is not sufficient unless a reconceptualization of the field is undertaken. The concept of the subaltern is

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<sup>100</sup> Zecchini, ‘No Name is Yours’, p. 79.

<sup>101</sup> Alpha Shah and Jens Lerche, ‘Preface’, in *Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in 21<sup>st</sup> Century India* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), pp. x-xix (p. x).

<sup>102</sup> Judith Misrahi-Barak, Satyanarayana, Thiara, ‘Introduction’, p. 1.

<sup>103</sup> Thiara and Misrahi-Barak, ‘Editorial: Why Should we read Dalit Literature?’, p. 5.

a good example worthy of analysis to show how foundational concepts of postcolonialism may not be able to accommodate Dalit narratives.

Spivak's famous question of 'Can the Subaltern speak?' is a foundational one in the field of postcolonial studies.<sup>104</sup> The answer to this question, ultimately, is no, as the subaltern subject is unable to be heard by the colonial powers or those that subjugate them. The main criticism of Spivak that I wish to draw out here is how caste is not discussed in her presentation of the conversation between the British, indigenous leaders, and the subaltern. Spivak ultimately overlooks the caste background of the Indigenous leaders that speak on behalf of, and therefore silence, the subaltern. The various ways that the British categorised and classified Indian and Hindu culture were drawn from Brahmins. As Sujata Patel argues:

this form of categorization and classification, if it created 'norms' for rule, also benefited one indigenous group, the Brahmins, who were now given enhanced status, that of the 'indigenous intellectual'. Other political entities that had had authority, such as that of region, village or neighbourhood communities, kinship groups, factional parties, chiefly authority, political affiliations, all got superseded, deleted from knowledge frameworks and silenced.<sup>105</sup>

Brahminical knowledge, therefore, was prioritised over other knowledge systems that existed in colonial India. This led to the legitimisation of Brahmins as the authority figures, and as 'knowledge constructors, thereby creating conditions for domination of and by this group in Indian society'.<sup>106</sup> This has much deeper implications that go beyond the issue of widow sacrifice that Spivak uses to frame her arguments. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, the British were instrumental in 'creating' our contemporary understanding of caste through synthesising the complex systems of *jati* and *varna*. In doing so, they were relying on the knowledge of the Brahmins as the 'indigenous intellectual'. The British colonial understanding of Indian society, and therefore their understanding of caste, untouchability, and the position of Dalits, was ultimately mediated by Brahmins. Within Spivak's subaltern paradigm, Dalits were rendered silent by the Brahmins, who spoke on their behalf to the British.

Although the concept of the subaltern is undoubtedly useful and is a cornerstone of the field, scholars working in postcolonial studies in the West need to contend with caste in order to be able to engage with Dalit literature. They need to recognise where caste has been concealed or indeed erased in history, theory, and in literature. When analysing literature from the subcontinent, scholars need to understand who is writing a text and from what perspective, and in the Indian context caste plays a pivotal role. To access this corpus of Dalit literature, academics from postcolonial studies needs to work hard in order to understand the complexities of caste and the relationship between Dalits and colonialism. Dalit literature and Dalit studies do not need to change to fit the postcolonial paradigm.

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<sup>104</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind Morris (New York, Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 34-105.

<sup>105</sup> Sujata Patel, 'Beyond Binaries A Case for Self-Reflexive Sociologies', *Current Sociology*, 54:3 (2006), 381-395 (p. 386).

<sup>106</sup> Patel, 'Beyond Binaries', p. 386.

In fact, postcolonial studies needs to adapt and reconfigure its knowledge base in order to give this vastly under-researched literature the attention it deserves.

So far, I have highlighted multiple theoretical approaches and ways of reading Dalit literature that exist around Dalit literary studies. As I have already outlined, the way that this thesis will analyse the literary texts will be radically different from traditional modes of analysis as I will analyse the texts as literary texts as opposed to sociological documents. The theoretical position of the thesis will also represent something new that draws upon, as well as rejects, a number of key theoretical positions. Ultimately, this thesis is written from an anti-caste perspective. As many of the stories, anecdotes, and literary extracts that are presented in the thesis attest, the humiliation and suffering that Dalits are subjected to in the name of caste is utterly abhorrent. The fact that this is allowed to continue today, both in public and in private, in one of the world's largest democracies, is a stain not only on India's, but also the international community's, conscience. As my thesis is rooted in anti-caste principles, it is therefore aligned with the defining features of Dalit studies. However, it is important to note that this thesis is not written with an 'activist sensibility'. Although I am able to write from an anti-caste perspective, I am not an activist. Therefore, the ideas and arguments surrounding Dalit literature, culture, and religion that I make in this thesis are purely theoretical and are drawn from the representations of Dalit culture portrayed in the primary texts, as well as the debates that I draw upon via secondary material.

Even though I am not able to write with an activist edge, or from a Dalit perspective, I am able to write from an 'Ambedkarite perspective'. There are many different interpretations as to what form writing from an Ambedkarite perspective can take. As discussed above, Arjun Dangle declares that Dalit literature is the written embodiment of Ambedkarite philosophy and awareness. Academic writing, particularly the kind described by Rawat and Satyanarayana in *Dalit Studies*, can also be written from an Ambedkarite perspective. Writing with an activist sensibility that seeks to challenge caste and the ways that it has previously been discussed is infused with the core principles of Ambedkarism, including the 'annihilation of caste' and a deep sense of rationalism.<sup>107</sup> I argue that my thesis is written from an Ambedkarite perspective in a form that is inspired by B.R. Ambedkar himself and the legacy that he has left behind. In theoretical terms, this thesis engages with a number of Ambedkar's writings which often form the basis of the key arguments of the thesis. There are instances, however, where I challenge Ambedkar in my analysis of the primary texts. For example, my analysis of the relationship between Dalits and Buddhism presented in Dalit literature in Chapter Four shows that converting to Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism may not have been as enduring as one may expect. Aside from the theoretical links to Ambedkar, this thesis also takes into account the spirit of Ambedkar and brings to the analysis of caste and untouchability an inspiration that is accessible to both Dalits and non-Dalits, both inside and outside of India. As Shivani Waldekar

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<sup>107</sup> Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* (London: Sage, 2014), p.52.

writes, ‘Ambedkarites are the followers of the philosophy and standpoint of B.R. Ambedkar. The philosophy which stands for equality, liberty, fraternity and justice and shows the path to enlightenment and reclamation of human personhood’.<sup>108</sup> Although Ambedkarism is driven by the quest to abolish caste and untouchability, it is also founded on respect for humanity. As Waldekar notes, ‘once you become a follower of Babasaheb it doesn't mean that your responsibility is done. You need to impart knowledge and thoughts to others. You need to take all your actions very carefully so that you never do injustice to others, you never hurt, violate them and their rights’.<sup>109</sup> Although I am not able to write from an activist or a Dalit perspective, I am able to incorporate these fundamental principles of *being* an Ambedkarite into my thesis. Through writing from an anti-caste perspective, the thesis acknowledges the need for basic human rights and the need to reject the injustice that is inflicted upon Dalits. Through engaging with the under-researched area of Dalit literary studies, the thesis also follows an Ambedkarite perspective in relation to imparting knowledge, particularly in the Western academic environment in which this thesis has been conceived.

Rooting this thesis in the ethos of Ambedkarism is also combined with a conscious effort to engage with theoretical writing written by Dalits and lower castes that seek to bring self-respect to Dalit communities. Dalit studies, as Rawat and Satyanarayana note, rests on two important ideals – the generation of dignity and the ending of humiliation. Through engaging with a number of Dalit and lower caste scholars, whose work is rooted in these two ideals, my thesis will be able to interrogate the representation of caste and untouchability through these lenses. Ultimately, these Dalit scholars enable me to bring a Dalit perspective to my analysis. For example, the arguments that Raj Gauthaman makes with regard to Dalit culture and the use of language are fundamentally from a Dalit perspective. When Gauthaman declares: ‘talk aloud! Speak in *your* Tamil. Speak in *your* language that has been despised as *cheri* Tamil and colloquial Tamil!’, the ‘*your*’ is aimed at Dalits.<sup>110</sup> Through his writing, Gauthaman is boldly addressing Dalits and instructing them how to develop a resistance culture that is rooted in Dalit culture. By using theoretical writing such as this, I am able to bring a Dalit perspective to my analysis and explore Dalit literature through the theoretical constructs created by Dalits themselves. It is this prioritising of Dalit and lower caste voices that leads to this thesis rejecting other voices, including those found within postcolonial studies. As discussed above, postcolonial scholars need to adapt their foundational principles in order to fully embrace Dalit

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<sup>108</sup> Shivani Waldekar, ‘Knowing (Reading) Ambedkar And Being An Ambedkarite: Through The Anti-Caste And Feminist Lens’, *Round Table India*, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2020. <[https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=9865:knowing-reading-the-ambedkar-and-being-an-ambedkarite-through-the-anti-caste-and-feminist-lens&catid=120:gender&Itemid=133](https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9865:knowing-reading-the-ambedkar-and-being-an-ambedkarite-through-the-anti-caste-and-feminist-lens&catid=120:gender&Itemid=133)> [accessed 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020] (para 17 of 45).

<sup>109</sup> Waldekar, ‘Knowing (Reading) Ambedkar’, (para 24 of 45).

<sup>110</sup> Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Protest Culture: The First Stage’, p. 268.

literature. Therefore, I believe it is vital that in a study of Dalit literature, it is the Dalit voice that should take primacy.



## Chapter One: Dalit Protest: From Activism to Literature

In 2014, the publishing house Navayana published an extensively annotated edition of one of Ambedkar's most famous texts: *Annihilation of Caste*. As noted on the publishers' website:

Navayana is a publishing house that focuses on the issue of caste from an anticaste [sic] 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.<sup>1</sup>

With a view to fighting against caste discrimination, Navayana have published various texts both by and about Ambedkar, as well as the literary work of Dalit writers. With this in mind, Navayana can be seen as a small cog in the greater machine of raising Dalit consciousness. This was the case until their publication of an annotated edition of *Annihilation of Caste*. Although questions were raised regarding the need for an annotated edition, the introduction to the text written by Arundhati Roy sparked a ferocious debate amongst the Dalit community. The introduction, titled 'The Doctor and the Saint', attempted to introduce the ideas of Ambedkarism through a discussion on Ambedkar's relationship with Mahatma Gandhi. At the start of Roy's 162-page introduction, she provides a rationale for this discussion:

Ambedkar was Gandhi's most formidable adversary. He challenged him not just politically or intellectually, but also morally. To have excised Ambedkar from Gandhi's story, which is the story we all grew up on, is a travesty. Equally, to ignore Gandhi while writing about Ambedkar is to do Ambedkar a disservice, because Gandhi loomed over Ambedkar's world in myriad and un-wonderful ways.<sup>2</sup>

What follows is a lengthy discussion of the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading up to the independence of India. Roy frames this discussion predominantly through the lens of Gandhi, and his involvement with the Congress and the independence movement. She intermittently brings in Ambedkar, to show how his views and political positions differed from Gandhi's. Roy even goes as far as to include a long 'standard' biography of Gandhi, exploring parts of his career such as his time in South Africa (it is also worth noting that this section comes *before* a similar section on Ambedkar).<sup>3</sup> Crucially, this introduction does little to introduce the text itself, but rather discusses a large amount of historical context which is unrelated to the publication of *Annihilation of Caste*. This is the view of Bojja Tarakam, who notes that 'even if she [Roy] wanted to introduce the book to the new generation she should have written about the book or intentions of the author in writing the book.

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<sup>1</sup> Navayana, 'About', <<https://navayana.org/about/>> [accessed 28<sup>th</sup> March 2018].

<sup>2</sup> Arundhati Roy, 'The Doctor and The Saint', in *Annihilation of Caste* (New Delhi: Verso, 2016), pp. 17-179 (p. 39).

<sup>3</sup> Roy, 'The Doctor and The Saint', pp. 66-94.

Nothing like that was done'.<sup>4</sup> Instead, Roy creates a narrative which feels more like a discussion of the merits and demerits of Gandhi, rather than a critical introduction to a text written by Ambedkar.<sup>5</sup>

The impact of Roy's introduction on the Dalit community has been monumental. So much so, that the publishing house The Shared Mirror published a response to the text, titled *Hatred in the Belly: Politics behind the Appropriation of Dr Ambedkar's Writings*. The book, which features thirty-eight contributions, discusses the limitations of Roy's introduction, as well as the Navayana edition of *Annihilation of Caste* in general. There are two main criticisms of this introduction which are highlighted in *Hatred in the Belly*. The first, which has been discussed above, is aimed at how the introduction does little to introduce the text in an adequate manner. The second is related to the selection of Arundhati Roy as the person to write the introduction, with numerous contributors to *Hatred in the Belly* arguing that this was based purely on her star-power, and its ability to sell books. As Sunny Kapicadu notes, 'it is clear that Anand, owner of Navayana, had recognised Arundhati's stardom', thus implying that this was the reason for her selection.<sup>6</sup> K. Satyanarayana mirrors this criticism, arguing that Roy is a 'famous writer hailing from a Malayali Syrian Christian background with certain kind of inherited access to privileges [...] the space that [Roy] occup[ies] in the media is not available to Dalits'.<sup>7</sup> These arguments have raised questions over who has the right to discuss Ambedkar and Dalit related issues. This can be seen through a statement by Kapicadu: 'how did she [Roy] suddenly get the right to write about Ambedkar?'.<sup>8</sup> As Roy is writing from a level of privilege, questions of her right to write about Ambedkar, and therefore the legitimacy of her introduction, have been aimed at this publication.

What this introduction, and the heavy criticism levelled at it show, is how difficult it can be to introduce Dalit related issues from a position outside of the Dalit movement. As more and more Dalit texts are being translated into English, and being read by an ever increasing global audience, introductions into the Dalit movement, its key figures, and its history, will become ever more important to fully engage and inform this growing audience from outside of the subcontinent. Crucially, this is an audience that, until picking up the book that they are about to read, may not have previously known who the Dalits are, what the caste system is, or know the intricate and expansive history of the Dalit movement. Although Arundhati Roy's introduction to *Annihilation of Caste* is

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<sup>4</sup> Bojja Tarakam, 'AoC does not need any introduction', in *Hatred in the Belly: Politics behind the Appropriation of Dr Ambedkar's Writings* (Hyderabad: The Shared Mirror, 2016), pp. 10-13 (p. 10).

<sup>5</sup> This introduction has since been published as its own, separate entity by Haymarket Books, titled *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and Annihilation of Caste, the Debate between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi*. This shows how the text has little bearing on the text of *Annihilation of Caste* itself. See <<https://www.haymarketbooks.org/books/996-the-doctor-and-the-saint>> [accessed 28<sup>th</sup> March 2018].

<sup>6</sup> Sunny Kapicadu and Dr O.K. Santhosh, 'Does Arundhati have any other qualification that her stardom?', in *Hatred in the Belly: Politics behind the Appropriation of Dr Ambedkar's Writings* (Hyderabad: The Shared Mirror, 2016), pp. 60-67 (p. 60).

<sup>7</sup> K. Satyanarayana, 'Arundhati Roy failed to grasp the significance of AoC', in *Hatred in the Belly: Politics behind the Appropriation of Dr Ambedkar's Writings* (Hyderabad: The Shared Mirror, 2016), pp. 115-124 (p. 119).

<sup>8</sup> Kapicadu and Santhosh, 'Does Arundhati have any other qualification that her stardom?', p. 60.

flawed on many levels, the essence of what she was attempting to do shows how one is able to engage a global audience on Dalit issues. As Roy herself notes:

[Gandhi] is India's greatest and most unique export. It may be true that Dalits, for the most part, have not been indoctrinated in Gandhism as much as the rest of us have. But all over the world he is a great, great hero... Moving the Gandhi monument out of the way in order for a reader to get to Ambedkar's writing cannot be done easily.<sup>9</sup>

The 'reader' here is undoubtedly a Western one, who would already, to some extent, know who Gandhi was. This is an idea that is highlighted by Sunil Khilnani, who in his expansive survey of Indian history uses phrases such as: 'in many parts of the world, Gandhi is virtually a saint' and 'the most famous modern Indian' to describe Gandhi.<sup>10</sup> To the world outside of India, Gandhi is seen as a universal figure who is able to transcend political and social lines. As we know, however, this is not the case within the subcontinent. Since the time of Gandhi, to our present moment, people have criticised and challenged the political and philosophical ideas that he had, and in the Dalit context have completely delegitimised his claim to be the 'leader of the untouchables'.<sup>11</sup> But the one thing that we simply cannot ignore is the global image of Gandhi, and how he, whether we like it or not, acts as the window into Indian history and society for a large percentage of the Western world.

This leads me into my own introduction of Ambedkar, the Dalit movement, and the history of Dalit literature in India. The debates that I have highlighted above show how challenging the task is of writing such an introduction from outside of the Dalit movement, whilst at the same time attempting to fully inform and engage a readership that lives in a world outside of the contours of caste, with little knowledge of the rich social history that India has to offer. To do this, I must undoubtedly have to refer to Gandhi, the proclaimed 'Father of the Nation'. However, I will do this within the context of Ambedkar, the 'Father of the Constitution', and discuss how his political views have shaped and defined contemporary Dalit literature and the Dalit movement.<sup>12</sup> Alongside Ambedkar, I will also introduce other key activist figures and movements that have helped to define anti-caste politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and have in many ways helped to shape the contemporary Dalit movement. To many extents, these figures and movements have attempted to give a voice to, or be the voice of, Dalits within their geographical and temporal locations. As we have seen from the above discussion, speaking on behalf of Dalits whether in a literary or political context is a sensitive issue. Through introducing these important figures and movements, I will also explore whether they were successful in their attempts to represent Dalits or if other political motivations took precedence over the Dalit cause.

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<sup>9</sup> Arundhati Roy, 'Arundhati Roy Replies to Dalit Camera', in *Hatred in the Belly: Politics behind the Appropriation of Dr Ambedkar's Writings* (Hyderabad: The Shared Mirror, 2016), pp. 84-88 (p. 87).

<sup>10</sup> Sunil Khilnani, *Incarnations: India in 50 Lives* (London: Penguin, 2017), pp. 304-306.

<sup>11</sup> See Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 278.

<sup>12</sup> In Chapter Three, I will discuss the relationship between Ambedkar and Gandhi, see pp.79-80.

## Ambedkar and Gandhi

Within the story of Gandhi, one which has famously been brought to Western cinema screens by Richard Attenborough, there have been many individuals who have played key roles that have been overlooked within the international narratives of Indian history. Possibly the greatest of these oversights has been Dr B. R. Ambedkar, known to most Indians as the architect of their constitution, but he was also the man who can be seen as the founder of the Dalit movement. Born into the Mahar caste, Ambedkar defied the odds of his preordained position as untouchable to become one of the most educated Indians of all time, receiving two PhDs in the process.<sup>13</sup> Although a voice in the independence movement, his views were always geared towards the upliftment of untouchable castes, and the abolition of the caste system. It is on the issue of caste that Ambedkar had the deepest differences with Gandhi, with the two clashing repeatedly on caste related issues. Ambedkar and Gandhi's most public disagreement was in relation to a separate electorate for untouchables. Separate electorates would reserve seats in India's legislative assemblies for Dalits, allowing them greater representation in government. He put this idea to the British government at the second Round Table Conference in 1931.<sup>14</sup> Eventually, British Prime Minister Ramsey MacDonald granted the Communal Award, which granted separate electorates for minorities such as Muslims, Christians, and untouchables. This award triggered one of Gandhi's seventeen hunger strikes in opposition to the separate electorates for untouchables. As Nicholas Dirks notes:

Gandhi, who was opposed to separate electorates for any group, grudgingly accepted them for Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and Anglo-Indians but, in what was clearly his commitment to the unity of the Hindu community, drew the line when it came to untouchables, whose interests he claimed to represent.<sup>15</sup>

This idea relating to a Hindu community, and the position of Dalits within it, was one of the most crucial differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar. As Dirks rightly suggests, Gandhi claimed that he was the one who was able to represent Dalits during the independence process, yet Ambedkar was the one who was selected by government to represent Dalits in formal political settings, such as the Round Table Conferences. This was because of the gulf that existed between both men's views on untouchability and how it could be eradicated. Gandhi believed that untouchability was a religious and spiritual issue that was an internal matter for Hinduism to rectify, whereas Ambedkar saw the

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<sup>13</sup> For a full biographical account of Ambedkar, see Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1971).

<sup>14</sup> The Round Table Conferences were a series of discussions held between the British and various representatives of different segments of Indian society, held between 1930 and 1932, to discuss constitutional reforms. There were three held in total. Ambedkar took part in all three conferences, as the representative of the Depressed Classes. Gandhi, on the other hand, only attended the second. See Stephen Legg, 'Global governance and place-making: India, internationalism and empire in 1930s London', *Geography*, 104:1 (2019), 4-11 (p. 9).

<sup>15</sup> Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, p. 269.

issue of untouchability as a social issue and one which could be resolved through political and social change.<sup>16</sup>

As can be seen from Ambedkar's discussions with the British regarding separate electorates, Ambedkar was committed to legal safeguards and constitutional reforms and saw these as ways by which untouchability could be addressed to give Dalits better visibility in the public sphere. This issue of separate electorates was a precursor to other affirmative actions that were put in place to help elevate the position of Dalits in the public sphere post-independence. As I discussed in the Introduction, the 22.5% reservation in place for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, alongside the 27% reservation for OBC's suggested by the Mandal Commission highlights the importance of political measures that are necessary in order to help minorities in India. Ambedkar was a forerunner in this regard, and therefore wished to cement legal protections for Dalits into the constitution of independent India. As he was elected the Head of the Constitution Drafting Committee, he was able to preside over the legal structures that would protect Dalits, such as making the practice of untouchability illegal.<sup>17</sup> Ambedkar's association with the drafting of the constitution is something that is celebrated by Dalit communities, and he is often depicted in statue form grasping a copy of the constitution.<sup>18</sup>

Although Ambedkar believed that legal protections were necessary in the fight against caste and untouchability, he also knew that social reforms were just as important. One can make laws to declare untouchability illegal, but laws cannot change fundamental beliefs. These social reforms, Ambedkar argued, were rooted in an analysis of Hinduism in order to delegitimise its laws that underpin caste. He shapes this argument in *Annihilation of Caste*, making this text one of Ambedkar's most radical and well-known pieces of writing. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar explains that:

Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind. The destruction of caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change [...] it must be recognized that the Hindus observe caste not because they are inhuman or wrong-headed. They observe caste because they are deeply religious.<sup>19</sup>

In order for political and social reforms to be successful, the legitimacy of Hindu law needed to be challenged. Ambedkar, therefore, sought to delegitimise the fundamental beliefs of Hindus:

Caste has a divine basis. You must therefore destroy the sacredness and divinity with which caste has become invested. In the last analysis, this means you must destroy the authority of the Shastras and the Vedas.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, pp. 2728-279.

<sup>17</sup> Ramachandra Guha, *Makers of Modern India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010), p. 206.

<sup>18</sup> See Nicolas Jaoul, 'Learning the use of symbolic means: Dalits, Ambedkar statues and the state in Uttar Pradesh', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 40:2 (2006), pp. 175-207.

<sup>19</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (New Delhi: Verso, 2016), p. 286.

<sup>20</sup> Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, p. 289.

This rejection of Hinduism in which its fundamental beliefs are delegitimised is what ultimately sets Ambedkar and Gandhi apart. Ambedkar saw Hinduism itself as the problem, citing a total rejection of the religion and its cultural practices as one of the most effective ways of eradicating untouchability. Through a process of eradicating caste logic by delegitimising Hindu law, and turning away from Hinduism to Buddhism, Ambedkar combined political and religious ideologies to promote an emancipating message to Dalits.<sup>21</sup> This rejection of Hinduism is not something which has been confined solely to the politics of Ambedkar, however. There have been many movements, both before Ambedkar and during his lifetime, that focused on both rejecting Hinduism and embracing Buddhism with the view of fighting against caste, whilst also claiming to represent the voice of the untouchables.

### **Periyar: ‘If you see a snake and Brahmin on the road, kill the Brahmin first’<sup>22</sup>**

As Ambedkar rejected Hinduism, and sought to delegitimise its dogma, so did his Tamil contemporary E.V. Ramasamy, or Periyar as he was known to his followers.<sup>23</sup> Periyar was born into a middle-caste family of traders in Tamil Nadu in 1879, making him ten years younger than Gandhi and thirteen years older than Ambedkar. Although initially aligned to the Congress party, becoming the president of the Tamil Congress in 1920, his distrust of the Brahmin Congress leadership and his increasingly radical politics made him leave the party to form his own more progressive alternative.<sup>24</sup> In a similar vein to Ambedkar, Periyar too had a history with Gandhi, with the latter playing a key role in Periyar’s decision to leave the Congress. Initially, however, Periyar saw Gandhi as someone who could help reform the Congress during the early 1920s, citing him as the reason he decided to remain in the party, even if at arm’s length:

I have decided to stay on, because I desire to change the present- day Congress [...] Sometimes when I hear the Mahatma speak, it seems to me he too would like to work for such change. If I were to lose my faith in him... I will not stay in the party.<sup>25</sup>

Eventually, however, Periyar would lose his faith in Gandhi. As V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai note, ‘the “break” with Gandhi came [when he] remarked on his faith in the salience of varnashrama dharma’.<sup>26</sup> Although Periyar had been critical of Gandhi in the past, this became the breaking point for Periyar’s relationship with the Congress.<sup>27</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai write that Periyar thought

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<sup>21</sup> This will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Four, see pp. 100-105.

<sup>22</sup> Khilnani, *Incarnations*, p. 269.

<sup>23</sup> As we will see later, Periyar had as much of a distrust for Gandhi as Ambedkar did. ‘Periyar’ roughly translates to ‘great man’, contrasting with the Mahatma, ‘the great soul’. See Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, p. 257

<sup>24</sup> Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2006), p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samya, 1998), pp. 280-81.

<sup>26</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, p.286. I discuss the concept of dharma in Chapter Two, p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> The first confrontation between Periyar and Gandhi occurred in the early 1920s regarding temple entry issues in Kerala’s Kottayam district. Local Dalits had been denied access to a temple and the roads around it, and Periyar had been selected by the Congress to lead the campaign for them to gain access. Eventually, Gandhi became involved and struck a deal that allowed Dalits access to some of the surrounding roads, but not access to

Gandhi's views were 'akin to those routinely mouthed by brahmins and he nowhere sought to refute the latter's caste privileges'.<sup>28</sup> Gandhi's acceptance of the four varnas and hereditary occupations angered Periyar and helped to add more momentum to his new social movement: the Self-Respect movement. The Self-Respect movement was a radical movement based on the core ideas of atheism and non-brahminism, viewing these two ideas as central to the removal of caste and untouchability. Geetha and Rajadurai write that the movement generated 'through the critique of religion, caste and gender [...] a rational atheistic world-view, articulated overtly, in some circumstances, as an alternative way of imagining community and nation'.<sup>29</sup> Self-Respect, then, was not just a political movement but, as Sarah Hodges describes:

a set of practical strategies for transforming everyday and ritual life into revolutionary propaganda through choice of dress, names, home décor and domestic ritual, as well as through the attendance of public meetings and the reading of newspapers.<sup>30</sup>

The Self-Respect movement became a dominating force in Tamil Nadu and across south India, leaving its marks on the contemporary political landscape of Tamil Nadu.<sup>31</sup> Although striving towards a secular and casteless society, with Periyar believing that the two worked in tandem, the movement failed to have any major impact on the lives of Tamil Dalits, both during the height of its influence in the 20s and 30s and through the political parties that trace their lineage to it in contemporary India.

There are two main reasons why I believe that this is the case, which both relate to the previous discussion of Ambedkar. The first of these is religion. As will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Four, Ambedkar famously converted to Buddhism in 1956 to show how Dalits are able to live a life away from Hinduism. The changing of religion, the conversion from Hinduism to another religion, was a divisive and symbolic act that helped Ambedkar show that he understood the Dalit condition, and that any reconciliation with Hinduism was impossible. Although rejecting and delegitimising the basis of Hindu society is an important step towards annihilating caste, this symbolic shift *away* from Hinduism *into* a religion that accepts Dalits is something that was just as important to Ambedkarite philosophy and the Dalit movement. This is something that the Self-Respect movement did not have. Even though Periyar and the Self-Respect movement agreed, in principle, with Buddhist ideology, they were unable to agree with it as a religion and were subsequently unable to offer Dalits something that they could leave Hinduism for.<sup>32</sup> Periyar's relentless focus on anti-Brahminism, as

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the temple. This increased Periyar's anger at the Brahmin leaning tendencies of the Congress. See Khilnani, *Incarnations*, pp. 270-71 and Geetha and Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, p. 288.

<sup>28</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, p. 287.

<sup>29</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, p. 289.

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Hodges, 'Revolutionary family life and the Self Respect Movement in Tamil South India, 1926-49' *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 39:2 (2005), 251 - 277 (p. 254).

<sup>31</sup> The two dominant parties in Tamil politics since 1967 have been the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK). The DMK is an off-shoot of Periyar's political party Dravidar Kazhagam. The ADMK was formed in 1972 when the DMK split into two factions. For an in-depth discussion of these parties, and Periyar's influence on Tamil politics, see Hugo Gorringer, *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu* (London: Sage Publications, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, p. 294.

opposed to Ambedkar's Dalit centred approach, may also be a reason why the Self-Respect movement failed to have a substantial impact on the Dalit communities of south India. The Tamil Dalit writer Ravikumar argues that Periyar's interaction with Dalits and untouchability only occurred within the context of anti-Brahminism. He notes:

When he [Periyar] spoke about the problems of untouchables, he equated those with problems faced by non-brahmins...By saying this, he usurped from the untouchables even the position of victims. Instead of rising against the atrocities of caste Hindus, he took steps only to pacify them.<sup>33</sup>

Periyar, then, diluted Dalit voices by placing them on the same platform as Shudras and OBCs, thus making them a part of his fight against Brahmin domination rather than focusing on removing untouchability. This relates to Ambedkar's disagreement with Gandhi's interpretation of the varna system. Ambedkar argued that in Gandhi's varna system, 'the Untouchables will be classed as Shudras instead of being classed as AtiShudras', even though Gandhi knew that the Shudras would not accept the untouchables into their fold.<sup>34</sup> Ambedkar thus highlights how different the untouchable and Shudra social groups are, which shows how wrong Periyar was for attempting to make Dalit and Shudra issues one and the same. Through his anti-caste and anti-Brahmin rhetoric, Periyar attempted to bring all castes together in an attempt to topple the tyrannical rule of the Brahmin. By making the Brahmin the common enemy through highlighting how challenging Brahmin supremacy could eliminate caste, and subsequently untouchability, Periyar and the Self-Respect movement drowned out the Dalit voice. So much so, Ravikumar suggests that 'had Ambedkar been born in Tamil Nadu, he would have been completely blocked out by these non-brahmin leaders'.<sup>35</sup> So although charismatic and domineering in approach, Periyar and the Self-Respect movement could not see past their hatred of Brahmins in order to address the serious social issues that were oppressing Tamil Dalits.

Periyar's interest in Dravidian (or south Indian) nationalism and politics also made him unable to speak for Dalits on a national scale. As Khilnani notes, 'unlike Ambedkar, Periyar never generalized his critique into an all-India one. He was too deeply rooted in the Dravidian culture of the south'.<sup>36</sup> This basis in regional politics is something that comes from older activist movements that were focused on caste issues for particular Dalit castes in specific areas. An example of this is the Mahar movement in Maharashtra. As Eleanor Zelliot notes, 1890 'saw the beginning of articulate protest among the Mahars', who began campaigning in an attempt to elevate their caste status.<sup>37</sup> This coincided with the rise of Indian nationalism, enabling Ambedkar to discuss Mahar and other Dalit

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<sup>33</sup> Ravikumar, 'Re-reading Periyar', *No Alphabet In Sight: New Dalit Writing From South India* ed. K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011), pp. 283-294, (p. 290).

<sup>34</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, 'What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 9*, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), p. 294.

<sup>35</sup> Ravikumar, 'Re-reading Periyar', p. 294.

<sup>36</sup> Khilnani, *Incarnations*, p. 274.

<sup>37</sup> Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013), p. 14.



issues on a national level when he became the leader of the Mahar movement in the late 1920s.<sup>38</sup> ‘It was Ambedkar’s genius’, writes Zelliott, ‘that he was able to speak both to his own caste and, because of his Western education and his dedication to the democratic process in the solution of social problems, to those in authority’.<sup>39</sup> Ambedkar, then, was able to view the upliftment of untouchables both within Mahar and national contexts making him the voice of Dalits on a pan-Indian scale, which Periyar was unable to do.

### **Iyothee Thass and Dravidian Buddhism**

Periyar and the Self-Respect movement’s rejection of all religion, including Buddhism, comes as a surprise when we consider the Buddhist roots of the Tamil anti-caste movements that preceded them. In particular, this relates to the Dalit activist of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Iyothee Thass. Thass was a Dalit, born into the Paraiya caste, and is best known for his re-reading of ancient Tamil literature in order to create a history for Tamil Dalits.<sup>40</sup> Thass argued that in a time before what we know today as Hinduism arrived in south India, the inhabitants of the land were Buddhist, and that these people today are Dalits. As Geetha and Rajadurai note, the Paraiyas were ‘degraded and their religion systematically destroyed when Aryan invaders from the north [...] imposed their rule and culture on these original Tamils’.<sup>41</sup> They succeeded by re-writing and ‘Hinduizing’ Buddhist works, as well as introducing the idea of high and low portions of society in order to delegitimise the views of those who did not conform to their way of life. As Thass himself writes, ‘those who fell prey to the sophistry of the veshha brahmanas became Hindus. Those who rejected them and were degraded were the Buddhists, who came to be known, from then on, as Paraiyahs’.<sup>42</sup> This also relates to Thass’ interpretation of the varna system which for him existed in some form before the northern Aryans came to Tamil Nadu. He argued that the version of the four varna system that existed at this time was based on occupation but was not hereditary.<sup>43</sup> Although each varna’s occupation mirrors that of the Hinduized varna system, anyone from any walk of life could be a part of any particular varna.<sup>44</sup> Crucially, this version of the varna system had no grounding in the idea of high and low, of one varna being above the other. Thass believed that it was the invading veshha Brahmins who hijacked this system and turned it into one that was based on purity and hierarchy in order to oppress the indigenous Buddhist population, who did not conform to their new ‘Hindu’ ideas. Through tracing

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<sup>38</sup> Zelliott, *Ambedkar’s World*, p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> Zelliott, *Ambedkar’s World*, p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> Malarvizhi Jayanth, ‘Literary Criticism as a Critique of Caste: Ayothee Thass and the Tamil Buddhist Past’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 54:1 (2019), 84–95 (p. 85).

<sup>41</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, p. 93.

<sup>42</sup> Thass draws a distinction between the yathartha Brahmins, who were the ‘real’ Brahmins of Buddhist faith, and the veshha Brahmins who were the northern Arayan invaders that were ‘false prophets’. See Geetha and Rajadurai, p. 93. Quoted in Geetha and Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, p. 94.

<sup>43</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, p. 100.

<sup>44</sup> Geetha and Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, pp. 100-101.

this Buddhist history, whilst arguing that the Paraiyas were the ‘original Tamils’, Thass was able to create a radical narrative of history that places the Dalits at its centre.

This reinvention of ancient Tamil history that is Dalit focused can be seen as the foundation upon which groups such as the Self-Respect movement were able to build. Early anti-caste activists such as Thass and Phule (who will be discussed below) were pioneers in making Dalits central to their activism and giving Dalits a sense of self-respect. Thass’ narrative of Tamil history enabled Tamil Dalits to feel proud of who they were and thus gave them the confidence to speak out against caste oppression. By making the Paraiyas the original inhabitants of the land that had become oppressed by a foreign religious and social system, Thass was able to inspire Tamil Dalits to believe that a life away from the caste system was possible. Through Buddhism, their original religion, the Dalits would have the potential to counter the caste system and Brahmin dominance by reasserting their position as the original inhabitants of Tamil Nadu. Thirty years after Thass’ death in 1914, Periyar founded the Dravidian Party with its core aim of forming a ‘separate non-Brahman or Dravidian nation’.<sup>45</sup> Periyar had taken Thass’ idea of originality and moulded it to fit the national debates that were surrounding independence and the formation of Pakistan – a Muslim state. Periyar’s version of this originality was founded on Dravidian identity, as he argued that the nationalism project was a cover-up to reaffirm Brahmin privilege and force northern institutions such as Hindi onto the south.<sup>46</sup> Periyar adopted Thass’ idea of the northern Brahmins infecting the south with their Hinduism and caste, but instead of viewing it through a Dalit lens, as Thass did, Periyar saw this as an attack on southern values. In a similar fashion to what Ravikumar described in the above discussion, the Dalits here were marginalised in this conversation. An idea that began by placing Dalits at its centre was then turned into a campaign for regional independence that would do little to improve the Dalit position. This again highlights how the Dalit voice has been suppressed and made a part of conversations that have little impact on their positions as untouchable.

### **Jotirao Phule**

Thass’ interpretation of Tamil history that places Dalits at its centre is preceded by a reworking of the Aryan race theory by the great social reformer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jotirao Phule. Gail Omvedt describes Aryan race theory as a ‘discourse by the European “Orientalists” who saw the Vedas as an ancient spiritual link between Europeans and Indians’.<sup>47</sup> During in the colonial period, the British Indian elite used this to ‘justify brahman superiority’.<sup>48</sup> The theory that attempted to legitimise the rule of the Brahmins was reworked by Phule to show how the Brahmins had invaded the land and oppressed its original inhabitants. He argued that these invaders developed a society and religion that was ‘worse than all others since it was in principle based on inequality and forbade the conquered

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<sup>45</sup> Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, p. 263.

<sup>46</sup> Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, p. 263.

<sup>47</sup> Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, p. 19.

<sup>48</sup> Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, p. 19.

masses from even studying its texts'.<sup>49</sup> This reworking, in a similar way to Thass, helped Phule galvanise Shudra and Dalit communities through his critique of caste and Brahmin rule. Born into the Mali Shudra caste in 1827, Phule was one of the first social reformers who not only attacked the systems of Dalit and Shudra oppression, but gave these communities tangible solutions to their problems. This came in the form of education. Phule was a great believer in education and campaigned for schools to be opened up to all castes and argued that education should not be reserved for Brahmins. Writing in 1882, he declares:

Have they [Brahmins] kept their knowledge to themselves, as a personal gift, not to be soiled by contact with the ignorant [and] vulgar?... My object in writing the present volume is [...] to tell my Shudra brethren how they have been duped by the Brahmins.<sup>50</sup>

Alongside petitioning the government to reform the Brahmin dominated education system, Phule opened up his own schools for boys and girls of the lower castes, as well as untouchables.<sup>51</sup> He also educated his wife Savitribai, who went on to teach in one of his schools. Khilnani describes how Phule's 'commitment to educating women, and lower-caste ones at that, ranked as scandalous even within his own community'.<sup>52</sup> On a daily basis when Savitribai would walk to their school, she would be 'pelted with mud and stones and garbage'.<sup>53</sup> This, however, did not stop the Phules who were committed to changing the way the women and lower castes were educated, with the belief that through education Brahmin domination could be countered.

Alongside these tangible efforts to bring education to communities that had previously been denied it, Phule was also a prolific writer who had by his death in 1890 'published polemics, plays, songs and ballads'.<sup>54</sup> A translator of Phule's work, G.P. Deshpande, notes that 'it is impossible to translate the vigour and ruggedness of his Marathi', suggesting that his language was that of non-standard vernacular.<sup>55</sup> The use of a rugged and non-standard dialect has been used by Dalits in their writing to counter traditional literary forms that had previously been dominated by Brahmins, and is central to the radicalism of Dalit literature when read in the vernacular.<sup>56</sup> This was also a feature of Phule's writing. As he wished for lower castes to become more educated, thus enabling them to take up public jobs, their voices would be able to be heard within the public sphere countering that of the Brahmin. Through Phule's use of rugged Marathi, he was beginning to bring the lower-caste voice into the literary world. This, however, became an issue in regards to spreading his writing amongst communities outside of Maharashtra. By writing in Marathi instead of English, he remained relatively unknown outside of his home state during his lifetime and as Omvedt notes, 'the lack of a

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<sup>49</sup> Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, p. 19.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Guha, *Makers of Modern India*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>51</sup> Guha, *Makers of Modern India*, p. 76.

<sup>52</sup> Khilnani, *Incarnations*, p. 180.

<sup>53</sup> Khilnani, *Incarnations*, p. 181.

<sup>54</sup> Guha, *Makers of Modern India*, p. 77.

<sup>55</sup> Guha, *Makers of Modern India*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>56</sup> See Introduction of this thesis, p.16.

communication network amongst low castes and the revulsion for his writings felt by most of the brahman elite made his work inaccessible'.<sup>57</sup> As will be discussed below in relation to Ambedkar, celebrations surrounding Phule's death centenary in 1990 helped bring him to prominence amongst Dalit communities.<sup>58</sup> This was particularly facilitated by the government releasing Phule's works in a new English translation.<sup>59</sup> Although Phule was predominantly unknown to communities outside of Maharashtra, he was a significant influence on Ambedkar, who cited Phule as one of his 'three gurus'.<sup>60</sup> Omvedt argues that 'very little of Phules's [sic] influence is actually seen in Ambedkar', however I believe that Phule's vision of education as a means to undo caste is something that is deeply present within Ambedkarite ideology.<sup>61</sup> Both men believed that through education Dalits would be able to challenge Brahmin hegemony by giving them a voice in spaces to which they would have previously been denied access. As Ambedkar writes: 'the Depressed Classes think that the surest way for their elevation lies in higher education, higher employment and better ways of earning a living'.<sup>62</sup> Education, then, enables to Dalits to have a voice in society, which has the potential to lead to a radical shift in social attitudes.

### **The Dalit Panthers**

What we have seen from the above discussions is that there have been both Dalit and non-Dalit anti-caste activists over the past 150 years who have all claimed to represent the voice of Dalit communities. Interestingly, if not at all surprisingly, the figures who have gone on to populate the narratives of Indian history fall into this category of non-Dalit: Periyar has shaped the foundations of contemporary Tamil politics; Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule are routinely celebrated for the social reforms they pioneered;<sup>63</sup> and Gandhi is considered the greatest Indian of all time, despite recent polls.<sup>64</sup> Figures like Iyothee Thass, a Dalit and early campaigner against caste atrocities, has faded into the Tamil Dalits' collective memory. Even Ambedkar, a figure who stands tall in both Dalit and

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<sup>57</sup> Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, p. 23.

<sup>58</sup> Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, p. 23.

<sup>59</sup> P.G. Patil, 'Foreword', *Collected Works of Mahatma Jotirao Phule Vol 1: Slavery (In The Civilised British Government under the Cloak of Brahminism)* (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1991), pp. v-vi (p. v).

<sup>60</sup> The other two Gurus were the Buddha and the medieval bhakti poet Kabir. See Zelliott, *Ambedkar's World*, p. 166.

<sup>61</sup> Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Gandhi and his Fast' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 5*, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), pp. 329-395 (p. 382).

<sup>63</sup> Savitribai Phule's 186<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary was commemorated by Google in India in January 2017. See: Google, 'Savitribai Phule's 186th Birthday', Doodles Archive, 3rd January 2017 <<https://www.google.com/doodles/savitribai-phules-186th-birthday>> [accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June 2018].

<sup>64</sup> An official poll was conducted in 2012 to declare who is the 'greatest Indian of all time'. Gandhi was not one of the candidates eligible to be voted for as the organisers declared: "'Great' is a label that sits easily with Gandhi. But who, after the Mahatma, is the greatest Indian to have walked our soil?'. Ambedkar topped the poll, officially making him the greatest Indian of all time *after Gandhi*. See Outlook India, 'The Greatest Indian After Gandhi', *Outlook India*, 11 June 2012, <<https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/the-greatest-indian-after-gandhi/281103>> [accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June 2018].

national circles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century had, after his death, become a footnote in India's history. In the 1970s, however, this was about to change in a radical way.

In a recent book, *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History*, J.V. Pawar narrates how he and a fellow writer, Namdeo Dhasal, conceived the idea of the Dalit Panthers whilst walking the streets of Mumbai in 1972:

As we were walking, we were discussing the possibility of launching a militant organization to combat atrocities against Dalits. We thought of various names for the organization, but ultimately we zeroed in on "Dalit Panther". The birth of the Dalit Panther thus took place as we were walking along a Mumbai street. It lived up to its name by taking to the streets for the cause.<sup>65</sup>

This conversation between Pawar and Dhasal sparked the most significant movement in Dalit activism since Ambedkar; a development that would help form our contemporary understanding of Dalit activism and Dalit literature. As Satyanarayana and Tharu note, the Dalit Panthers were formed in the 'vacuum created in Dalit politics of Maharashtra' that was left by the Republican Party of India (RPI).<sup>66</sup> This party, founded by Ambedkar before his death in 1956, was the third in a string of attempts to formalise a Dalit centred political party by Ambedkar.<sup>67</sup> The RPI thus became the political legacy of Ambedkar and was the organisation that could continue Ambedkarism in the political realm. The party, however, was subject to many feuds and disagreements and split into different factions, leading to its decline in influence and the void in Dalit politics that Satyanarayana and Tharu mention.<sup>68</sup> The decline of a Dalit political voice, combined with rising atrocities being committed against Dalits, provided the perfect environment for the Panthers to be born. What was so different about the Dalit Panthers, which has led to them being influential in both political and literary circles, is that the founding members of the group were writers. As Arjun Dangle, one of these founding writers notes: 'this was probably the first time in India that creative writers became politically active, and formed an organization'.<sup>69</sup> This led to a 'renaissance in Marathi literature and arts' due to their unique blend of social realism and angry, retaliatory tone.<sup>70</sup> It was a coarse, angry, colloquial literature that not only shook the Marathi literary scene, but also brought the realities of Marathi Dalits to the literary mainstream. This literary intervention was combined with a militant activist approach to form a unique brand of Dalit protest.<sup>71</sup> Take, for example, Namdeo Dhasal's 1972 poem

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<sup>65</sup> J.V. Pawar, *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History* (New Delhi: Forward Press Books, 2017), Amazon Kindle e-book (location 457).

<sup>66</sup> K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, *The Exercise of Freedom* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013), p. 55.

<sup>67</sup> See Zelliott, *Ambedkar's World*, pp. 177-203.

<sup>68</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, *The Exercise of Freedom*, p. 55.

<sup>69</sup> Arjun Dangle, 'Introduction', in *Poisoned Bread* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1992), pp. xi-xv (p. xii).

<sup>70</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, *The Exercise of Freedom*, p. 55.

<sup>71</sup> The first major demonstration that the Dalit Panthers held was on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Indian independence. The Panthers dubbed the day 'Black Independence Day' and marched towards the state legislature building towards midnight wearing black armbands in protest that the state had done little to stop atrocities against Dalits. See Pawar, *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History* (location 666).

‘Man, You Should Explode’.<sup>72</sup> This is a violent and angry poem in which Dhasal encourages the reader to engage in a host of rebellious acts such as drinking, smoking and liberal sexual intercourse.

The opening lines of the poem read:

Man, you should explode  
Yourself to bits to start with  
Jive to a savage drum beat  
Smoke hash, smoke ganja  
Chew opium, bite lalpari  
Guzzle country booze—if too broke<sup>73</sup>

The poem then becomes increasingly violent, telling the reader to ‘keep handy a Rampuri knife/ A dagger, an axe, a sword, an iron rod, a hockey stick, a bamboo’ so that they are ‘ready to carve out anybody’s innards without batting an eyelid’.<sup>74</sup> The lyricism of the poem, combined with the explicit language and the violent images it creates, resembles that of a rallying call. One can imagine Dhasal reciting this poem at a demonstration or rally, exciting and enraging the audience of Dalit protesters. The poem, then, becomes tied to the activist experience, creating an art form that is just as militant as the Dalit Panthers’ protest. Dalit protest, therefore, becomes a kind of resistance that is different from previous generations. As Satyanarayana and Tharu note, the Dalit Panthers ‘helped popularise the term “dalit” to refer to untouchable communities’.<sup>75</sup> They were therefore able to load the term ‘Dalit’ with their ideology and new kind of activism to create a movement that was specifically ‘Dalit’ in nature.

The Panthers were also instrumental in resurrecting the ideas of Ambedkar during this early 1970s period. As can be seen from the ‘Dalit Panthers Manifesto’ issued in 1973, Ambedkarite philosophy played a central role in the politics and activism of the group. For example, the manifesto states that it was Ambedkar who ‘helped us realize our humanity even in our state of beast-like exploitation’.<sup>76</sup> The revolutionary and emancipating message of Ambedkar thus provided an ideological framework that the Panthers could work within. This meant, therefore, that the Panthers wished to make the writings of Ambedkar available to all Dalits to help spread the emancipating message of Ambedkar. As Pawar notes: ‘the community that reads is the community that survives. The community that does not read does not survive... This is what Babasaheb believed. It was thus necessary to publish the works of Babasaheb in all languages for the benefit of Dalits’.<sup>77</sup> The Panthers petitioned the Maharashtra government to publish Ambedkar’s works, a majority of which were unpublished, and to make the already published books more accessible. The petition was successful,

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<sup>72</sup> Namdeo Dhasal, ‘Man, You Should Explode’, *A Current of Blood* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2011), pp. 9-11 (p. 9).

<sup>73</sup> Dhasal, ‘Man, You Should Explode’, p. 9.

<sup>74</sup> Dhasal, ‘Man, You Should Explode’, p. 9.

<sup>75</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, *The Exercise of Freedom*, p. 55.

<sup>76</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, *The Exercise of Freedom*, p. 57.

<sup>77</sup> Pawar, *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History* (location 3634).

and the first volume of his writings was published in 1979.<sup>78</sup> This has led to Ambedkar's work being published in a variety of regional languages, thus contributing to the spread of Ambedkarite and Dalit politics. As Satyanarayana and Tharu explain: 'the availability of Ambedkar's writings in English at the national level, and their translation into several Indian languages, spread Ambedkar's thought and gave rise to stimulating discussions all over the country'.<sup>79</sup> Ultimately, the publication of Ambedkar's works and their dissemination across the subcontinent has led to Ambedkar becoming a national figure, placing caste issues on a national level.

What makes the Dalit Panthers so important, when viewed within the larger history of anti-caste politics and activism, is that they were a group by and for Dalits, and were thus able to be a true voice for the community that they represented. Inspired by Ambedkarite and socialist ideology, the Dalit Panthers developed a framework that rejected the caste system and looked towards a total structural change of Indian society to liberate the Dalits from caste oppression. Shifting from the politics and rhetoric of the figures before them, the Dalit Panthers took aim at the system itself, rather than the individuals within it. Under the heading 'Who are our Enemies?' in the groups manifesto, they list concepts such as power and wealth, figures such as landlords and capitalists alongside 'parties who indulge in religious or casteist politics'.<sup>80</sup> Instead of taking aim at specific caste groups, such as Periyar's militant anti-Brahmanism, the Dalit Panthers attacked the symbols of their oppression and the systems that legitimise it. We can see here how the roots of the Dalit Panthers' ideology can be found within Ambedkar's work. As we have seen in the above discussion, Ambedkar argued that caste can only be undone through a complete 'notional change' as well as delegitimising Hindu law. This is the kind of message that the Dalit Panthers sought to promote, rather than focusing their rhetoric on specific caste groups. This approach, I argue, helped to spread the Dalit Panthers' message into different regions of India and thus help create the contemporary Dalit movement. The overarching ideology of the Dalit Panthers, as can be seen from their manifesto, was not confined to Maharashtra or any other geographical area. This differs significantly from some of the other figures and movements that we have discussed in this chapter. The Self-Respect movement, for example, was inextricably tied to Tamil Nadu, making it inaccessible for Dalits from other parts of India. Although often protesting about issues important to Maharashtrian Dalits, the ideology of the Dalit Panthers meant that it was able to be engaged with by Dalits from across the subcontinent, giving a voice to a number of Dalit communities.

### **Dalit Activism in the 1990s**

The potentially pan-India nature of the Dalit Panther model allowed it to extend into different regions of India, creating a new kind of Dalit-specific activism. This was the case in south India, and Tamil

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<sup>78</sup> Pawar, *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History* (location 3662).

<sup>79</sup> K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, 'Introduction', in *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011), pp. 1-69 (p. 7).

<sup>80</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, *The Exercise of Freedom*, p. 62.

Nadu in particular. As Hugo Gorringe notes, the Dalit Panthers ‘inspired mobilisation across India’, and in 1982, ‘a group of disaffected Dalits led by M. Malaichami formed the Dalit Panther Iyakkam (Movement) (DPI)’ in Tamil Nadu.<sup>81</sup> The group came into its own in the 1990s following the death of Malaichami and the appointment of Thirumavalavan in 1990. Thirumavalavan is a ‘powerful orator’, and used this proficiency to create a reputation that attracted listeners to hear him speak.<sup>82</sup> Thirumavalavan’s DPI was part of a new era of Dalit politics and activism in Tamil Nadu that was ‘led by a younger generation of dalits’.<sup>83</sup> In a similar way to how the Dalit Panthers were formed in the vacuum of Dalit politics in the 1970s, the conditions in 1990s Tamil Nadu provided the perfect environment for this new generation of Dalit writers and activists.

One of the most significant factors that contributed to the rise of this new Dalit activism in south India was the reintroduction of Ambedkar into the Tamil context. As mentioned in the discussion of Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement above, Periyarite ideology dominated the state during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, meaning that Ambedkar did not have as big an impact in Tamil Nadu as he did in other states during his lifetime. The publication of his works that began in 1979, however, meant that Dalits in Tamil Nadu could begin to engage with Ambedkar decades after his death. This came to its pinnacle in 1993 when the first volume of Ambedkar’s writing was published in Tamil.<sup>84</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu note that this reintroduction of Ambedkar in the Tamil context ‘renewed the debate on caste, gave rise to a critical reassessment of the national movement and returned to the question of dalit emancipation’.<sup>85</sup> This coincided with other Ambedkar celebrations that were happening on a national level. In 1990, the Indian government awarded Ambedkar the Bharat Ratna<sup>86</sup> and in 1991, national celebrations were held to celebrate his birth centenary.<sup>87</sup> This return to Ambedkar in national, Tamil, and Dalit circles, as well as the lack of a Dalit voice in Tamil Nadu helped to create groups such as the DPI and allowed writers the opportunity to voice their concerns about caste issues. As Hugo Gorringe explains, ‘post-colonial Tamil Dalit movements developed later than counterparts in other parts of India’, such as the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, and it was only in the 1990s that Dalit movements appeared in Tamil Nadu.<sup>88</sup> This is also the case for Dalit literature. As I have highlighted in the discussion of the Dalit Panthers, literature was used in combination with

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<sup>81</sup> Hugo Gorringe, *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), p. 53.

<sup>82</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, ‘Introduction’, p. 22; Hugo Gorringe, ‘Resounding rhetoric, retreating rebels: the use and impact of militant speeches in Tamil Dalit movements’, *Contemporary South Asia*, 18:3 (2010), 281-292 (p. 282).

<sup>83</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, ‘Introduction’, p. 22.

<sup>84</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, ‘Introduction’, p. 21.

<sup>85</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, ‘Introduction’, pp. 7-8.

<sup>86</sup> Bharat Ratna is the ‘highest civilian honour, given for exceptional service towards advancement of Art, Literature and Science, and in recognition of Public Service of the highest order’. See: Know India, ‘Bharat Ratna’, *Know India*, < <http://knowindia.gov.in/general-information/bharat-ratna.php> > [accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June 2018] (para. 1 of 4).

<sup>87</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, ‘Introduction’, p. 7.

<sup>88</sup> Gorringe, ‘Resounding rhetoric’, p. 282.



other forms of activism such as demonstrations. For them, their literary endeavours were an integral part of their activism, making their literature a protest literature. In 1990s Tamil Nadu, however, I believe that we are able to see a shift in discourse that begins to untie Dalit literature from the anchor of political activism.

The Dalit Panthers were unique as they were political activists as well as being writers. The example of Namdeo Dhasal's poetry highlights this fact whilst showing how the poetry of the Dalit Panthers was intimately tied to their political activism. In Tamil Nadu, however, the worlds of Dalit political activism and Dalit literature were never created as a homogenous unit. The DPI, for example were not writers but were inspired by the militant activism of the Dalit Panthers, and thus wanted to create political and social change.<sup>89</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu note that much of the new Dalit writing that appeared in Tamil during the 1990s appeared in magazines that were started by Dalits.<sup>90</sup> They highlight one magazine in particular, *Nirapirikai*, as being one of the earliest and most influential of these magazines. It was started in the early 1990s by a group of Dalit intellectuals including Ravikumar and Raj Gauthaman, who had their roots in Left organisations and were 'exploring alternative ideologies in the early 1990s'.<sup>91</sup> It has been described as a 'social science journal which is a product of the dalit literary movement [which] carries [...] high-quality literary criticism, local history with a subaltern perspective and translations from English social science journals'.<sup>92</sup> Alongside this, the magazine also published Dalit literature giving Dalits the opportunity to express their anger at the caste system in a way that was different from the activism of political movements. Through magazines such as *Nirapirikai*, key Dalit writers who have shaped the contemporary Dalit literary scene such as Bama, Sivakami, Cho. Dharman, Imayam and K.A. Gunasekaran were discovered.<sup>93</sup> Unlike the Dalit Panthers, who were writing poetry as political activists, this new generation of Tamil Dalit writers were writing without an explicit political conviction. These new writers were finding a creative outlet to express their anger at the social system and represent their respective communities.

### **The Rise of Dalit Literature**

As this new generation of writers appeared, writing in a way that was not bound up with Dalit political movements, experimentation with new modes of writing was beginning. The Dalit Panthers utilised poetic forms during the 1970s as these forms allowed them to quickly and cheaply disseminate their rhetoric as well as allowing them to perform their work in front of audiences.

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<sup>89</sup> This is highlighted by the fact that the DPI transformed into the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) political party and contested in the 1999 general elections. See the following for an in-depth discussion of the DPI's transition into party politics: Hugo Gorringer, *Panthers in Parliament: Dalits, Caste, and Political Power in South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>90</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, 'Introduction', p. 25.

<sup>91</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, 'Introduction', p. 25.

<sup>92</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, 'Introduction', pp. 25-26.

<sup>93</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, 'Introduction', p. 26.

Although there has not necessarily been a shift away from poetry, writers are now engaging with other forms of literature such as the novel, short story and autobiography. The autobiography in particular has become a popular genre for Dalit writers as they are able to narrate specific details about how their lives have been affected by caste. Throughout this chapter, I have explored various movements and figures who have claimed to represent the Dalit voice throughout history. With Ambedkar and the Dalit Panthers, we are able to see how the Dalit is able to speak within the political realm. Since the 1990s and the dawn of the new millennium, the explosion of Dalit writing in regional languages and English translation has meant that the Dalit outside of the political world too has a voice. It is for this reason that the autobiographical genre became so popular. It provided a space for Dalits to write about their lives in their own dialects and in a way that best represents their community. This latter issue has become a major point of discussion amongst critics in recent years, particularly in regards to influential Dalit autobiographical texts such as Bama's *Karukku*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*. As I discussed in the Introduction, scholars have argued that the Dalit autobiography can be viewed as a testimonio by evidencing the bleak nature of Dalit life. One of the key differences between an autobiography and a testimonio is that the writer is not simply writing a history of the self but rather the history of their community. This community is one that has been oppressed and is unable to speak for itself. The writer thus acts as a witness to this oppression and speaks on behalf of the community. Rege notes that one of the major departures in the Dalit autobiography as testimonio that set it apart from other autobiography forms is the 'depleting of the "I" – an outcome of bourgeois individualism'.<sup>94</sup> An example of this can be found in *Karukku*, with the first line of the text reading '*Our* village is very beautiful' (emphasis added).<sup>95</sup> The use of the collective 'our' as opposed to the individualistic 'my' highlights the communal aspect of this text. Bama thus becomes the voice of her community and acts as a witness to the caste struggles that her village has endured, speaking on behalf of those who cannot.<sup>96</sup>

The autobiographical form became a way for Dalits to talk about the realities of Dalit life in a way that was not bound up with the politics of Dalit activist movements. They were able to speak for themselves and their communities, bearing witness to the caste atrocities that they have faced. We see a shift, however, from a focus on the representation of reality to a focus on literary aesthetics when we look at the Dalit novel. Through the novel form, writers are able to explore a range of issues that affect Dalits whilst simultaneously experimenting with style and form. Scholar and translator Raj Kumar notes that 'novel or novel form as we understand in literature is both real and imaginary [...] the novel form is a kind of wider space whereby things like the idea of equality, freedom, caste

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<sup>94</sup> Rege, *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender*, p. 17.

<sup>95</sup> Bama, *Karukku* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> This is explored in greater depth in Pramod K. Nayar, 'Bama's *Karukku*: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 41:2 (2006), 83–100.

oppression, gender, environment, education can be addressed'.<sup>97</sup> The novel thus gives writers a space to explore these different issues without the pressure of speaking on behalf of others. As Thiara notes, 'experimentation with language, narrative voice, form, and genre are defining features of Dalit literature', particularly in regards to the Dalit novel.<sup>98</sup> As writers have this broad range and scope that Raj Kumar describes, writers have the freedom to experiment with their writing in order to 'subvert the literary and aesthetic conventions of the upper castes and challenge mainstream readers' received assumptions about art and aesthetic value more broadly'.<sup>99</sup> This kind of literature challenges the perceived ideas of the function of Dalit literature in general. As we have seen from the above discussions, Dalit literature from the time of the Dalit Panthers has either been tied to political activist movements or has been committed to representing the voice of Dalit communities. Sharankumar Limbale argues that 'Dalit writers believe that their literature should be analyzed from a sociological perspective focused on social values [rather] than on beauty', which highlights the role that Dalit literature has played throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>100</sup> However, the experimentation found in the Dalit novel that Thiara describes allows writers to break away from the perceived norms of Dalit literature that Limbale believes all Dalit writers share. The exploration of Dalit novels in the subsequent chapters of this thesis will examine this point in greater detail and will explore how the literary experimentation in the Dalit novel gives a voice to the Dalit in the literary sphere, alongside their voices in political and sociological spheres.

### **Dalit Activism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Throughout this chapter, I have shown the evolution of Dalit activism in India through a discussion of some of the key anti-caste activists throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, who have all claimed to speak on behalf of Dalits. With the advent of Dalit literature in the 1970s and the boom in Dalit literatures throughout the 1990s into the present day, Dalits are able to speak for themselves through their writing, expressing their hatred for the caste system and their vision of a world free of caste. The subsequent chapters of this thesis will argue that contemporary Dalit literature has begun to disentangle itself from political activism and that writers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not necessarily writing from the position of political activists. Unlike the Dalit Panthers who used their literary endeavours in conjunction with their activism, recent Dalit activist groups have not used literature as a vehicle to voice their concerns and are instead using other forms of communication such as social media.

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<sup>97</sup> Martand Kaushik, 'In Conversation: The Uncharted Territories Covered By "Bheda," The First Dalit Odia Novel', *The Caravan*, 22 September 2017, <<http://www.caravanmagazine.in/vantage/uncharted-territories-bheda-first-dalit-odia-novel>> [accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June 2018] (para. 11 of 37).

<sup>98</sup> Nicole Thiara, 'Subaltern Experimental Writing: Dalit Literature in Dialogue with the World', *Ariel*, 47:1–2 (2016), 253–280 (p. 256).

<sup>99</sup> Thiara, 'Subaltern Experimental Writing', pp. 256–57.

<sup>100</sup> Sharankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2004), p. 19.

One of these groups is the activist organisation known as the Bhim Army. The Bhim Army was founded in 2014 by Chandrashekhar Azad in Uttar Pradesh. As the name of the group suggests, they were founded with deep roots in Ambedkarite ideas and are committed to the spreading of Ambedkarite thought across Dalit communities. As Chandrashekhar notes in a recent documentary about the group: ‘Bhim Army is an ideology, we will transform the nation with Ambedkarite values’.<sup>101</sup> The group has two main goals, with its primary aim being education. Inspired by Ambedkar’s, and to an extent Phule’s, commitment to education, the Bhim Army has set up free schools across Uttar Pradesh primarily for Dalit children. As the head teacher for one of these schools notes in the aforementioned documentary: ‘our education system, public and private, falls short. Children of our caste [Chamar] were unable to even write their names in English. Now it’s getting better. We teach the older children and in turn, they teach the younger ones’.<sup>102</sup> Making education readily available for Dalit children in an environment that is free from caste discrimination is key for the Bhim Army. Alongside their educational endeavours, the group also acts as representatives for Dalit communities across Uttar Pradesh. An example of this is highlighted in the documentary. In March 2016, a Dalit community in Western Uttar Pradesh erected a sign at the entrance of their village reading ‘The Great Chamar Village of Gharkoli Welcomes You’.<sup>103</sup> This sign angered members of the upper-caste communities in the village, who took issue with the fact that the Chamars were calling themselves ‘great’.<sup>104</sup> The local branch of the BSP, a Dalit orientated political party, refused to get involved and when the police were called, the Brahmin officer ordered that the sign be blackened out with paint.<sup>105</sup> With no one else to turn to, the Dalits called the Bhim Army. This is how eyewitnesses described the scene when the group arrived in the village:

A phalanx of motorcyclists vroomed into the village. “Bhim Army, Jai Bhim” they chanted, as their leader, a handsome, muscular man wearing a handlebar moustache, white shirt, black pants, and ink blue scarf draped across his neck, dismounted from the leading bike.<sup>106</sup>

This is reminiscent of the kind of conditions that helped create the Dalit Panthers. In present day Uttar Pradesh, there is no Dalit political voice to stand up for Dalits in this kind of situation when Dalits are being abused by upper-caste communities and members of the police.<sup>107</sup> The number of atrocities committed against Dalits is able to rise because there is a lack of an authoritative Dalit voice. The

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<sup>101</sup> The Quint, *Marching with the Bhim Army #AmbedkarsArmy*, online video, YouTube, January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2017, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=607&v=yQmlsEwYuRE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=607&v=yQmlsEwYuRE)>, 2:22 [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2018].

<sup>102</sup> The Quint, *Marching with the Bhim Army #AmbedkarsArmy*, 11:45.

<sup>103</sup> The Quint, *Marching with the Bhim Army #AmbedkarsArmy*, 0:15.

<sup>104</sup> The Quint, ‘Ambedkar’s Army: A Dalit Force Fights Caste Atrocities in Uttar Pradesh’, *The Quint*, <<https://www.thequint.com/quintlab/ambedkar-dalit-army-fights-caste-atrocities-in-uttar-pradesh/>> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2018].

<sup>105</sup> The Quint, ‘Ambedkar’s Army: A Dalit Force Fights Caste Atrocities in Uttar Pradesh’.

<sup>106</sup> The Quint, ‘Ambedkar’s Army: A Dalit Force Fights Caste Atrocities in Uttar Pradesh’.

<sup>107</sup> In September 2020, a nineteen-year-old woman from Hathras district in Uttar Pradesh was raped and beaten by a group of four upper-caste men. The woman died of her injuries. The police cremated the body in the middle of the night, unbeknownst to her family, causing national outrage. See: Geeta Pandey, ‘Hathras case: A fatal assault, a cremation and no goodbye’, *BBC News*, 8<sup>th</sup> October 2020. < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-54444933>> [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

Bhim Army, then, act as this voice. They fulfil the role of political leaders and the police as they are the only ones that these communities can turn to when traditional methods of negotiation have failed.

Chandrashekhara also notes how the rise of social media has helped to shape Dalit activism in recent years. He explains that ‘because of social media, the average person is more aware of this exploitation’, as videos of Dalits being attacked as well as news stories are able to be circulated throughout India and around the globe. The quick and instant platform that social media offers gives anyone from any community the opportunity to show what is happening to themselves and their community. As Paolo Gerbaudo notes, social media is ‘often used as a means of representation, a tool of “citizen journalism” employed to elicit “external attention”’.<sup>108</sup> An example that Gerbaudo gives is the use of YouTube to document instances of police brutality. Dalits are able to use social media in a similar way, an example being the group Dalit Camera. Founded in 2011, Dalit Camera are an organisation that primarily operates via YouTube where they publish videos of ‘protest, public meeting, discussion [and] talks’.<sup>109</sup> The function of the group is therefore two-fold. On the one hand, they allow Dalits from across the country to virtually ‘attend’ conferences and public talks where discussions on caste and Dalit issues are taking place. Through publishing these videos, Dalits are able to listen to and engage with speakers at these events in ways that would not have been previously possible. On the other hand, the group also interview victims of caste violence.<sup>110</sup> Through these testimonies, Dalit Camera are able to give Dalits a voice by giving them the opportunity to talk about how caste affects them on a daily basis, and publish it for millions to watch online. The rise of social media usage by Dalits highlights how the relationship between Dalit activism and literature is changing. As discussed previously, the Dalit autobiography gave writers the opportunity to bear witness to the caste atrocities that their communities had faced. With social media, however, images and videos of this abuse are able to be shared instantly amongst millions of people from across the globe. The function that Dalit literature once had as acting as the medium that connected Dalits with other communities has therefore disappeared. Bama was able to speak on behalf of her community in the 1990s, whereas in the 2010s, the community is able to speak for itself with instantly accessible video content. Dalit activism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has, for the first time, been placed into the hands of the masses, rather than a select few. Through new technologies, Dalits from across the subcontinent are able to share their stories with the world and begin to reclaim their voice.

## Conclusion

Although the criticism levelled at Arundhati Roy’s *Annihilation of Caste* introduction may appear extreme through the eyes of a Western audience, we can now see how these criticisms have been a

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<sup>108</sup> Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), p. 3.

<sup>109</sup> Dalit Camera, ‘About’, < <http://www.dalitcamera.com/about/> > [accessed 18<sup>th</sup> June 2018] (para. 1 of 5).

<sup>110</sup> See the following as an example: Dalit Camera, *Dalit Labourer killed in Kerala over 30 Rupees*, online recording, YouTube, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2017, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UC7oh6vuXow>> [accessed 18<sup>th</sup> June 2018].

part of Dalit activism since its very inception. Who does, and who does not, have the right to speak on behalf of Dalits has been a question that has been asked at every point in the history of Dalit and anti-caste politics, since the time of Phule to the rise of the Bhim Army. Ultimately, what this survey of Dalit activist history has shown is that movements are most successful when Dalits are the ones that are at its centre. The Self-Respect movement, for example, was comprised of a non-Dalit leadership and thus allowed Dalit issues to be consumed by other Sudra and anti-Brahmin agendas. In stark contrast, Ambedkar was able to secure legal safeguards through his tenure as Law Minister and Head of the Constitution Drafting Committee and has since become a symbol of hope for Dalits across the subcontinent. Ambedkar perfectly highlights how, when Dalits are placed at the centre of discussions, real change is able to occur. Similarly, when Dalits are not being represented in the political sphere, Dalit-centred activist groups are able to fill that void. These were the conditions that helped create the Dalit Panthers, who believed that since the death of Ambedkar the Dalits of Maharashtra did not have a voice. The Dalit Panther movement that spread throughout India offered a renewed sense of optimism for Dalits. Circulating the writing of Ambedkar and raising Dalit consciousness, Dalit communities were able to speak out against the caste atrocities that they were victims of. Politics, however, reduced the impact of groups such as the Dalit Panthers and the DPI, who were either torn apart by internal politics or have had their radicalism watered down through electoral coalition, which has become the fate of the DPI. As Pandian notes in an interview with Hugo Gorringe: ‘Dalit parties can never gain power through electoral politics. In every constituency in Tamil Nadu Dalits are in a minority. [Even if] all the Dalits in Tamil Nadu [...] voted for Thirumavalavan he cannot win’.<sup>111</sup> Gorringe explains that in seeking electoral success, radical parties such as the DPI ‘may require the dilution or neglect of key movement demands in favour of broader or more general appeals, or it may result in pragmatic electoral alliances with other parties’.<sup>112</sup> The irony here is that while the DPI has attempted to speak for Dalits in a formal political setting, their voice has been muted as they have been forced to dilute their radicalism in order to form coalitions with other parties. Since 2010, groups such as the Bhim Army and Dalit Camera have formed with a similar ethos to the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s and over time we shall see if they will succumb to a similar fate, or if they are able to generate a strong, powerful Dalit voice for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The development of Dalit literature, as we have seen throughout this chapter, has helped to strengthen the Dalit voice. With figures such as Ambedkar and Periyar dominating anti-caste politics in the political realm, literature gave Dalits a voice both within and outside of the political sphere. From the radical poetry of the Dalit Panthers to the young generation of writers in the 1990s, literature became a way for Dalits to shake the foundations of caste through exposing the harsh realities of living life at bottom of the social ladder. What this chapter has shown, however, is how this role that

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<sup>111</sup> Gorringe, *Panthers in Parliament*, p. 111.

<sup>112</sup> Gorringe, *Panthers in Parliament*, p. 111.

Dalit literature played throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century has changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In contemporary India young, urban and educated Dalits are turning to social media to express their hatred for the caste system and video testimony has replaced the Dalit autobiography as the vehicle of representing Dalit life. The translation boom of Dalit literature since the year 2000 has continued to rise, however, with new texts appearing in English translation every year. If Dalits in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are finding their voice through online platforms, then what role does literature play in an India where caste issues are still a major concern? The proceeding chapters of this thesis will examine this question in greater detail through exploring the debates that contemporary Dalit literature engages with. These debates, in many ways, are different from the core arguments of Dalit activist groups both past and present.

## Chapter Two: Dalit Castes and Identities: The Use of ‘Dalit’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The history of Dalit and anti-caste politics over the past 150 years has been complicated, with many figures and movements offering different visions of how to work towards a world without caste. It is a history that has often lacked an authoritative Dalit voice, though this began to change in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to the work of Ambedkar and the Dalit Panthers., This picture of Dalit politics and activism becomes even more complex when we begin to critically analyse the idea of a pan-Indian Dalit community. Throughout this thesis so far, I have used the word ‘Dalit’ as a ‘catch-all’ phrase, a word that encompasses all people who are born into castes that are considered untouchable. This is, after all, what the word is intended to do. Like words and phrases that have come before it, such as ‘Depressed Classes’ and ‘Harijan’, or official phrases that exist today such as ‘Scheduled Castes’, ‘Dalit’ is a word that brings these castes together as one large entity. As I have shown in the previous chapter, however, Dalit politics and activism have historically never been truly a national enterprise. Although regional Dalit activist groups and political parties have existed over the years, other than Ambedkar, there has not been a group or figure that has been able to view Dalit issues on a nationwide level. Even Ambedkar faced difficulties in creating a unified Dalit identity that would be able to stand out as a cohesive unit. Although the word ‘Dalit’ is supposed to be universal in its attempt to bring communities together from across the subcontinent, history shows us that Dalit activism often functioned on a regional basis.

Throughout this chapter, I will analyse the use and development of the word ‘Dalit’ to understand its importance in contemporary discourse. I will explore the relationships between specific Dalit castes, and how the construction of individual Dalit caste identities affects the development of a ‘pan-Indian’ Dalit identity. For example, the differences between the Mala and Madiga Dalit castes in Andhra Pradesh will be explored in this chapter, particularly through the formation of the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS) activist group in the 1990s. In independent India, the Scheduled Castes (SC) have benefited from positive discrimination in the form of reservations that have been implemented by the constitution. These reservations apply to areas such as education, jobs, and local government spending.<sup>1</sup> The MRPS argued that the Madiga caste were receiving a disproportionate amount of Scheduled Caste reservations when compared to the Mala caste, one of the largest Dalit castes in Andhra Pradesh, and that the Madigas were entitled to a greater share of the reservations. The basis of the MRPS’ argument was that within the caste structures that exist in the region, the Madiga caste is inferior to the Mala caste, and the group believed that this prejudice was being extended within the reservation system, resulting in them receiving a lower share. As K. Balagopal

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<sup>1</sup> For a list of Scheduled Castes, see Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, ‘List of Scheduled Castes’, <<http://socialjustice.nic.in/UserView/index?mid=76750>> [accessed 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018].



notes, ‘the malas and the madigas are both “untouchable” and suffer equally [...] but [there is] a miniature hierarchy within the Dalits that puts the malas on the upper rungs of the ladder [...] The madigas are outcastes for the malas, just as there are castes even lower than the madigas’.<sup>2</sup> The structures of the caste system that places the Malas and the Madigas as inferior to the upper-castes is replicated here, with Dalit castes forming their own hierarchies. The MRPS was eventually successful in its campaign, with the Andhra Pradesh government changing the way in which the reservation share is calculated.<sup>3</sup>

Although I will return to this example later in this chapter, it is worth introducing here to highlight how intricate Dalit caste relationships are, and that many communities and identities exist under the heading of ‘Dalit’. This is complicated further in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when we introduce the urban Dalit youth and the Dalit middle class sections of society into the equation. Thanks to the reservation system, there has been a steady incline in educated and relatively wealthy Dalits living in urban environments. Their education and job prospects have, however, done little to eradicate caste prejudice. Instead, caste discrimination takes on new forms such as Dalits being refused apartment rentals or issues arising in the university system, similar to those which lead to the suicide of Rohith Vemula.<sup>4</sup> The new social status of the Dalit middle-class, I will argue, has changed their perception of the Dalit question and thus their view of the word ‘Dalit’ itself. I will argue that these ideas perpetuated by the Dalit middle class have filtered down into the new generation of Dalit activists. 21<sup>st</sup> century youth organisations such as the Bhim Army, for example, have run on a radically different platform from other Dalit groups that have come before them. The Bhim Army, for instance, have abandoned ‘Dalit’ in favour of ‘Ambedkarite’. This highlights another division that comes under the heading of ‘Dalit’ in contemporary India, demonstrating that the Dalit community is fractured along both class and caste lines. This chapter will explore how the word ‘Dalit’, has come to represent all of these different communities, and question the future of the category in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through an analysis of the complexities of the Dalit community and by examining the intricate caste relationships that exist today. In doing so, I will explore the fundamentals of the caste system, and how our contemporary understanding of caste synthesises the ideas of varna and jati. I will argue that an understanding of jati identity formation is critical in our understanding of Dalit identity, as different jati groups can form local hierarchies that could potentially damage the cohesion that the Dalit identity offers.

### **The Origin of ‘Dalit’ and the Politics of Naming**

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<sup>2</sup> K. Balagopal, *Ear to the Ground: Selected Writings on Class and Caste* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2011), pp. 429-30.

<sup>3</sup> See Satyanarayana and Tharu, ‘Introduction’, pp.44-45.

<sup>4</sup> Dyotana Banerjee and Mona G. Mehta, ‘Caste and capital in the remaking of Ahmedabad’, *Contemporary South Asia*, 25.2, (2017), 182-195.

Although history is unclear about who initially coined the word ‘Dalit’ to refer to untouchable communities, it has been widely suggested that it was brought into usage by both Phule and Ambedkar.<sup>5</sup> This, however, runs contrary to the fact that throughout his writings, Ambedkar uses the phrases ‘untouchables’ and ‘Depressed Classes’ when referring to Dalits, rather than the word ‘Dalit’ itself.<sup>6</sup> Phule, too, commonly used the phrase ‘Ati Shudra’ in his writings when discussing Dalit communities. This was part of his efforts to unite the Dalits and the Shudras as a large social force to counter Brahmin hegemony. Regardless of who first used the term to refer to untouchable communities, we do know that it was in use during the pre-independence period in small pockets of the country but on a much smaller scale than we see today.<sup>7</sup> Its introduction and usage during this time period is significant considering the debates surrounding the position of Dalits in independent India that were being conducted by the British, Gandhi, and Ambedkar, which will be discussed below.

Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak note that the word ‘Dalit’ means a number of things in Marathi such as “‘oppressed”, “broken”, “crushed” and “downtrodden””.<sup>8</sup> Etymologically, Arun Prabha Mukherjee breaks the word down to its Sanskrit origins, writing that the word ‘comes from the Sanskrit root *dal*, which means to crack open, split, crush, grind, and so forth’.<sup>9</sup> Although typically used to describe the processing of food grains such as lentils, its ‘metaphoric usage, still as a verb, is evident in descriptions of warfare and the vanquishing of enemies’.<sup>10</sup> In its current form, the word comes to describe the historical abuse that the community has been subjected to at the hands of the caste system by evoking this feeling of being crushed and ground down. Not only is it a word that describes the Dalit condition, but it is also a word that brings together the Dalit community as a distinct minority. Most importantly, it is a name that the Dalit community has given themselves, rather than subscribing to other names given to them. This is what makes its usage during the pre-independence period so significant. At a time when the British used the phrase ‘Depressed Classes’, and Gandhi used the word ‘Harijan’ to refer to the untouchable community, the Dalits had no group identity that was not loaded with the politics of other non-Dalit political actors. ‘Dalit’, therefore,

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<sup>5</sup> Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, ‘Introduction’, in *Dalit Literatures in India*, ed. Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1-14 (p.8).

<sup>6</sup> My own research shows that throughout the seventeen volumes of Ambedkar’s writings and speeches, the word ‘Dalit’ appears only three times. In all three instances, it appears when Ambedkar is discussing other activist groups who use the word ‘Dalit’ in the names of their organisation. For example, he refers to the ‘Secretary of Dalit Sudhar (Harijan Uplift) Committee’ through a quotation from a newspaper. See B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 5*, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, ‘Under the Province of Mr. Gandhi’, in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 5*, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), pp. 287-329 (p. 303).

<sup>8</sup> Abraham and Misrahi-Barak, ‘Introduction’, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Arun Prabha Mukherjee, ‘Introduction’, in *Joothan: An Untouchables Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. xiv-xxxv (p. xviii).

<sup>10</sup> Mukherjee, ‘Introduction’, p. xviii.

stands out from these other names as it represents the political and historical struggles of the Dalit community. As Mukherjee argues:

By identifying themselves as Dalits, [they] are embracing an identity that was born in the historic struggle to dismantle the caste system, which was responsible for their untouchable status, and to rebuild society on the principles of human dignity, equality, and respect.<sup>11</sup>

The word 'Dalit' therefore has a sense of hope infused into it. Unlike other names that were previously given to Dalits that reinforced their low social position, 'Dalit' offers a liberating message for the community that simply did not exist in the words and phrases used previously.

The liberating qualities of the word 'Dalit' were not enshrined in the word from the outset, but instead have developed over time. The largest contribution to this has been through its use by the Dalit Panthers. As discussed in Chapter One, the Dalit Panthers have been one of the main catalysts of the contemporary Dalit movement and the development of Dalit literature. Through their use of poetry, activism, and an ideological framework that was rooted in Ambedkarism, the Dalit Panthers were able to create a new kind of Dalit protest that was different from other pre-independence forms. As they helped to bring the writings and philosophy of Ambedkar back into public discourse, they also brought the word 'Dalit' into the Marathi mainstream.<sup>12</sup> As the word had only been previously used infrequently before independence, the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s were able to infuse the word 'Dalit' with their own unique form of activism. The Dalit Panthers, however, adopted a much more inclusive definition of the term in contrast with its usage today. In their manifesto, published in 1973, the group note that by 'Dalit' they mean:

members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion.<sup>13</sup>

This definition, then, goes far beyond the idea that Dalits are specifically former untouchables and members of castes that are considered untouchable. The Dalit Panther definition of the word is a broad and inclusive term that includes groups that are similarly 'ground down' by society. However, this kind of inclusivity has not lasted with the word quickly becoming associated with former untouchables rather than a larger cross-section of Indian society. It is important to remember this early definition of the word by the Dalit Panthers as it signifies this hope of forming a better and equal society that has since become associated with the word.

'Dalit', then, has survived into the 21<sup>st</sup> century because of the different kinds of Dalit politics that surround it. It is a word that not only symbolises the Dalit condition of being worn down by the caste system, but also represents their vision of a world without caste that has developed within Dalit activism after independence. But the act of naming themselves Dalits, I believe, is the largest

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<sup>11</sup> Mukherjee, 'Introduction', p. xx.

<sup>12</sup> Ghanshyam Shah, 'Introduction: Dalit Politics', in *Dalit Identity and Politics*, ed. Ghanshyam Shah (New Delhi: Sage, 2001), pp. 17-43 (p. 22).

<sup>13</sup> K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, *The Exercise of Freedom* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013), p. 62.

contributing factor to the word's popularity and survival. As a word that rejects the names ascribed to them, 'Dalit' is something that is theirs and is an identity that they can begin to shape. It is for these reasons that A. C. Lal described the word 'Dalit' as 'a beautiful word, because it transcends narrow national and sectarian frontiers. It is a beautiful word because it embraces the sufferings, frustrations, expectations and groaning of the entire cosmos' at the first Dalit Solidarity Conference in Nagpur 1992.<sup>14</sup> Ambedkar, however, did not use the word 'Dalit' (or a word of his own invention) in his writings and speeches, as noted above. Instead, he continued to use the words 'Depressed Classes' and 'untouchables' interchangeably.<sup>15</sup> This, I believe, is due to the deep pragmatist roots of Ambedkar and his philosophy. As discussed in the previous chapter, Ambedkar was committed to enforcing tangible political reforms such as legal and constitutional safeguards for Dalits, believing these would be the foundations that would lead to Dalit emancipation. For Ambedkar, what the untouchables called themselves was inconsequential, as it did not remove them from their position as untouchables. As Ghanshyam Shah puts it: 'Dr Ambedkar and his followers did not find any difference whether they were called *achchuta* [untouchable] or Harijan, as the new nomenclature did not change their position in the social order'.<sup>16</sup> A change in name for Ambedkar, then, was superficial. He did have an opinion on naming, however, when it came to religious conversion.

Shortly after Ambedkar was supposed to deliver his 'Annihilation of Caste' speech in May 1936, he organised a conference where the agenda was focused on religious conversion. In front of an 'exclusively Mahar audience of approximately 35,000 people', Ambedkar delivered a speech titled 'What Way Emancipation?'.<sup>17</sup> Here, Ambedkar discusses how religious conversion has the potential to improve the position of untouchables by leaving the Hindu fold. He argues that:

The names that depict your caste are considered so filthy that even their utterance is enough to create a vomiting sensation in the heart of Hindus [...] To call oneself a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist or a Sikh is not merely a change of religion but is also a change of name.<sup>18</sup>

For Ambedkar, a change in name is only successful when it has the backing of wider ideological changes. In the context of religious conversion, the change in name is significant as they are moving *away* from Hinduism, and thus away from the structures that legitimised their position as untouchable.

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<sup>14</sup> Sipra Mukherjee. 'Creating Their Own Gods: Literature from the Margins of Bengal' in *Dalit Literatures in India*, pp. 128-142 (p. 139).

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting here that Ambedkar did offer different names for the untouchables to the British during the Round Table Conferences to replace the name 'Depressed Classes'. These included "Non-caste Hindus", "Protestant Hindus", or "Non-conformist Hindus". The British never adopted these names, nor did Ambedkar himself use them. See B. R. Ambedkar, 'Dr Ambedkar at the Round Table Conferences', in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 2*, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), pp. 503-748 (p. 672).

<sup>16</sup> Shah, 'Introduction: Dalit Politics', p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Scott R. Stroud, 'Pragmatism and the Pursuit of Social Justice in India: Bhimrao Ambedkar and the Rhetoric of Religious Reorientation', *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 46:1, (2016), 5-27 (p. 20).

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Stroud, 'Pragmatism and the Pursuit of Social Justice in India', p. 22.

Conversion allows them to be called something that is fundamentally different from other names that relate to being Hindu.

### **Varna, Jati, and Caste**

In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar discusses, and summarily dismisses the ideas of social reformists who wished to consolidate the thousands of castes that exist in India into four social classes (Chaturvarnya).<sup>19</sup> Although Ambedkar had many issues with this idea, including the practicalities of its enforcement, he also had an issue with the chosen names of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Ambedkar argued that although these caste reformists wished to reinstate this system of four large social classes that would be based on worth rather than birth.<sup>20</sup> Retaining these group names meant that they would be ‘associated with a definite and fixed notion in the mind of every Hindu. That notion is that of a hierarchy based on birth’, and that a hierarchy would be in place, regardless as to whether it was based on birth or worth.<sup>21</sup> As highlighted in the previous chapter, Ambedkar was against this kind of caste reform as he argued that ‘the idea of varna is the parent of the idea of caste [...] Both are evil ideas and it matters very little whether one believes in varna or in caste’.<sup>22</sup> But what, fundamentally, is the difference between varna and caste, and how does understanding this difference help us in our understanding of Dalit identity formation and naming?

Unlike many modern religions, what we know today as Hinduism does not have a central text that serves as the basis of its theology, such as the Christian Bible for example. Because of this, there is not one specific place where Hindus can look to find the answers to the great philosophical questions that man has asked for millennia such as ‘who created the universe and all that is in it?’. Instead, Hindus are faced with a plethora of different texts, ranging from 1500 BCE to 500 years CE that give different answers to these kinds of questions. The oldest of these, the Vedas, can be seen to be a part of the Brahminical tradition that existed in the Vedic period between 1500-600 BCE.<sup>23</sup> These texts, which began to solidify the position of Brahmins at the top of society, formed the foundations of contemporary Hinduism centuries later. The Vedas give varying accounts of how the universe (and thus humanity) was created, ranging from the universe being hatched from a golden egg or embryo, to simply not knowing what or who created the universe.<sup>24</sup> One of the oldest of the Vedas, the *Rigveda*, contains a hymn that not only gives one explanation for the origin of the universe, but also the origin of the four social classes, or *varnas*. This hymn (Rigveda 10.90) evokes the idea of Purusha- the cosmic man. He is described as being ‘thousand-headed [...] thousand-eyed [and] thousand-footed’

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<sup>19</sup> Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, p.263. ‘Chatur’ is the Sanskrit numerical prefix of four, similar to the prefix ‘quad’. ‘Chaturvarnya’ thus translates to ‘four varnas’.

<sup>20</sup> Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, pp. 263-264.

<sup>21</sup> Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, pp. 263-264.

<sup>22</sup> Ambedkar, ‘What Congress and Gandhi Have Done...’, p. 289.

<sup>23</sup> R. Weiler, ‘Introduction’, in *Sources of Indian Tradition* vol 1, ed. Ainslie T. Embree (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 3-7 (p. 3).

<sup>24</sup> See R. Weiler, ‘Cosmic and Ritual Order in Vedic Literature’, in *Sources of Indian Tradition* vol 1, pp 7-29 (pp. 19-22).

and is part of the cosmic sacrifice that creates the universe. He is sacrificed by the gods and from him spring forth not only the animals such as goats, sheep, and cows, but also ‘the verses and the sacred chants’.<sup>25</sup> After the sacrifice, the gods divided Purusha into four portions: his mouth, arms, thighs, and feet. These four parts became the Brahmin, Kshatriya,<sup>26</sup> Vaishya and Shudra social classes.<sup>27</sup> What is so interesting about this hymn is that in this story of creation, social class was created at the same time as the universe. During the cosmic sacrifice, *humanity* did not simply spring from Purusha as did the animals, but four distinct classes were created. This, then, gives a divine provenance to this system of social organisation. For the orthodox Hindu, who believes rigidly in the sanctity of the Vedas, this creation story affirms the belief that these social classes should remain intact because they are the will of the gods.

Although hymns such as this in the Rigveda begin to explain the origins of these four varnas, it is not until later, post-Vedic texts that we begin to see explanations of what these four social classes look like, and the duties that are prescribed to each one. The *Manusmriti* for example, gives a clear account of the roles and duties of each of these social classes. Estimated to have been composed around 5 CE, the *Manusmriti* is a legal text that outlines both legal and societal instructions ranging from legal sanctions to what food Brahmins can and cannot eat. It was also one of the first Hindu texts translated by the British at the start of the colonial period. As Patrick Olivelle writes:

In 1772 Warren Hastings, the British Governor General, had proposed a plan for the administration of justice in which the Hindu law based on [the *Manusmriti*] [...] British judges needed access to the original legal texts of India to implement the British policy of ‘administering native law to the natives’.<sup>28</sup>

The adoption of the *Manusmriti* by the British led to the Brahmins becoming solidified at the top of the hierarchy in colonial India, as I began to discuss in the Introduction. The *Manusmriti* dedicates long chapters to detailing the rules and expectations that should be followed by the Brahmin and the Kshatriya social groups. Namely, the Brahmins are the protectors of the Vedas, and as such, they are the ones that are in charge of all religious and spiritual matters. The Kshatriyas, in the *Manusmriti*, are predominantly the Kings and lawmakers of society. The text largely focuses on the societal laws that apply to the Brahmin and Kshatriya classes, and pays little attention to the Vaishyas and Shudras.

There is only one short passage of the text that explicitly addresses the Shudras:

For the Südra, on the other hand, the highest Law leading to bliss is simply to render obedient service to distinguished Brahmin householders who are learned in the Veda. When he keeps himself pure, obediently serves the highest class, is soft-spoken and humble, and always takes refuge in Brahmins, he obtains a higher birth.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Weiler, ‘Cosmic and Ritual Order in Vedic Literature’, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> This hymn in the Rigveda calls the Kshatriyas ‘Rajanya’.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Weiler, ‘Cosmic and Ritual Order in Vedic Literature’, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> Patrick Olivelle, ‘Introduction’, in *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Manava-Dharmasastra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 3-71 (p. 62).

<sup>29</sup> Patrick Olivelle, ‘Translation’, in *Manu's Code of Law*, pp. 75-236 (p. 207).

Simply put, the role of the Shudra is to serve the Brahmin and the rest of society, with the hope of gaining a higher birth through fulfilling their dharma which is to service the Brahmin.<sup>30</sup> Although this is the only section in the *Manusmriti* which specifically details the role of the Shudra in society, it is made clear throughout the text that the Shudras are at the bottom of this social hierarchy. An example of this is when the text discusses the repercussions of a Brahmin not following his duty, such as studying the Vedas. The text notes: ‘When a Brahmin expends great effort in other matters without studying the Veda, while still alive he is *quickly reduced to the status of a Sudra*, together with his children’.<sup>31</sup> Through highlighting and enforcing these rules based on specific social orders, the *Manusmriti* begins to put flesh to the bones of the social system laid out in previous scriptures, but also stresses the deep hierarchy engrained in this system.

The hymn of the Rigveda began to introduce the idea of a four-tiered social order that had a divine origin, whilst the *Manusmriti* assigned laws and social rules to these groups. These two ideas are combined in other Hindu texts such as the *Mahabharata*. Many Western scholars have described the *Mahabharata*, alongside its north Indian counterpart the *Ramayana*, as an epic, mirroring that of the *Iliad*. Although, as John D. Smith notes, there is ‘no comparable genre’ of the epic in the Indian tradition, it is a suitable comparison to enable unfamiliar readers to understand what kind of text the *Mahabharata* is.<sup>32</sup> In brief, the *Mahabharata* tells the story of two groups of feuding cousins who fight a war for the right to rule the land. On the eve of the war, the principal character Arjuna (a Kshatriya) becomes uneasy about the prospect of fighting and throws down his weapons, asking his friend and charioteer for advice. This person is Krishna who, during a section of the text known as the *Bhagavad Gita*, reveals himself to Arjuna as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu.<sup>33</sup> Although the *Mahabharata* is large and extensive with many different sub-plots exploring multiple subjects, one of the core themes of the text, which relates to my discussion of varna, is *dharma*.

Dharma is a concept that has no literal translation in English, and has no comparison in the Western world. It also means different things to different groups. Buddhists, for example, use the word dharma (with the Pali spelling dhamma) to mean the Buddha’s teachings, or it can also mean ‘laws’ or ‘rules’ in this context.<sup>34</sup> In the Hindu context, dharma comes to mean a range of things that all link to the idea of what it is right for an individual to do. As Smith puts it: ‘a person’s *dharma* is what is right for that person to do, but one person’s *dharma* is different from another’.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, it may be right, or an individual’s dharma, for them to do one thing, but not right, or *adharma*, for someone else. There are multiple factors at play in an individual’s dharma, but the one that I will

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<sup>30</sup> The concept of dharma will be discussed below.

<sup>31</sup> Olivelle, ‘Translation’, p. 103; emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> John D. Smith, ‘Introduction’, in *The Mahabharata* ed. John D. Smith (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), pp. xi-lxx (p. lxxv)

<sup>33</sup> For a full and in-depth summary of the plot of *The Mahabharata*, see Smith, ‘Introduction’, pp. xv-xviii.

<sup>34</sup> Alf Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, ‘Introduction’, *The Mahabharata*, p. xviii.

focus on here is how being born into a particular social group affects an individual's dharma. As described above, each of the four varnas have a defined role in society, and transcendence between these roles is mostly prohibited. The *Mahabharata* affirms this through its use of dharma to explain why it is important for individuals in each group to stick to the roles assigned to their social group. This is exemplified in a story titled 'The Brahmin's Conversation with the Hunter', which appears in book three. In this story, a character named Kausika meets a hunter whose job it is to prepare and sell meat, which gives him one of the lowest positions in society, mirroring that of contemporary Dalits. Kausika criticises the hunter for his work, but he replies by saying that it is his '*hereditary calling, which it would be wrong for him to turn away from*'.<sup>36</sup> The hunter has been born into this position because of bad deeds committed in a previous life, which he later explains was accidentally killing a Brahmin.<sup>37</sup> '*Only through dharma*', the hunter explains '*may one break the chain and reach freedom*'.<sup>38</sup> This chain is the series of high and low births that are achieved based on the way one acts in a previous life. Through fulfilling his dharma, killing animals and preparing the meat, the hunter hopes to break the chain of rebirth and go to heaven.

The *Mahabharata*, through the concept of dharma, solidifies varna groups by giving them spiritual grounding. One is born low because of previous sins, and fulfilling one's dharma in this life will lead to better births, or an end to them, in the future. The dharma of social groups is also given divine backing within the *Mahabharata*, particularly in the *Bhagavad Gita* section. Here, Krishna convinces Arjuna that he should fight in the war that is set to start the following day, and he does this by highlighting Arjuna's dharma. As a Kshatriya, it is part of his dharma to fight. Krishna points this out early in the text by saying: 'think thou also of thy duty and do not waver. There is no greater good for a warrior [Kshatriya] than to fight in a righteous war [...] But to forgo this fight for righteousness is to forgo thy duty and honour: is to fall into transgression'.<sup>39</sup> Krishna returns to this thought at the end of the text where he explains the roles of each varna, concluding that 'they all attain perfection when they find joy in their work'.<sup>40</sup> So through finding joy in the work ascribed to one's social group, and therefore achieving one's dharma, an individual is able to find perfection.

The texts that I have discussed above have formed a theoretical, religious, and spiritual basis for the varna system of social organisation, and thus for the contemporary caste system. This is one of the main reasons that Ambedkar rejected Hinduism as a religion and attacked its foundational texts. In an unfinished book chapter, 'Philosophic Defence of Counter Revolution (Krishna and his Gita)', Ambedkar criticises the *Bhagavad Gita* for its fundamental championing of varna. Crucially, for

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<sup>36</sup> All quotations here are italicised in the original, unless otherwise stated. *The Mahabharata*, p. 203.

<sup>37</sup> *The Mahabharata*, p. 204.

<sup>38</sup> *The Mahabharata*, p. 203.

<sup>39</sup> *The Bhagavad Gita* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> *The Bhagavad Gita*, p. 83.



Ambedkar, the *Bhagavad Gita* has ‘no message and it is futile to search for one’.<sup>41</sup> Instead, he believes that the Gita ‘defend[s] certain dogmas of religion on philosophic grounds [...] It uses philosophy to defend religion’.<sup>42</sup> He goes further by arguing that Brahminical groups have pointed to the Vedas as empirical truth, meaning that its dogmas cannot be disputed: ‘these things were ordained by the Vedas, the Vedas were infallible, therefore the dogmas were not to be questioned’.<sup>43</sup> Ambedkar, therefore, sees how these texts which have formed the basis of contemporary Hinduism, have legitimised the varna system which highlights why he was in favour of rejecting Hinduism and its teachings. Although this graded, four-tiered system of social organisation has evolved over the centuries, its basic principles of high and low members of society with their own specific roles and occupations has endured. Ultimately, this is due to the validity that these sacred texts have enjoyed for thousands of years. Whether it be a social system that existed at the point of creation, or one proclaimed by god, these texts have had a crucial role in underpinning the very fabric of Indian society for the past three millennia. It is for this reason that Ambedkar believed that undermining the validity and belief in these texts was crucial in order to destroy the basic beliefs in the caste system.

One of the most puzzling aspects of the varna system is how exactly this kind of social system would work in practice. As we can see in the previous discussions, the texts that underpin the religious and spiritual basis for a four-tiered system of social organisation explain the order of the hierarchy, with the Brahmin at the top and the Shudra at the bottom, as well as explaining the kinds of jobs and social responsibilities that each group have. However, they fail to explain how these four larger social groups divide themselves. As R. N. Dandekar notes, ‘it must be stressed that the concept of society divided into four classes is a vision of an ideal society and does not correspond to actual historical reality’.<sup>44</sup> The varna system, then, is an idealised construct, which neatly places sections of society into specific parts. It does not, however, reflect the lived reality of Indians today or historically. As M. N. Srinivas notes, ‘the varna-scheme refers at best only to the broad categories of the society and not to its real and effective units’.<sup>45</sup> It is at this critical junction, between the idealised system and the social reality, where we find the idea of Jati. Jati can be described as the ‘birth group’ that into which an individual is born. These birth groups, which can sit within or blur the lines of the varna system, create their own tiered system of social organisation with more specific roles embedded into them. As Richard G. Fox explains:

it is the jati or local endogamous group which is the foundation of the caste system. The varna names are applied to groupings of jatis [...] and therefore operate to broadly classify

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<sup>41</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, ‘Philosophic Defence of Counter Revolution (Krishna and his Gita), in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 3*, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), pp. 357- 380 (p. 361).

<sup>42</sup> Ambedkar, ‘Krishna and his Gita’, p. 261.

<sup>43</sup> Ambedkar, ‘Krishna and his Gita’, p. 363.

<sup>44</sup> R. N. Dandekar ‘Dharma: The First End of Man, in *Sources of Indian Tradition vol I*, ed. Ainslie T. Embree (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 213-233 (p. 215).

<sup>45</sup> M. N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 65.

categories of castes on the basis of shared status, historical origins, life styles, and ritual behaviours.<sup>46</sup>

The jati system, then, reflects the lived social reality with social groups forming around specific occupations. This means that jati is fundamentally located in local traditions and hierarchies, with different jati groups existing in different villages and regions of India. It is therefore important to understand that these two systems of varna and jati, although similar and inherently connected, are two *separate* systems of social organisation; one functions on a regional level, with the other functioning on a pan-Indian level. David Mandelbaum presents an interesting scenario that exemplifies how these two systems are able to run in parallel. Here, a farmer meets a shopkeeper and knows that the shopkeeper is a Vaishya, so he is able to treat him accordingly. Mandelbaum continues:

were the farmer to be fully informed about the shopkeeper, he would know [...] that he is of the Sarta jati, of the Visa subdivision of that variety of those Vanias (Banias) who are supposed to have originated in Desawal.<sup>47</sup>

It is, however, unimportant for the farmer to know this minute detail about the shopkeeper's exact social origin as he is able to base his first impression on the shopkeeper on his varna identity. This leads Mandelbaum to conclude that 'not only is it unnecessary for the farmer to know all this, it would be impossible for him to adjust his relations with all his neighbours on the basis of such finely discriminatory knowledge'.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Srinivas argues that, '*varna* systematizes the chaos of *jatis* and enables the sub-castes of one region to be comprehended by people in another area by reference to a common scale'.<sup>49</sup> So not only does the jati system help to tackle the broad nature of varna, but varna too helps to comprehend the hundreds of jatis from across the subcontinent into a simplified order. It is of no surprise, then, that with these two systems working in tandem, caste has been able to survive for the past three millennia. An individual is identified by their jati on a local level, which places them within the unique hierarchy of their village or region. But they are also able to be identified by their varna identity away from their immediate locality. There is, therefore, no way of escaping one's caste identity as caste is able to function on both regional and national levels. In contemporary scholarship, the interplay between these two systems is becoming increasingly more relevant. Throughout the 50s and 60s, scholars saw the importance of jati within anthropological research into caste.<sup>50</sup> Previously, 'students of Indian society viewed the four-class varna scheme as representing the caste system'.<sup>51</sup> But today, as Maya Unnithan-Kumar suggests:

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<sup>46</sup> Richard G. Fox, 'Varna Schemes and Ideological Integration in Indian Society', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 11:1 (1969), 27-45 (p. 28).

<sup>47</sup> David Mandelbaum, 'Social Perception and Scriptural Theory in Indian Caste', in *Culture in History*, ed. Stanley Diamond. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960) pp. 437-48 (p. 446).

<sup>48</sup> Mandelbaum, 'Social Perception and Scriptural Theory', p. 446.

<sup>49</sup> Srinivas, *Religion and Society*, p. 25 emphasis added.

<sup>50</sup> Fox, 'Varna Schemes and Ideological Integration', p. 28.

<sup>51</sup> Fox, 'Varna Schemes and Ideological Integration', p. 28.

it is becoming important to approach caste not as a system of ideological classifications (in terms of *varna*) or social groupings (*jati*) but in terms of the relationship between the two as experienced through the everyday religious, economic and political contexts in which men and women live.<sup>52</sup>

The study of *jati* has been historically challenging when compared to the study of *varna* for a number of reasons. There are no ancient books or texts that scholars can turn to in the study of *jati* as I have done here in my discussion of *varna*. *Jati* is rooted in lived experience rather than ideological or religious thought, which makes it difficult to form a general view of *jati*, as it functions differently throughout the subcontinent. *Jati* research is therefore still in its early stages, but it is crucial that we have a fundamental understanding of it, and its differences from *varna*, as it best reflects the lived reality of Indians on a day-to-day basis.

The concept of *jati* is also important in our larger analysis of Dalit caste identities and structures. As can be seen from the previous discussions, particularly in reference to *varna*, the lowest rank of the Hindu social order is the Shudra, which sprouts various *jati* groupings across India. As I introduced in my discussion of Phule in Chapter One of this thesis, Shudras and Dalits are two separate social groups. To be direct: Shudras are not untouchable. As Ambedkar states in the preface of his book *Who Were The Shudras?*, ‘indeed until the fifth *Varna* of the Untouchables came into being, the Shudras were in the eyes of the Hindus the lowest of the low’.<sup>53</sup> Within the *varna* system, as I have outlined above, the lowest *varna* is that of the Shudra, but if, despite forming the bottom rung of the Hindu *varna* system, the Shudras were not untouchable, *varna* does little to explain the origins of Dalits and untouchability. As Ambedkar so neatly explains:

*Savarna* means one who belongs to one of the four *Varnas*. *Avarna* means one who does not belong to any one of the four *Varnas*. The Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras are *Savarnas*. The Untouchables or *Ati-Shudras* are called *Avarnas*, those who have no *Varna*. Logically, the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras are within the *Chaturvarnya*. Logically, the Untouchables or the *Ati-Shudras* are outside the *Chaturvarnya*.<sup>54</sup>

It is for this reason that *jati* identity, rather than *varna* identity, is much more important when we discuss Dalit caste identity and construction. If Dalits are considered to be *Avarna* (without *varna*), then it is impossible for us to discuss them in relation to *varna* as we can Shudras, for example. Even if we were to group Dalits together as a ‘fifth *varna*’ of Hindu social order, as Ambedkar flippantly does in the quotation above, we would be ignoring the distinct social organisation of Dalit communities. If we were to extend Mandelbaum’s example to the Dalit context, a Dalit outside of his immediate locality would have no choice but to identify by his *jati*, as he has no wider *varna* signifier that others can judge him by. The *jati* identity, which is bound up with untouchability, becomes the

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<sup>52</sup> Maya Unnithan-Kumar, *Identity, Gender, and Poverty: New Perspectives on Caste and Tribe in Rajasthan* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1997), p. 8.

<sup>53</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, ‘Who Were the Shudras?’ in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 7*, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014) pp. 11-227 (p. 9); emphasis in original.

<sup>54</sup> Ambedkar, ‘Who Were the Shudras?’, p. 36; emphasis in original.

central identity of Dalit communities. This is until, however, the inception of words such as Dalit. As will be discussed through the remaining parts of this chapter, 'Dalit' becomes a word that brings the different Dalit communities, or jatis, together. It has become, therefore, a similar signifier as varna categories, as they are now able to be identified as Dalits across the subcontinent via this word. Jati names, however, are still of vital importance to Dalit communities, and different groups have often had polarising views on them. This will be discussed later in this chapter, after I have given a brief explanation of how varna and jati come together in the more contemporary concept of *caste*.

As Patrick Olivelle highlighted, the British have played a crucial role in solidifying the dominance of caste in modern India. They have done this in particular by elevating the status of texts such as the *Manusmriti*, and codifying its teachings into law, as well as solidifying the position of Brahmins at the top of society, as discussed in the Introduction.<sup>55</sup> But most significantly, the British contributed to the amalgamation of varna and jati into what we know today as the caste system. As Ursula Sharma explains, the word 'caste' itself is not an Indian word; it is 'derived from the Portuguese *casta* meaning pure breed'.<sup>56</sup> In the very early colonial period, colonisers were becoming interested in the way that Indians organised themselves, and began to apply their own words and phrases to it. This is the source of today's concept of 'caste'. As Ramachandra Guha notes, caste is a word 'that conflates two Indian words: *jati* [...] and *varna*'.<sup>57</sup> Before the colonial period, the two systems of varna and jati functioned in parallel. Colonisers, such as the Portuguese and the British, were unable to disentangle these two systems from each other, and failed to understand the complex differences between the two. Instead, the word 'caste' developed as a phrase that encompassed both systems. It is to this end that Nicholas Dirks has argued that the caste system as we know it today is a colonial 'invention'. To clarify, Dirks argues that caste 'is a modern phenomenon, that is, specifically, the product of an historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule'.<sup>58</sup> He does not claim that colonial rule created caste from the ground up, but argues that 'under the British, [...] "caste" became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all "systemizing" India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization'.<sup>59</sup> The thousands of years' worth of Indian spiritual and philosophical thought that produced the two systems of varna and jati were shaped by the British to form the contemporary caste system. In modern India, 'caste' is very much the specific system of social classification. Even though on local levels the word 'jati' may be used, 'caste' has become the word that combines one's varna and jati identities. To ask someone what his or her caste is in 21<sup>st</sup> century India, then, has the potential for multiple answers. It is for this reason that the

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<sup>55</sup> Olivelle, 'Introduction', p. 62.

<sup>56</sup> Ursula Sharma, *Caste* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999) p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (London: Macmillan, 2007), p. ii; emphasis in original.

<sup>58</sup> Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, p. 5.

concept of caste is so challenging for the West to understand and comprehend. Through highlighting the distinct difference between varna and jati here, and how they have developed into the contemporary word ‘caste’, we are able to understand more clearly the relationships between Dalit castes, and how the formation of a universal Dalit identity is challenging.

### **Dalit Caste Structures**

When one breaks down the caste system into its distinct parts (that being varna and jati), we can see how hierarchies within caste groups are able to be formed. The jati system helped to create these hierarchies on village and regional levels through assigning different job roles to different jatis within a village or region, placing some jatis above and below others. This is also the case with Dalit communities. Amongst the thousands of Dalit castes that exist in India, local hierarchies exist that place some Dalit groups above and below others. I have already introduced this idea at the start of this chapter, where I highlighted the case of the Madiga agitations in the 1990s. In the caste structures of Andhra Pradesh, the Madigas are below the Malas, which led the Madigas to believe that they were being discriminated against within the state’s reservation quotas. The Dalit caste structure in Andhra Pradesh consists broadly of four main castes (although this will be broken down in greater depth below), these being the Malas, Adi Andhras, Madigas, and Rellis.<sup>60</sup> The Madigas are rooted at the bottom of this hierarchy due their traditional occupations of ‘leather goods work, removal of carcasses from the village, grave-digging, making footwear and drum-beating’.<sup>61</sup> These occupations are considered to be the most polluting in Indian society, which means that the Madigas are believed to be the most polluted of the Dalits in the Andhra Pradesh caste structure.

What is striking, however, is that although the Dalit caste structure of Andhra Pradesh is broken down into four main caste groups, with the Madiga at the bottom, there are in fact fifty-nine Scheduled Castes in Andhra Pradesh, as defined by the State.<sup>62</sup> Following the Madiga agitations in the 1990s, the Andhra Pradesh government divided the SC reservation quota into four, redistributing it in accordance to caste size and economic status. This was termed the ‘A, B, C, D model’ of reservation distribution and the reservations were split amongst the Malas, Adi Andhras, Madigas, and Rellis. It is interesting, as Balagopal explains, that smaller castes have been placed in and alongside these larger caste groups in the reservation distribution system, which he describes as related castes:

Group A was to consist of relli and *related castes* (twelve in number) [...] group B was to consist of the madigas and *related castes* (eighteen in number) [...] group C, consisting of malas and *related castes* (twenty-five in number) [...] and group D, consisting of adi andhras and *related castes* (four in number).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Sambaiah Gundimeda, *Dalit Politics in Contemporary India* (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), p. 234.

<sup>61</sup> Gundimeda, *Dalit Politics in Contemporary India*, p. 236.

<sup>62</sup> For the full list of Scheduled Castes in Andhra Pradesh, see: Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, ‘Andhra Pradesh’ <<http://socialjustice.nic.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/Scan-0001.jpg>> [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> October 2018].

<sup>63</sup> Balagopal, *Ears to the Ground*, p. 437; emphasis added.

The numbers, which Balagopal lists as being part of each groups, add up to fifty-nine- the number of Scheduled Castes in the state. What this means, then, is that the Dalit caste structure of Andhra Pradesh is much more complex than these four large caste groups of Mala, Adi Andhra, Madiga, and Relli. Other smaller castes, which in some ways are *related* to these larger groups, identify as being part of these castes for the purpose of SC reservations. This is also the case for Dalit caste structures in other parts of the subcontinent. In Tamil Nadu, for example, the three largest Dalit caste groups are the Pallars, Paraiyars and Chakkiliyars. Within social, political, and literary discourses, one routinely finds individuals defining themselves as one of these Dalit castes. Hugo Gorringe notes, however, that these three caste groups are largely used as categories, rather than actual castes:

It should be stressed here that the Pallars, Paraiyars and Chakkiliyars are caste categories rather than castes in their own right. Each of the three are sub-divided into sub-castes and split along numerous lines including language and occupation. The use of the terms here is a political one and emphasises the creation of pan-Tamil caste links and movements.<sup>64</sup> When we begin to break down Dalit caste identities, we find that caste identities have the ability to shift depending on social and political situations. In Tamil Nadu, Pallar, Paraiyar and Chakkiliya are political identities, enabling smaller castes to come together as one unit in the eyes of the State, yet live separate lives on a day-to-day basis. This is also similar in the Andhra Pradesh context. During the 1990s, smaller ‘related’ castes were able to join with the Madigas in a state-wide fight for a more proportionate share of the SC reservations. The identity of Madiga, therefore, becomes a political identity, with different castes identifying as Madiga for political reasons.

Dalit caste structures and identity formations are, therefore, a lot more complex than one might imagine. We can begin to make sense of this shifting between one caste identity and another when we explore the idea of *satellite castes*. The phrase, first used by T. R. Singh in his book *The Madiga: a Study in Social Structure & Change*, describes these smaller caste groups that sit on the periphery of larger caste groups, such as Madigas and Malas within Dalit caste structures. As Singh explains: ‘the main supporting caste has been called *central caste*; the others economically dependent upon, but complementing the socio-cultural life of the former, have been called *satellite castes*’.<sup>65</sup> Chinnaiiah Jangam elaborates this further:

According to custom, the main castes [central castes] provide food and shelter to travelling satellite castes. In turn, the dependent castes provide cultural and entertainment services, sometimes only to their main caste, but they may also perform for the rest of society.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Hugo Gorringe, *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu* (London: Sage Publications, 2005) p. 57.

<sup>65</sup> T. R. Singh, *The Madiga: A Study in Social Structure & Change* (Lucknow: Ethnographic & Folk Culture Society, 1973) p. 31.

<sup>66</sup> Chinnaiiah Jangam, ‘Caste From Below: Memory And Subversion Of Caste In Chindu Yakshaganam’, *South Asia Research* 36:3 (2016), 343-355 (p. 344).

The existence of these satellite castes helps to explain how smaller caste groups are able to vacillate between different caste identities depending on their political and social environment. N. Sudhakar Rao explains, for example, that the Madiga caste has six satellite castes, which all bring different services to the Madiga communities that they visit.<sup>67</sup> This relationship is not exploitative, however, when compared to the work relationships between Dalits and higher castes. As Jangam notes, ‘to some extent, the caste system among untouchables communities does replicate the dominant Hindu Brahminical ideology in terms of purity and pollution’, which I have highlighted in the respect of Malas and Madigas.<sup>68</sup> However, the relationships between Dalit central and satellite castes is ‘based on the egalitarian responsibility of supporting the dependent castes [...] the network of castes acts as a cohesive community, which preserved the inner strength’ of the community at large.<sup>69</sup> Because of the mutual relationships between the larger central and smaller dependent castes, the latter are able to identify as the former to create a larger political entity in situations such as the Madiga struggles of the 1990s.

This discussion of Dalit caste structures, and how different identities can be formed within them, highlights a serious problem with the word ‘Dalit’ as an inclusive term. At the start of his chapter on the Madiga agitations in the 1990s, Sambaiah Gundimeda provides two epigraphs which are extracts taken from two newspaper reports from 1996 and 1997 respectively. The first highlights that at the rally the report is covering, 40,000 Madigas showed to protest about the unfair reservation system. It quotes numerous slogans that were shouted by the protesters such as ‘social justice for the Madigas’.<sup>70</sup> The second epigraph highlights a similar protest that took place in 1997, but this time it was staged by 30,000 Malas who were protesting *against* the Madigas’ demand for a redistribution of the reservations. Slogans that were shouted at this rally included: “Down with the Madigas’ categorisation demand” [and] “Oh Madiga! If you have brain, fight with us in the competition”.<sup>71</sup> The derogatory slogans shouted by the Malas, and the fact that they were even protesting against the Madiga cause, highlights deep rifts that exist amongst Dalit communities throughout India. As K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu note, movements such as the MRPS highlighted the ‘internal tensions and contradictions between Dalit castes’ and that these kinds of caste-based movements raised questions of ‘structural hierarchy and social inequality among the different scheduled castes’.<sup>72</sup> This reflects the view that Ambedkar had on the caste system, and why it is so difficult to eradicate. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar argues that the caste system places communities ‘in a graded order one above the other in social status. Each caste takes its pride and its consolation in the fact that in the

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<sup>67</sup> N. Sudhakar Rao, ‘The Structure of South Indian Untouchable Castes: A View’, in *Dalit Identity and Politics* ed. Ghanshyam Shah (New Delhi: Sage, 2001), pp. 74-96 (p. 93).

<sup>68</sup> Jangam, ‘Caste From Below’, p. 346.

<sup>69</sup> Jangam, ‘Caste From Below’, pp. 346-47.

<sup>70</sup> Gundimeda, *Dalit Politics in Contemporary India*, p. 232.

<sup>71</sup> Gundimeda, *Dalit Politics in Contemporary India*, p. 232.

<sup>72</sup> K Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, ‘Introduction’ in *From Those Steel Nibs Are Sprouting*, pp. 1-54 (p. 43).

scale of castes it is above some other caste'.<sup>73</sup> He believed that no 'caste revolution' would occur because 'if a general dissolution came, some [castes] stand to lose more of their prestige and power than others do'.<sup>74</sup> This is precisely the case in some Dalit communities, and can be seen in particular within the relationship between the Madigas and the Malas. Although they are treated as inferior to the majority of Hindu society, the Malas are still superior to the Madiga, and wish to cling on to this position in the hierarchy. A redistribution in the SC reservation quotas would give the Madigas the opportunity to economically advance, and possibly threaten the Mala position. These casteist principles thus threaten the cohesive nature of the Dalit community, as the inherent nature of the caste system pits communities against each other, as exemplified by Ambedkar. 'Dalit', therefore, does not reflect these key differences between groups who may be separated on regional and national issues. There may be, however, a way to reconceptualise the word 'Dalit' within this discussion of fractured communities, by using it as a word that signals a new future for Dalit caste relationships. This is exemplified in Yendluri Sudhakar's poem 'Drumbeat'.<sup>75</sup> At the start of the poem, Sudhakar refers to himself as a Madiga, rather than a Dalit: 'I now speak as I am:/ as a madiga, a cobbler/ a slipper-stitching slogger'.<sup>76</sup> By the end of the poem, he appeals to the Malas to 'destroy the rungs of this ladder', and to look forward to the future to 'build a new Dalit world'.<sup>77</sup> So although Sudhakar takes deep pride in his Madiga identity, his use of the word 'Dalit' at the end of the poem points to a future in which the differences between Dalit communities has disappeared, and they are united by the word 'Dalit'. In its current state, the universality of the word 'Dalit' may not fully reflect the lived experience of Dalit communities on a local level. It can, however, offer a hope that these differences, which have become engrained by the caste system, will disappear in favour of annihilating caste and its prejudices.

### **Use of Dalit Jati Names**

A key component that led to the victory of the MRPS in the 1990s was how it was able to infuse a sense of pride into the word 'Madiga', allowing the community to be proud of identifying as Madigas. Historically, Dalit jati names have been considered as polluting as Dalits themselves. Ambedkar believes that Dalit jati names are 'considered so filthy that even their utterance is enough to create a vomiting sensation in the heart of Hindus'.<sup>78</sup> Despite this, the MRPS were able to utilise their jati name as an inherent part of their activism, using it as a base for them to build their movement. This is exemplified through the suffixing of key members of the MRPS' names with the word 'Madiga'. The group's founder and president, for example, changed his name to 'Krishna Madiga' to symbolise the importance of the jati name. He explains that he, as well as other key members of the MRPS, changed

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<sup>73</sup> Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, p. 294.

<sup>74</sup> Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, p. 296.

<sup>75</sup> Yendluri Sudhakar, 'Drumbeat', in *From Those Steel Nibs Are Sprouting*, pp. 590-592.

<sup>76</sup> Sudhakar, 'Drumbeat', p. 590.

<sup>77</sup> Sudhakar, 'Drumbeat', p. 592.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Stroud, 'Pragmatism and the Pursuit of Social Justice in India', p. 22.



their names to include the word ‘Madiga’ ‘to impart social identity and respectability to the madiga jati’.<sup>79</sup> This movement, then, was not just about SC reservations. It was about addressing the centuries’ worth of hatred and humiliation that had been synonymous with the word ‘Madiga’ and challenging the fundamental basis of this humiliation. The use of jati names has always been a contentious issue in the history of Dalit politics and activism. This contention is still very much alive in contemporary India, with some Dalit communities embracing their jati names, while others firmly reject them. To explore this debate, I will turn to examples away from the south Indian context and highlight two specific incidents that have occurred in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which exemplify how differently Dalit communities engage with their jati names.

In July 2004, the Bharatiya Dalit Sahitya Akademi (Indian Dalit Literature Academy, BDSA<sup>80</sup>) staged a protest in New Delhi in response to a proposed change in school curriculum by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). The change was centred around the famous nationalist-era Hindi writer Premchand, and which of his texts should be taught in government-funded schools. NCERT wished to replace his novel *Nirmala* with another of his novels, *Rangbhumi*, written in 1925. The BDSA took issue with this change as they were deeply opposed to the use of the word ‘Chamar’ (a Dalit jati that are most populous in North India) in the text to describe the main character of the novel. They believed that the text was ‘offensive to Dalits and dangerous to the “soft minds” of young students, who may become biased against Dalits because of the novel’s constant repetition of caste-specific terminology’.<sup>81</sup> As part of their protest, the BDSA burned copies of the text in the street, prompting both support and criticism from multiple Dalit organisations. This book-burning episode has since become an important touchstone for two influential scholars of Dalit literature: Laura Brueck and Toral Jatin Gajarawala. Both use the 2004 incident in the introductions to their books on Hindi Dalit literature to highlight how it relates to their overall thesis. Brueck, in her book *Writing Resistance*, argues that the incident:

brings to the fore the fundamental dilemma of applying standards of ‘authenticity’ to Dalit identity and experience as well as contested standards of legitimacy for literary representations of a Dalit perspective. It also treads an uncomfortable line between a justifiable demand for the inclusion of Dalit literary voices in a government-sanctioned curriculum and a crude recourse to the very same kind of censorship that has silenced those very Dalit voices for so long.<sup>82</sup>

As Premchand himself was not a Dalit, but highlighted the position of Dalits in his novel, Brueck believes that the BDSA’s rejection of the novel highlights the issue of authenticity in Dalit literature,

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<sup>79</sup> Krishna Madiga, ‘Manda Krishna Madiga: An Interview’ in *From Those Steel Nibs Are Sprouting*, pp. 658-674 (p. 661).

<sup>80</sup> The BDSA are a group who wish to spread the Dalit message throughout India through encouraging ‘Dalit Literature and Public meeting, conferences, Symposiums, Seminars, Rallies, Sports & Writing Competitions, Exhibitions, Dr. Ambedkar Study circles, Library & Reading Rooms, Youth Guide Centers, Street Plays, Dramas, Discussions & Debates’. See: Bharatiya Dalit Sahitya Akademi, ‘About Us’ <<http://bdsakademi.com/about-us.php#bdsa>> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> October 2018] (para. 2 of 3).

<sup>81</sup> Laura Brueck, *Writing Resistance*, p. 1.

<sup>82</sup> Brueck, *Writing Resistance*, p. 2.

and who has the right to represent Dalits in literary spaces. In a similar vein, Gajarawala sees the attack on Premchand as highlighting a fundamental problem with literary realism. She argues that a Dalit reading of the text reveals that calling the protagonist of the novel a Chamar:

is not only to make concessions to the ethnographic real, but to reify the word ‘Chamar’ which can only function as an insult [...] there is [also] the question of the way in which the realist text configures its ethnographic authority on the basis of repetition of caste names, casteized paradigms, and the circumscribed narrative arc of the Dalit figure.<sup>83</sup>

In their retellings of the 2004 book-burning incident, both Brueck and Gajarawala make valuable points that inform our wider reading of Dalit literature. They both, however, seamlessly pass over a key part of book-burning story, which I argue offers an intriguing view into the contemporary use of Dalit jati names, and the use of ‘Dalit’ itself.

A year and a half after the protest, in January 2006, NCERT announced that a compromise had been achieved and that they would be adding *Rangbhumi* to the curriculum. However, the copies of the novel that were to be distributed to students would have the word ‘Chamar’ edited out and replaced with ‘Dalit’.<sup>84</sup> Brueck and Gajarawala fail to address the significance of this conclusion, with Brueck quoting a passage from a newspaper article about the edit, whilst Gajarawala reduces this to a footnote.<sup>85</sup> This, however, is one of the most important parts of the BDSA protest story as it sheds light on the immense dichotomy that exists between Dalit jati names and the word ‘Dalit’ in contemporary India. For the BDSA, the word ‘Chamar’ is so insulting, so imbued with humiliation that they were only content once the word was physically removed from the novel itself. This kind of action polarises ‘Chamar’ and ‘Dalit’, with the former being viewed as offensive whilst the latter is seen as inherently liberating and progressive. This goes against the previous example of the MRPS and the pride that they were able to inject into the word ‘Madiga’. The MRPS saw the cultural and political significance of their Madiga identity, and thus sought to engage with it in a positive way, rather than delete it from their history. To clarify, I am not arguing here that the term ‘Chamar’ does *not* have the potential to be insulting and humiliating. Rather, I am arguing that Dalit jati names *do* have the potential to be empowering for communities, and that removing the word ‘Chamar’ from Premchand’s novel stunts any possibility of this happening. In fact, there are Chamar communities in contemporary India who are embracing the term and are identifying with it in a positive way. I have already alluded to such an example in Chapter One during my discussion of the activist group the Bhim Army. In 2016, the Bhim Army came to the aid of a Chamar community in western Uttar Pradesh who had erected a sign reading ‘The Great Chamar Village of Gharkoli Welcomes You’.<sup>86</sup> The issue that the upper caste members of the village had with the sign was twofold. The first was that

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<sup>83</sup> Toral Jatin Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 8.

<sup>84</sup> Brueck, *Writing Resistance*, p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> See Brueck, *Writing Resistance*, p. 3 and Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions*, p. 208.

<sup>86</sup> The Quint, *Marching with the Bhim Army #AmbedkarsArmy*, online recording, YouTube, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2017, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=607&v=yQmlsEwYuRE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=607&v=yQmlsEwYuRE)>, 0:15 [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2018].

the Dalits were calling themselves ‘great’, and the second was that they were using it in conjunction with the word ‘Chamar’.<sup>87</sup> As Aman Sethi notes, ‘upper castes had used the word [Chamar], a traditional caste name for those who worked with hide, as a pejorative for centuries – now the Dalits were reclaiming their name’.<sup>88</sup> This community, then, has taken a word that has been associated with abuse and humiliation for centuries and have begun to make it a positive identity through acts of protest.

This debate becomes more complex when we look to Dalit communities who have converted from Hinduism to other religions. Although this will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Four, religious conversion provides Dalits with an opportunity to develop an identity away from Hinduism, and therefore an identity that is potentially devoid of caste stigma.<sup>89</sup> As Ambedkar notes, ‘to call oneself a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist or a Sikh is not merely a change of religion but is also a change of name’, and therefore a new identity.<sup>90</sup> This kind of naming, which focuses on one’s religious identity rather than one’s caste identity, is particularly prevalent amongst Mahar communities. This is unsurprising considering Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism in 1956 alongside 35,000 other Mahars. In the Mahar context, ‘Buddhist’ has become a name that forms the basis of their identity, far outstripping other words such as ‘Mahar’ or even ‘Dalit’. As Shailaja Paik notes, ‘Buddhism brought to the Mahar a new self-esteem and a sharpened sense of their separate identity as being non-Hindu’.<sup>91</sup> This new ‘non-Hindu’ identity was rooted in the fact that Mahars could now refer to themselves as Buddhist, rather than any other word that relates to caste Hinduism. Paik quotes the Marathi Dalit writer Shankarrao Kharat as saying ‘I am a Buddhist now. I am not a Mahar, nor an untouchable, nor even a Hindu’, when he converted to Buddhism.<sup>92</sup> Interestingly, Kharat does not identify, or even mention the word ‘Dalit’, but instead rejects the identities of ‘Mahar’ and ‘untouchable’ and embraces ‘Buddhist’. This is also the case for the Marathi Dalit writer Urmila Pawar, whose short stories and autobiography will be discussed in Chapter Four. Paik explains that during an interview she conducted with Pawar in 2004 ‘she was visibly upset when I used the term “Mahar” to describe our shared community. She said that she felt violated by the term’.<sup>93</sup> Pawar believes that the word ‘Mahar’ is rooted in the humiliating practices of removing dead animal carcasses, and told Paik that if she uses the word again, she would stop the interview. She then ‘affirmed that [...] (we are Buddhist)’.<sup>94</sup> Exploring the use of jati names and the word ‘Dalit’ in the Mahar context adds another layer to the complex arguments surrounding their usage. As previously

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<sup>87</sup> The Quint, ‘Ambedkar’s Army: A Dalit Force Fights Caste Atrocities in Uttar Pradesh’, The Quint.

<sup>88</sup> The Quint, ‘Ambedkar’s Army: A Dalit Force Fights Caste Atrocities in Uttar Pradesh’, The Quint.

<sup>89</sup> Although conversion has this potential, the reality is often quite different. This will form the basis of my argument in Chapter Four of this thesis.

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Stroud, ‘Pragmatism and the Pursuit of Social Justice in India’, p. 22.

<sup>91</sup> Shailaja Paik, ‘Mahar-Dalit-Buddhist: The History and Politics of Naming in Maharashtra’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 45:2 (2011), 217–241 (p. 231).

<sup>92</sup> Paik, ‘Mahar-Dalit-Buddhist’, p. 231.

<sup>93</sup> Paik, ‘Mahar-Dalit-Buddhist’, p. 234.

<sup>94</sup> Paik, ‘Mahar-Dalit-Buddhist’, p. 234.

discussed, the Dalit Panthers were instrumental in bringing the word 'Dalit' into regular Marathi usage, yet we see that on a day-to-day level, 'Buddhist' is used as an identifying marker amongst Mahar communities. Although they do not reject 'Dalit' as they do 'Mahar', they take much more pride in being called 'Buddhists' than 'Dalit', as it fully represents a shift away from Hinduism. However, this may not be a universal claim. As I will discuss in Chapter Four, many communities who convert to Buddhism often revert back to old customs and traditions as conversion does not necessarily bring the material gains that they hoped for. Although people like Pawar find self-respect through identifying as Buddhist, others in her community may not be able to engage with a Buddhist identity in the same way.

These examples of the different uses of Jati names in Chamar and Mahar contexts show that there is no right or wrong answer when it comes to the use of Dalit jati names. One community may feel deeply offended by being referred to by their jati name, which is where words such as 'Dalit' provide an identity that is new and separate from old identities that are associated with humiliation; another community, with the same jati name, may feel empowered by the name and seek to solidify a positive identity based upon that name. This further highlights the complex nature of Dalit caste structures in contemporary India, as not only is nomenclature different from region to region, but it also differs amongst communities themselves.

### **Dalit Youth in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Dalit caste structures, and their relationships with identity politics, are multifaceted and must be analysed within their own specific regional, cultural and historical contexts. As we have transitioned into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and have seen a surge in new activist groups and movements, it is necessary to explore to what extent issues surrounding caste and 'Dalit' identity exist amongst this new generation of Dalit activists. The Bhim Army are perhaps the group to have had the most impact on contemporary Dalit activism and politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Nikhila Henry notes, during mid-2017 'the Bhim Army was at the centre of national debate, taking up as much airtime as mainstream political parties and their leaders'.<sup>95</sup> This is, in part, due to their large social media reach, which gives them the ability to connect with Dalits across both Uttar Pradesh and India in general. The Bhim Army have therefore managed to place themselves on a national platform, giving them the ability to spread their message on a much larger scale at a quicker rate, unlike many groups that have come before them. But what is so interesting about the Bhim Army, in relation to the ideas of identity politics that this chapter has engaged with, is that the word 'Dalit' does not appear within their naming or rhetoric. Instead, they are named after Ambedkar and see it as their quest to continue his work.<sup>96</sup> This subtle moving away from the 'Dalit' to an embracement of Ambedkar may have its roots in an ideology that is far removed from the ideology of the Bhim Army themselves.

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<sup>95</sup> Nikhila Henry, *The Ferment: Youth Unrest in India* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2018), p. 33.

<sup>96</sup> Henry, *The Ferment*, p. 28.

The decline in the use of the word 'Dalit' in recent years can be ascribed to the growing influence of the so-called 'Dalit middle class'. This new group of Dalits occupy a strange position in Indian society. On the one hand, they are upwardly mobile after benefiting from the reservation system. As they are now able to access education and better employment opportunities, this group of Dalits has been able to acquire wealth and move out of village structures into more urban areas. This follows the ideas of Ambedkar who argued that the practice of untouchability was engrained into the structures of the village.<sup>97</sup> On the other hand, they are still victims of caste discrimination, as caste manifests itself in new forms in these urban spaces. As Dyotana Banerjee and Mona G. Mehta discuss, the housing situation for middle class Dalits can be challenging. In their study of Dalit-dominated neighbourhoods in Gujarat's largest city of Ahmedabad, they found that there are specific apartment buildings which advertise as being 'Dalit only'.<sup>98</sup> Banerjee and Mehta note that 'advertisements such as these attest to the unequal social status experienced by middle-class Dalits, despite their having climbed the economic and educational ladder.'<sup>99</sup> Caste identity, then, is still very much alive in modern India, with segregated housing practices that are found in Indian villages being replicated in contemporary city spaces. Dalit jati identities, too, are important amongst the Dalit middle class with Dalit caste hierarchies being enforced. Banerjee and Mehta write:

It is generally the case that the more affluent Dalits also belong to the higher sub-castes [jatis] within the Dalit caste hierarchy, reflecting a strong overlap between higher-class and subcaste statuses. One of the anxieties of the Dalit middle class is the disruption of sub-caste boundaries through inter-marriage, which is often cited as justification for excluding other Dalit sub-castes in housing societies by upper caste Dalits.<sup>100</sup>

The structures of the caste system, which separate Dalits from the upper castes and from other Dalit castes, exist today amongst communities that have hoped that an acquisition of wealth and education would help alleviate caste prejudice. But although jati identities are still important amongst this new Dalit social group, the identity of 'Dalit' has disappeared.

Writing at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Gopal Guru argues that 'the ontological difference within the Dalits has led to the rejection of this category [of Dalit] by those whose social location has changed in an upward direction, and these transformations, both material and perceptual, into the middle class'.<sup>101</sup> He believes that this difference is rooted within class distinctions that have appeared in Dalit communities, with certain portions of the Dalit population becoming upwardly mobile, as described above. Guru contends that it is 'urban, educated middle class Dalits [who] criticise the category [of Dalit]', and suggests that they view the word as 'socially regressive, derogatory, and

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<sup>97</sup> See Jesús Francisco Cháirez-Garza, 'Touching Space: Ambedkar on the Spatial Features of Untouchability', *Contemporary South Asia*, 22:1 (2014), 37-50.

<sup>98</sup> Banerjee and Mehta, 'Caste and capital in the remaking of Ahmedabad', p. 189.

<sup>99</sup> Banerjee and Mehta, 'Caste and capital in the remaking of Ahmedabad', p. 190.

<sup>100</sup> Banerjee and Mehta, 'Caste and capital in the remaking of Ahmedabad', p. 191.

<sup>101</sup> Gopal Guru, 'The Language of Dalit-Bahujan Political Discourse', in *Dalit Identity and Politics* ed. Ghanshyam Shah (New Delhi: Sage, 2001), pp. 97-107 (p. 107).

undesirable'.<sup>102</sup> This is an idea that has stayed true throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the wake of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting issuing an advisory to news and media outlets about not using the word 'Dalit' (which will be discussed in greater depth below), many Dalit scholars and activists have written about the pros and cons of the word, and its place in contemporary political discourse. Surprisingly, J. V. Pawar (one of the founders of the Dalit Panthers), was one of these people who spoke out *against* the word. He writes:

We established Dalit Panthers keeping in mind that today we are Dalits (neglected) but one day our status will change. Dalitism is nothing but a status. We have changed that status. Backwardness should not be our identification. *We are not Dalits now*, we have achieved many things.<sup>103</sup>

This is a shocking revelation, considering the fact that the Dalit Panthers were the ones who brought the word 'Dalit' into popular usage in the 1970s. Interestingly, Pawar describes Dalit as a 'status', something which can be changed and is not stationary. He concludes by stating: 'we are Ambedkarites, our literature is Ambedkarite', which implies a progression from the 'status' of 'Dalit'.<sup>104</sup> I believe that this kind of ideological thought, which rejects 'Dalit' for other phrases such as 'Ambedkarite' and is rooted in its rejection by members of the Dalit middle class, has filtered down into sections of contemporary Dalit activism. If we turn again to the example of the Bhim Army, the word 'Dalit' does not feature in their name or activist material, as stated above. Although they have not necessarily rejected the word 'Dalit', it is this focus on Ambedkar that takes centre stage in their politics. This is reflected by a speech that the Bhim Army's founder, Chandrashekhar Azad, gave in May 2017. In a rousing speech, warning members of the upper castes from attacking Dalits, he said: 'so, don't test us, we are Ambedkarites'.<sup>105</sup> This kind of language, which can be found amongst members of the Dalit middle class who reject the identity of 'Dalit' in favour of something more 'progressive' such as 'Ambedkarite', has been replicated here in the rhetoric of the Bhim Army. The implications of this are twofold. It shows first how influential the Dalit middle class are, and what impact they can have on the wider discourse of contemporary activism. It also highlights the power that new Dalit activist groups such as the Bhim Army hold over the future of Dalit activism in general. With their large following, which is only set to grow over the coming years, they have the potential to inadvertently write 'Dalit' out of history. Through stressing this identity of 'Ambedkarite', the position of the 'Dalit' within contemporary discourse appears to be waning.

### **The Future of Dalit in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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<sup>102</sup> Guru, 'The Language of Dalit-Bahujan Political Discourse', p. 98.

<sup>103</sup> J.V. Pawar, 'We are Ambedkarites, we are not Dalits', *Mumbai Mirror*, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2018. <<https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/opinion/columnists/by-invitation/we-are-ambedkarites-we-are-not-dalits/articleshow/65694470.cms>> [accessed 1<sup>st</sup> November 2018] (para. 5 of 6) emphasis added.

<sup>104</sup> Pawar, 'We are Ambedkarites, we are not Dalits'.

<sup>105</sup> Henry, *The Ferment*, p. 30.

Although the future for the word ‘Dalit’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be uncertain, with new activist groups using different words to describe themselves in modern India, recent events suggest that ‘Dalit’ will always have a certain level of importance for scholars and activists from across multiple generations and disciplines. On August 7<sup>th</sup> 2018, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting issued an advisory notice to all news and media outlets, advising that they should refrain from using the word ‘Dalit’ in their news media, and instead should use the term ‘Scheduled Castes’.<sup>106</sup> The Ministry cited a court order that was issued by the Bombay High Court (Nagpur Bench) on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2018, in response to a petition made by Pankaj Meshram in 2016.<sup>107</sup> In an interview, Meshram argues that the term ‘Dalit’ is ‘insulting and unconstitutional’, and the phrase ‘Scheduled Caste’ should be used as it is infused with the legitimacy and dignity of the constitution.<sup>108</sup> The advisory notice that the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting issued in response to the ruling has sparked an intense debate amongst Dalit academics and writers, most of whom have come to the defence of the word. This debate was also intensified by the fact that the release of this advisory coincided with numerous raids by the Pune police of the homes and offices of Dalit academics and activists, accusing them of inciting violence and having links with the banned organisation Communist Party of India (Maoist).<sup>109</sup> One of these individuals was K. Satyanarayana, an important and respected Dalit intellectual. On 28<sup>th</sup> August 2018, the police searched Satyanarayana’s home for nine hours whilst questioning him on his work regarding Dalit rights and activism. In his recount of the ordeal, he outlines that:

They mentioned my caste and my wife’s caste several times during the search. They kept asking her (Pavana) why she did not wear any traditional ornaments that a Hindu married woman would usually wear. They told her, ‘Your husband is Dalit but you are a Brahmin, why don’t you follow any traditions’. They said obnoxious stuff. [...] They questioned me

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<sup>106</sup> Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, ‘Compliance with the order dated 06.08.2018 by High Court of Judicature at Bombay Nagpur Bench regarding using the nomenclature Dalit’, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2018.

<<https://mib.gov.in/sites/default/files/Compliance%20with%20Order%20dated%2006.08.2018%20by%20Hon%27ble%20High%20Court%20regarding%20using%20the%20nomenclature%20Dalit.pdf>> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> November 2018].

<sup>107</sup> High Court Of Judicature At Bombay Nagpur Bench, ‘Public Interest Litigation No. 114/2016’, *Bar and Bench*, 2018. <<https://barandbench.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Bombay-HC-Order-June-6-2018.pdf>> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> November 2018].

<sup>108</sup> The Quint, ‘Petitioner Pankaj Meshram on Why He Wants the Word ‘Dalit’ to Be Dropped’, online recording, YouTube, September 17<sup>th</sup> 2018. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuibN3XZDf0>> 0:14 [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> November 2018].

<sup>109</sup> On 1<sup>st</sup> January 1818, a small army of Mahar soldiers defeated a large army of Peshwa Bajirao II, the last ruler of the Maratha Empire in the village of Bhima Koregaon, near Pune in Maharashtra. Celebrations of this victory have occurred here since 1927 when Ambedkar led the first celebrations as it is seen as a moment when Dalits defeated the oppression of upper caste forces. 2018 marked the 200-year anniversary of this victory, which sparked larger celebrations than usual. This led to violence occurring in the village, with one person being killed. The investigation into the violence by the Pune police uncovered an alleged plot to assassinate the Prime Minister Narendra Modi by a group of activists and intellectuals with supposed links to Communist Party of India (Maoist). For a detailed account of these events see: Aarefa Johari, Abhishek Dey, Mridula Chari and Shone Satheesh, ‘From Pune to Paris: How a police investigation turned a Dalit meeting into a Maoist plot’, *Scroll*, September 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018 <<https://scroll.in/article/892850/from-pune-to-paris-how-a-police-investigation-turned-a-dalit-meeting-into-a-maoist-plot>> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> November 2018].

over every book with a red cover or Marx written over it. They asked me why I have so many books at home. How should I even respond to such a question?<sup>110</sup>

The raids and questioning that Satyanarayana and others have faced, coupled with this idea of removing the word ‘Dalit’ from mainstream media discourses have fuelled a fresh debate on the importance of the word ‘Dalit’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Following the police raid on his home, Satyanarayana wrote an article in response to the way he was treated, which also addressed the advisory notice of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. He writes:

I have published a volume titled *Dalit Studies* and compiled two major volumes on Dalit literature — *No Alphabet in Sight* and *Steel Nibs Are Sprouting*. How will the TV channels refer to my books? Will my *Dalit Studies* be called ‘Scheduled Caste Studies’ when they report on my publications?<sup>111</sup>

For Satyanarayana, ‘Dalit’ holds as much importance today as it did for the past forty years. It is a word that holds within it the political and cultural history of a community, and has become synonymous with their activist and literary endeavours. The categories of ‘Dalit studies’ and ‘Dalit literature’ can only be understood in reference to the ‘Dalit’ nature of them. If there were to be a formal ban on the word, and media outlets were to instead use the phrase ‘Scheduled Caste studies’, as Satyanarayana suggests, the nuances and history of the discipline would be lost. This comes down to a fundamental point: that ‘Scheduled Caste’ is not a term that people identify with on a daily basis. It is a name that is rooted in the constitution and is not used outside of legal contexts. As Sumit Baudh writes: ‘the status of SC is nothing more than legal nomenclature and it decides whether or not we avail reservations [...] On the other hand, Dalit status is more than SC status. I am Dalit and I choose not to avail SC reservations’.<sup>112</sup> As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, ‘Dalit’ became a popular name for the community because it was one which they chose *for themselves*. The importance of this fact still resonates today. For Baudh, choosing to be ‘Dalit’, rather than SC is a fundamental part of his identity, as it connects him to a larger historical and cultural community.

The position of the word ‘Dalit’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then, is somewhat unstable. Throughout this chapter, I have charted the development of the word through many different geographical, temporal, and contextual locations to explore how important it is both as a name and as an identity. It became a word that highlighted the history of abuse and humiliation that the community has faced, and was an identity that the community gave themselves, rejecting other names that had been given to

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<sup>110</sup> Sukanya Shantha, ‘K. Satyanarayana Says Will Move SC Against Pune Police’s Actions Against Him’, *The Wire*, 31<sup>st</sup> August 2018 <<https://thewire.in/rights/activists-raids-pune-police-k-satyanarayana>> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> November 2018] (para. 6 of 9).

<sup>111</sup> K. Satyanarayana, ‘Will you tell me who I am?’, *Indian Express*, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2018 <<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/using-word-dalit-in-media-information-and-broadcasting-ministry-scheduled-caste-5342034/>> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> November 2018] (para. 6 of 9).

<sup>112</sup> Sumit Baudh, ‘I am Dalit, not SC’, *Indian Express*, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2016. <<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/rohith-vemula-Dalit-scheduled-caste-treatment-suicide-opinion-2998129/>> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> November 2018] (para 9 of 11).



them. It helped to kick-start the Dalit Panthers, whose politics and literature were based on these 'Dalit' principles of engaging with the 'ground down' nature of their existence. But it has also receded within specific regional and cultural contexts. Throughout the 1990s, 'Dalit' gave way to a celebration of Dalit jati names, with organisations wishing to infuse these names, once symbols of oppression, with a new sense of pride. In our contemporary moment, 'Dalit' sits in the uncomfortable position of being an 'old word' that symbolises the oppression that the community have faced, and a word that holds within it the communities' historical struggle, which links to politics, activism, and literature. As I have shown in this chapter, 'Dalit' is positioned at the centre of this complex web of history and identity, where local histories and caste structures mix with national ideas of identity. Fundamentally, 'Dalit' offers a base upon which contemporary modes of activism are able to build. If the word itself becomes lost within future discourses, with other names and identities replacing it, it will never truly disappear from the Dalit collective memory as it encapsulates the essence of their struggle so far and the struggle that will continue into the future.

## Chapter Three: In search of a Dalit Culture: Reinterpreting Dalit History in Contemporary Contexts

In June 2018, the Tamil-language film *Kaala* was released in cinemas across India and around the globe. It follows the story of Kaala, a man who leads the inhabitants of a Mumbai slum in protest against the state government that wishes to evict them from their land and sell it to the property developers Manu Constructions. This film follows the growing success of its writer and director Pa. Ranjith, a Dalit filmmaker from Tamil Nadu. *Kaala* is Ranjith's fourth film, with his third film *Kabali* smashing box office records when it was released in 2016.<sup>1</sup> The success of Ranjith's films stems from multiple avenues: *Kabali* and *Kaala*'s mainstream impact was fuelled by their leading actor, the legendary Tamil film actor Rajinikanth who plays the title role of both films. Ranjith's films have also been praised for their socio-political debate on contemporary life: *Kaala* focuses on the rebellion of slum inhabitants; *Kabali* focuses on an aged Tamil gangster's feud with a Malaysian gang in Kuala Lumpur, and Ranjith's second film *Madras* explores a feud between Dalit and upper caste communities of a village. Caste conflict is always present in his work, whether it be explicit, as in *Madras*, or subtle as in *Kabali*— which on the surface highlights the oppression of Tamil Malaysians but simultaneously shows the rise to power of the lower caste Kabali. In his films, Ranjith presents caste issues in new and dynamic ways that engage with the tropes and culture of contemporary Tamil cinema. By featuring well-known actors and making films that subscribe to mainstream cinema conventions, Ranjith has been able to bring Dalit characters and caste issues to a much wider audience.

Ranjith's films have been both commercial successes and have received praise from the Dalit viewership, particularly regarding Ranjith's representation of Dalits in his films. Both *Kaala* and *Kabali* are strong and powerful leaders who stand up to oppressors, refusing to back down until justice is achieved. His films are also colourful and upbeat, featuring numerous song and dance numbers. Ultimately, Ranjith presents a contemporary Dalit experience that is not rooted in suffering or poverty. Although his films do engage with caste issues and present the problems that Dalits face, his characters are never depicted as weak or submissive; they are often strong and defiant in the face of oppressors, but at the same time, they are 'normal' everyday Indians. There is more to the lives of his characters than caste, which has helped make the films more accessible to a wider, non-Dalit audience. As Nagraj Manjule, a Dalit Marathi filmmaker, has pointed out: 'If you overlook the caste angle in *Sairat* and *Fandry* [two of Manjule's films], the films are still entertaining. They manage to move the audience. This makes it easier for me to tackle production roadblocks and reach a wider

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<sup>1</sup> See: Shekhar H Hooli, 'Kabali' box office collection: Rajinikanth starrer beats 7 big records of 'Baahubali' (Bahubali)', *International Business Times*, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2016. <<https://www.ibtimes.co.in/kabali-box-office-collection-rajinikanth-starrer-beats-7-big-records-baahubali-bahubali-688964>> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> December 2018].

audience'.<sup>2</sup> The depiction of Dalit life that Ranjith presents in his films is more positive and uplifting than the way Dalits are usually portrayed in cinema. He notes that:

There have been films in the past that depict Dalit characters and lives. They were made by non-Dalits, who view us through a lens of pity. Our world is shown as colourless and poverty-stricken. Yes, we are economically poor but not culturally so. Where is the depiction of our vibrant culture, music and food? Why is our world shown bereft of it all?<sup>3</sup>

In his films, Ranjith not only wishes to present the caste struggles that Dalits face, but he also wants to show the unique aspects of Dalit life and culture. He wishes to lift the usual representation of Dalits out of the realm of poverty and pity and into a bright and colourful world. In this chapter, I will argue that the kind of representation that Ranjith believes is lacking in the world of cinema already exists in the world of Dalit literature, and that 21<sup>st</sup> century Dalit literature is defined by this shift into presenting the vibrant culture of Dalit communities. As I have introduced in Chapter One, Dalit literature has historically been rooted in depicting the harsh realities of Dalit life. It has been viewed as a literature that, as Sharunkumar Limbale believes, should be 'analyzed from a sociological perspective' and offers a window into the world of the Dalit.<sup>4</sup> I will argue that 21<sup>st</sup> century Dalit literature is marked by a change in this kind of representation and combines elements of presenting the lived Dalit experience with the cultural history of Dalit communities. To do this, I will focus on G. Kalyana Rao's novel *Untouchable Spring*, which was originally published in Telugu in 2000. I will analyse the novel's use of song and performance to explore the importance of Dalit culture and how it becomes an intrinsic part of the lives of the main protagonists. I will also explore the relationship between art and activism in the Dalit context, and will argue that this depiction of Dalit culture signals a fundamental shift in Dalit literature being viewed as purely sociological, and that Dalit texts can be viewed as both art and activism.

### **Dalit Literature in the Sociological Framework**

Since the inception of the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s, Dalit literature has been inextricably tied to the activist project. This close relationship between the worlds of Dalit literature and Dalit activism have produced readings of Dalit literature that are inherently rooted in the social depictions of Dalit life. In the introduction to the landmark Marathi Dalit literature anthology *Poisoned Bread*, Arjun Dangle firmly roots Dalit literature in the realm of social activism. He argues that 'Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality'.<sup>5</sup> In an essay

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<sup>2</sup> Dipti Nagpaul, 'When Dalit filmmakers embrace their identity and reclaim their stories', *The Indian Express*, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018. <<https://indianexpress.com/article/express-sunday-eye/when-dalit-filmmakers-embrace-their-identity-and-reclaim-their-stories-5209972/>> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> December 2018] (para. 22 of 26).

<sup>3</sup> Nagpaul, 'When Dalit filmmakers embrace their identity and reclaim their stories', *The Indian Express*, (para. 3 of 26).

<sup>4</sup> Sharankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2004), p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Arjun Dangle, 'Introduction', *Poisoned Bread*, ed. Arjun Dangle (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Limited, 1992), pp. xi-xv (p. xi).

featured in the anthology, Dangle affirms this position by stating that ‘Dalit literature must be assessed in the sociological framework’.<sup>6</sup> For Dangle, Dalit literature is an inherently negative literature that focuses on the deprivation of Dalit society, rather than on any of the positive moments of Dalit life. This mirrors the view of Limbale, who argues that the purpose of Dalit literature ‘is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus’.<sup>7</sup> Dalit literature has often been viewed, therefore, as a literature that informs and exposes. It informs Dalits of their oppression and shows the rest of society and, in more recent decades, a global audience how Dalits have been dominated and oppressed by the caste system. It also exposes caste by highlighting its inherent oppression and displays why it is not an ‘ideal’ system of social organisation. This description of Dalit literature is fundamentally correct when we view it through an activist lens. Literature gave activists such as the Dalit Panthers an outlet to vent their anger at the caste system and to inspire Dalits to revolt against it. As Dangle outlines:

Dalit writers began to realize more and more that there was no point in merely writing provocative poetry [...] Dalit literature is not simply literature. Although today, many Dalit writers have forgotten its origins, Dalit literature is associated with a movement to bring about change.<sup>8</sup>

Literature, for these Dalit writers, must be tied to the greater cause of striving towards a casteless society. Rather than just being angry at the caste system and ‘merely’ writing about it, these writers made their literature and their activism one and the same. As Ravi Shankar Kumar argues, ‘it is Dalit consciousness that defines [Dalit] literature, which emerges from the experience of discrimination, untouchability, social ostracism and social stigma’.<sup>9</sup> This raising of Dalit consciousness through literature is ultimately why Dalit literature has become so inextricably connected with activism.

This description of Dalit literature, put forward by two of the most influential Dalit writers and activists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has similar undertones to the description of Dalits in films directed by non-Dalits that Ranjith describes, which views Dalits in a negative light rather than focusing on the positive elements of Dalit culture.<sup>10</sup> As Dalits write about the harsh realities of their lives and ‘narrate their pain and suffering’, they ultimately create a negative narrative that Dangle outlines above.<sup>11</sup> It is for this reason that contemporary Dalit writers are moving away from these depictions of Dalit life and are instead creating new representations of Dalits—depictions not rooted in the narrative of suffering. The narratives that Dangle and Limbale describe were necessary for writers such as the Dalit Panthers, who needed to write in a way that triggered revolt and awakened a Dalit consciousness.<sup>12</sup> In contemporary India, however, I believe that Dalits do not need to fully rely on this

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<sup>6</sup> Arjun Dangle, ‘Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future’, *Poisoned Bread*, pp. 234-266 (p. 237).

<sup>7</sup> Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Dangle, ‘Introduction’, p. xii.

<sup>9</sup> Ravi Shankar Kumar, ‘The Dalit Politics of Dalit Literature’, in *Dalit Literatures in India*, ed. Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak (London: Routledge, 2016) pp. 39-57 (p. 43).

<sup>10</sup> Kumar, ‘The Dalit Politics of Dalit Literature’, p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Dangle, ‘Introduction’, *Poisoned Bread*, p. xi.

narrative that is rooted in negativism. They have not ‘forgotten’ the origins of Dalit literature as Dangle suggests; they are instead creating new narratives for a new generation of Dalits. This is the view of the Dalit writer Cho. Dharman, whose novel *Koogai* was published in English in 2015 and will be discussed in Chapter Five. Dharman strongly rejects the category of ‘Dalit literature’ for many reasons and does not see himself as a ‘Dalit writer’.<sup>13</sup> He rejects these labels because of the narratives of suffering and poverty that have become synonymous with Dalit writing:

The Dalit portraits that presented to us thus far are one-sided; they portray Dalits as reeking of ‘filth’ and ‘smelly’, their women as prone to immorality, as drawn to violence, as unlettered, as footloose workers with no landholding, as slavish, and as people who struggle for food and wages.<sup>14</sup>

Dharman wishes to write ‘new and unusual stories’ instead of ‘retell[ing] old histories and prejudices’.<sup>15</sup> For him, these retellings, to some extent, keep alive images of the Dalit that are irrelevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is only by developing new narratives that Dalit writers can change the perception of Dalits in the contemporary Indian collective conscious, and offer a new, more honest understanding of Dalit life.

### **Dalit Culture**

One of the primary ways that contemporary Dalit literature has begun to offer a different view of Dalit life is through a reevaluation of Dalit history. Crucially, this relates to a rediscovery of Dalit cultural heritage that simultaneously infuses Dalits with a sense of pride and self-respect, whilst also challenging the hegemonic traditions of upper caste Hindu culture. As Kumar argues:

Broadly, we see two tendencies at work with regard to tradition in Dalit literature. A dominant tendency abhors everything traditional for its complicity with Brahmanical Hinduism, and its misrepresentation of Dalits. However, there is also another stream that takes serious note of tradition, and draw [sic] upon its resources for a critique of Brahmanical hegemony as well as a source in the search for Dalit identity.<sup>16</sup>

Historically, it is the former point that has dominated Dalit literature as writers rejected Dalit history and culture, seeing it as complicit to their oppression. An example of this is the perception of drumming as an occupation. There has been an intense debate over the last two decades surrounding this role, more specifically of the drum as a symbol of Dalit pride. Drumming became a Dalit occupation for many different reasons, but the two ideas surrounding the polluting nature of drumming are that the drums are made of leather, and that they were used mainly at funerals. Pavel Hons notes that:

Dalit leaders were of the opinion that as long as Dalits were automatically associated with leatherwork, scavenging, drumming, funeral work and other polluting tasks, they would never

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<sup>13</sup> K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, ‘Cho. Dharman’ in *No Alphabet In Sight: New Dalit Writing From South India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011), pp. 101-104, p. 101.

<sup>14</sup> Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, ‘Cho. Dharman’, p. 101.

<sup>15</sup> Aparna Karthikeyan ‘There is no such thing as Dalit writing’, *The Hindu*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2016. <[www.thehindu.com/books/literary-review/aparna-karthikeyan-in-conversation-with-cho-dharman/article7619145.ece](http://www.thehindu.com/books/literary-review/aparna-karthikeyan-in-conversation-with-cho-dharman/article7619145.ece)> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> February 2019] (para. 9 of 10).

<sup>16</sup> Kumar, ‘The Dalit Politics of Dalit Literature’, p. 46.

be able to get rid of the stigma of untouchability. Drumming was considered to be a symbol of their subjugation, untouchability and dismal past.<sup>17</sup>

Many communities have rejected the cultural tradition of drumming as it represents a history rooted in humiliation and is defined through being tied to hereditary caste-based occupations. This latter point put forward by Ravi Shankar Kumar, I argue, has been something which has become more of a central theme for contemporary Dalit literature. Instead of rejecting their history, which may be entangled with the traditions of the upper castes and the humiliation of adopting such traditions, writers have begun to find aspects of their history that they can use to critique upper caste hegemony, as well as find self-respect. I believe that this kind of discussion has been made possible thanks to the 1990s debates surrounding Dalit culture. This decade brought Dalit culture to the centre of political and social activism thanks to movements such as the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS), but also saw an intense debate surrounding Dalit culture amongst cultural critics. One of the most important amongst these was Raj Gauthaman, a writer and cultural critic from Tamil Nadu.<sup>18</sup> His two most well-known books *Dalit Panpaadu* (Dalit Culture) and *Dalit Paarvaiyil Tamil Panpaadu* (Tamil Culture from a Dalit Perspective), which were published in 1993 and 1994 respectively, both seek to examine the relationship between Dalits and Dalit culture, and Brahmins and Hindu culture in Tamil Nadu. His ideas, particularly from *Dalit Culture*, are not inherently rooted in the Tamil context and can be extrapolated and applied to the wider Dalit community across India.

In *Dalit Culture*, Gauthaman argues that Dalits need to create a counter-culture, or ‘protest culture’, that rejects Brahminical culture and caste Hinduism. He believes that elements of this protest culture can be found in Dalit culture itself and that it has the potential to overthrow mainstream Brahminical culture and tradition. Although Gauthaman was writing in a moment that was dominated by radical Left politics, his writings are greatly influenced by Ambedkar. In *Dalit Culture*, he describes the caste logic of Hindus in a way that is not dissimilar to Ambedkar:

How can it happen? When every Hindu’s mind is bound by caste psychology, when he spends the whole of his life deliberating which castes are below or above his caste, and when every Hindu nurtures the secret desire to move up the caste ladder and become a brahmin, neither the great Karl Marx nor his grandfather can transform the Hindus of our country [...] None can liberate the Hindu from caste. Caste is his only identity.<sup>19</sup>

This mirrors the argument made by Ambedkar in *Annihilation of Caste* where he argues that caste hierarchy is difficult to dismantle as ‘each caste takes its pride and its consolation in the fact that in the scale of castes it is above some other caste’.<sup>20</sup> For Gauthaman, the fundamentals of caste logic

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<sup>17</sup> Pavel Hons, ‘Tamil Dalit Art And Identity: What To Do With The Drum?’ *South Asia Research*, 38:2 (2018), 140–155 (pp. 141-142).

<sup>18</sup> Gauthaman is also known as the older brother of the writer Bama. In her autobiography *Karukku*, he is credited as the person who explains to a young Bama what untouchability is and why they are Dalits. See Bama, *Karukku* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Raj Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Culture’, in *No Alphabet In Sight: New Dalit Writing From South India* ed. K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011), pp. 149-157 (p. 151).

<sup>20</sup> Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, p. 294.

that dictate that one social group is above another are the main reasons why Dalits have been unable to topple the caste system and Brahmin hegemony. He argues that ‘Hindu culture, its caste divisions and Hindu communalism are the fundamental reasons for the inability to unite the economically oppressed as a class’.<sup>21</sup> As the logic of caste prevents caste groups from uniting, the ‘hegemonic castes’ are ‘able to safeguard their class interests by setting one caste off against the other’.<sup>22</sup> Gauthaman believes that Dalits are ‘at a stage when they have to seek their liberation by themselves’, as they cannot rely on forming alliances with other lower caste groups.<sup>23</sup> To do this, he argues, Dalits must create a protest culture in which the symbols of Brahminical Hindu culture are attacked and rejected. He writes that by ‘carefully disregarding, refusing, attacking, insulting and ridiculing the hegemonic culture and its signs and symbols’, Dalits will be able to free themselves from the ‘deeply embedded psychological complexes’ that centuries’ worth of humiliation have inflicted upon them.<sup>24</sup> Gauthaman roots some of the elements of this protest culture within pre-existing Dalit culture. He notes that ‘during times of community worship and festivals, elements of excess and transgression are present’, which include the ‘issuance of angry warnings [to the upper castes] while trance-dancing and prophesising during temple festivals by dalits’.<sup>25</sup> For him, these acts are ‘manifestations of the deeply embedded counterculture’.<sup>26</sup> The seeds of a Dalit protest culture that will ultimately topple the hegemonic Brahminical Hindu culture can be found within Dalit culture itself.

Gauthaman outlines one main problem in implementing this kind of protest culture that is rooted in Dalit cultural tradition. This problem relates to urban Dalits and the views that they hold of life back in the village. He believes that many Dalits who have moved away from villages view elements of Dalit culture – such as trance-dancing – as ‘uncultured and rustic’.<sup>27</sup> He continues, ‘impelled by the thought that it is shameful if others come to know of them, they take care to hide these elements. Judging these elements as backward and symptomatic of uncivilized barbarity, these dalits also frown at them when they visit their own villages’.<sup>28</sup> This relates to the discussion of caste logic that Gauthaman outlines previously. Here he notes that hegemonic castes have historically treated the Dalit identity as ‘negative’ and that ‘whenever a dalit tries to improve his status, the caste Hindu is anxious [and] impose[s] the dalit’s negative identity on him’.<sup>29</sup> This kind of negative identity has been internalised by the urban Dalit who has entered an environment in which caste dynamics are vastly different from that of the village.<sup>30</sup> In order to counter this, Gauthaman suggests other elements of the Dalit protest culture that are not rooted in Dalit cultural traditions but offer radical inversions of

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<sup>21</sup> Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Culture’, p. 152.

<sup>22</sup> Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Culture’, p. 153.

<sup>23</sup> Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Culture’, p. 153.

<sup>24</sup> Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Culture’, p. 154.

<sup>25</sup> Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Culture’, p. 154.

<sup>26</sup> Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Culture’, p. 154.

<sup>27</sup> Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Culture’, p. 154.

<sup>28</sup> Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Culture’, pp. 154-155.

<sup>29</sup> Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Culture’, p. 153.

<sup>30</sup> This was discussed in Chapter Two, see pp. 68-69.

social norms that persistently portray Dalits as inferior to other castes. One of the main ideas he puts forward here relates to language. He argues that Dalits have been historically silenced by caste Hindus and that when they have been allowed to talk, it is only in the context of debasement. He writes, ‘when a Dalit talks with one from a superior caste, he is expected to demean and debase himself... often he will have to remain silent without uttering a word’.<sup>31</sup> To counter this, Gauthaman believes that Dalits should ‘talk! Keep talking! Talk aloud! Speak in your Tamil. Speak in your language that has been despised as *cheri*<sup>32</sup> Tamil and colloquial Tamil! Transgress the elitist order of spoken language laid down by “hegemonic culture”’.<sup>33</sup> Through speaking in a language that is familiar and is different from standardised forms of language, Dalits are able to assert themselves in environments where they may be far removed from the cultural heritage of village life.

Most importantly, Gauthaman locates caste within Hindu culture that is propagated and protected by Brahmins, whereas he locates Dalits and their protest culture *outside* of Hinduism. For him, the Dalit protest culture is something that is separate from Hinduism and therefore has the ability to destroy it. This contrasts with the views of another key cultural critic writing during the 1990s: D. R. Nagaraj. Hailing from the south Indian state of Karnataka, Nagaraj was closely associated with the Dalit movement during the 1970s thanks to his close friendship with the poet-activist Siddalingaiah. Although holding firm ties to the movement, Nagaraj has been rejected by a number of members of the Dalit intelligentsia for his frequently controversial views, many of which are outlined in his book *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays*.<sup>34</sup> In this collection of essays, Nagaraj presents a study of the Dalit movement and the place of literature in the movement via the controversial attempt of reconciling the views of Gandhi and Ambedkar. As I have outlined in Chapter One, a majority of the Dalit community are against any comparison between Gandhi and Ambedkar, arguing that Ambedkar represented the voice of Dalits in ways that Gandhi never could. However, Nagaraj believes that bringing the two together is a necessary step in reformulating the Dalit movement at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He begins his book by stating ‘irony of ironies: to understand the nature of Babasaheb’s political career one has to place it along with Gandhiji’s, for the apparent divergence between the two will highlight the unique problems of the former’.<sup>35</sup> This, to an extent, mirrors the argument of Arundhati Roy who argues at the start of her ‘The Doctor and the Saint’ essay that ‘to ignore Gandhi while writing about Ambedkar is to do Ambedkar a disservice, because Gandhi loomed over Ambedkar’s world in myriad and un-wonderful ways’.<sup>36</sup> Nagaraj argues that ‘by the end of the mid-1930s both Ambedkar and Gandhiji were not the same persons they were when they had set out on

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<sup>31</sup> Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Protest Culture: The First Stage’, in *The Oxford Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* ed. Ravikumar and R. Azhagarasan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 263-271) p. 268.

<sup>32</sup> The Tamil word for the Dalit part of a village.

<sup>33</sup> Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Protest Culture: The First Stage’, p. 268.

<sup>34</sup> D.R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays*, ed. Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi (London: Seagull Books, 2011)

<sup>35</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> Arundhati Roy, ‘The Doctor and The Saint’, p. 39.



their journey of profound engagement with each other'.<sup>37</sup> He believes that they affected each other, and that their politics were shaped through their disagreements. This has a major impact on how Nagaraj argues Dalits should engage with Hinduism and their cultural history, which in many respects is the opposite of Gautaman's rejection of Hindu culture.

In his discussion of Gandhi and Ambedkar, Nagaraj concludes that the two were fundamentally influenced by each other in key areas of their ideology. His major argument that is relevant to this chapter is how he believes Ambedkar was 'transformed' by Gandhi. Nagaraj argues that 'Babasaheb had always opposed treating the question of untouchability as a religious matter, but after his engagement with Gandhiji he accepted the primacy of religion in this context' as his decision to convert from Hinduism can be seen as him 'recognizing the legitimacy of the Gandhian mode while rejecting the choice for which the solution was sought'.<sup>38</sup> The Gandhian mode sought to keep Dalits within the Hindu fold through initiating a process of self-purification. Gandhi rooted the problem of untouchability within Hinduism itself, viewing it as a spiritual issue that Hinduism needed to rectify internally. Nagaraj articulates this as Gandhi creating a 'collective Hindu self'; '[Gandhi] had transformed the notion of individual self and shifted the necessity of clearing the cobwebs of caste ego to the large notion of the collective self'.<sup>39</sup> This idea of self-purification made caste Hindus come to terms with the stain of untouchability on the Hindu religion and eradicate it as a practice. Ambedkar was deeply against this idea on multiple levels and believed that it was through a combination of legal processes and exposing the corrupt core of Hinduism that untouchability could truly be wiped-out.<sup>40</sup> What this highlights, however, is that Ambedkar saw the power of religion and that it was necessary to work within some kind of religious framework. This, ultimately, led to Ambedkar converting to Buddhism in 1956, signalling to Dalits across the country that Buddhism was a viable religious alternative to Hinduism.

Ambedkar's decision to reject Hinduism makes him, Nagaraj argues, an 'exclusivist'; someone who 'focus[es] attention on the independent cultural universe of Dalits'.<sup>41</sup> This differs from an 'integrationist' who emphasises the 'organic and consensual links of Dalits with caste Hindu society'.<sup>42</sup> The Gandhian philosophy of self-purification would fall into the category of integrationist as it seeks to tie Dalits to the Hindu world. Nagaraj falls within the space between these two schools of thought. He criticises Gandhi for 'de-culturing Dalits by his insistent definition of Hinduism as an integrated whole' whilst arguing that Ambedkar 'fell into the trap of defining the Dalits as the products of an exclusivist and adversarial Buddhist past, which has now disappeared'.<sup>43</sup> Both of these

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<sup>37</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 59.

<sup>39</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 35.

<sup>40</sup> This was discussed in greater depth in Chapter One, see pp. 28-30.

<sup>41</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 201.

<sup>42</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 201.

<sup>43</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 201.

arguments fail to acknowledge the lived experience of Dalits in relation to religion. Nagaraj believes that Dalits should engage with the ‘innumerable gods, goddesses, demons, devils, and the mythical universe’ that is a very real reality to a number of Dalit communities.<sup>44</sup> Although I will return to Nagaraj’s discussion of Dalit gods in Chapter Five, this argument that Dalits should engage with this specific cultural history puts Nagaraj at odds with the wider Dalit movement. He acknowledges that this kind of engagement means that ‘Dalit identity need not be defined from the centre of the brahminical social order’ which highlights its rejection of the relationship between Dalits and Hinduism that Gandhi tried to create.<sup>45</sup> But crucially, it still creates a link between Dalits and Hinduism. He argues:

The traditional models of Ambedkarite politics just *cannot accept* such forms of critical engagement with Hindu society. For them, it means getting either domesticated or emaciated [...] [Ambedkar] ruled out any truce with the present and the real in Hinduism.<sup>46</sup>

For Nagaraj, Dalits have this fundamental connection with Hinduism, and it is a failure of Ambedkar and the wider Dalit movement to acknowledge this history.

This differs from the arguments of Gauthaman who argued that Dalits needed to reject Hinduism and create their own protest culture away from the structures of the religion. Fundamentally, Nagaraj and Gauthaman are separated by their beliefs on how Dalits should engage with Hinduism; one completely rejects it whilst the other sees the potential of forging an identity within its framework. Although the two can never be fully reconciled because of this difference, I argue that there are in fact numerous similarities between Gauthaman and Nagaraj, with the differences found in how their arguments are ideologically framed and articulated. The similarities are rooted at the core of their arguments that Dalits should engage with the existing elements of their culture. For Gauthaman, this takes the form of trance-dancing and engaging with aspects of festivals that are Dalit in nature. This argument of Gauthaman does not differ from that of Nagaraj, who interprets this as an engagement with Dalit gods. These two ideas are one and the same. They both engage with aspects of pre-existing culture that are in some ways related to Hinduism. Gauthaman’s argument is intrinsically integrationist in nature as it acknowledges the Dalit relationship with festival and temple culture which are, ultimately, tied to Hinduism. It is not a traditionally Ambedkarite exclusivist argument as it is not claiming to have invented a new tradition for Dalits. It is this emphasis on the real and the pre-existing that lies at the crux of this similarity between Gauthaman and Nagaraj. They both agree that at the root of Dalit protest and identity formation is an engagement with a Dalit culture that is, to paraphrase Nagaraj, ‘present and real’. The difference between the two is how they are both ideologically positioned. Although Nagaraj is a strong supporter of the Dalit movement, he is unashamedly critical of both Ambedkar and the wider Dalit movement throughout

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<sup>44</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 203.

<sup>45</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 207.

<sup>46</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 207; emphasis added.

his writings. He is not afraid to make bold arguments, such as his attempt to synthesise Gandhi and Ambedkar, and his position that Dalits should engage, to some extent, with Hinduism. It is because of his forthright nature that the Dalit community has mainly rejected him due to his arguments seemingly defying the discourses of Ambedkar and the movement at large. Gauthaman, on the other hand, is a solid Ambedkarite. His writing is punctuated with the language of revolt and attack; Hinduism must be destroyed for the Dalit to be liberated. But behind the rhetoric, one can begin to see an intersection between the two making this debate even more interesting and allowing us to view the idea of Dalit culture in a multiplicity of ways. Although their arguments are similar, Gauthaman could never conclude that a Dalit protest culture has some links to Hinduism. He must follow the Ambedkarite line of rejecting and destroying Hinduism, whilst Nagaraj concludes that there is a connection between Dalits and Hindu culture, and that it is vital that this connection is explored.

### **Dalit Consciousness through Art**

The representation of Dalit art as a consciousness-raising tool is central to *Untouchable Spring* and is critical in analysing how Rao presents Dalit cultural tradition. The various kinds of Dalit art in the novel – performance, dance, and song – are all geared towards Dalit protest, and contribute to the raising of Dalit consciousness throughout the history that the novel explores. This is particularly relevant for the first section of the text that focuses on Yellanna, and his rise to becoming a well-known performer. Yellanna is an important figure in the novel and acts as the ultimate historical patriarch, as the several generations that follow Yellanna all look back to him as a source of inspiration. Through the performances and songs of Yellanna, Rao shows how cultural traditions generate a sense of self-respect for the characters in the text and how these cultural traditions, rooted in Dalit life, can help create a Dalit protest culture. The performance of a play at the start of the novel acts as a crucial moment that propels Yellanna from a performer to a historical beacon of self-respect. In the novel, the performance of Chenchulakshmi was much anticipated, and therefore attracted other Dalit communities from surrounding villages. As the performance starts, the text describes the audience as ‘laughing freely’ and not being afraid, as the upper castes were not present.<sup>47</sup> If the upper caste leaders had been in attendance, a member of the troupe would have announced their names, in order for them to make a grand entrance so that the performance could begin. Instead, the leader of the performance troupe, Naganna,<sup>48</sup> announces the names of the Dalit elders, the pedda Mala and the pedda Madiga, and invites them to take their seats.<sup>49</sup> This is an act of great defiance on the part of Naganna, as this kind of introduction was historically reserved for the upper castes. This has a significant impact on the community, ‘lift[ing] their self-respect to the sky’.<sup>50</sup> Naganna and the troupe

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<sup>47</sup> G. Kalyana Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2011), p. 75.

<sup>48</sup> Naganna befriends Yellanna when the latter was a child, and trained Yellanna in the art of dance and performance.

<sup>49</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 75.

<sup>50</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 75.

give the community a sense of self-respect by subverting this tradition and emphasising the importance of the Dalit elders. This does, however, anger the upper castes, who threaten the community with violence when they hear that the troupe will be performing in a neighbouring village.<sup>51</sup> This puts the troupe in a difficult position. They eventually decide to cancel their performance in order to uphold their self-respect, as they see this as more important than performing without introducing the Dalit elders. It is this moment, I argue, which raises a sense of caste-consciousness in Yellanna. Up to this point, Yellanna had viewed performing as entertainment, with Naganna commenting frequently on his natural abilities as a dancer. However, this incident allows Yellanna to see how performance is able to challenge caste hierarchy. It is he who ultimately decides that they should cancel their next show: ‘Yellanna thought self-respect was more important than performance... Said they could perform another time’.<sup>52</sup> Naganna also contributes to this new-found caste consciousness in Yellanna. When they arrive back in Yennela Dinni, he speaks to Yellanna about how their performances should change: ‘he said the song must change. He sang a few songs. Those songs appeared new. Hunger, land, tears, malas, madigas- the songs were full of them’.<sup>53</sup> These new songs are ultimately based on caste humiliation and the struggle of Dalit life, which subsequently makes Yellanna rethink his position as a performer. Performance, as a medium of expression, has moved away from being a form of entertainment for Yellanna and he is now concerned with presenting the stories of the community. This moment in the text signals the start of Dalit protest culture.

This new-found caste consciousness affects Yellanna in a way that we may not expect. Instead of becoming angry at the caste system, he instead becomes confused. This impacts him as a performer, as he begins to become disenchanted with performing: ‘What had happened to the happiness he experienced while performing? Where did the artist who had journeyed with him till then go? [...] Only shadows were lurking about his creativity’.<sup>54</sup> These ‘shadows’ are the shadows of caste to which Yellanna’s eyes have been fully opened. He, however, does not know the best way to react to this new knowledge. Once he leaves his home village, after weaving a song that depicts all events of the novel thus far, he sees the potential of performance and song as an act of resistance and consciousness-raising.<sup>55</sup> Yellanna’s songs elevate his status as a popular performer, as the songs he creates on his travels engage with the harsh realities of Dalit life:

He wove songs on growing fields. He sang, sharing the toil of the labourers bending down to plant the seeds. He spoke out in verses about carrying saplings at the field ridges. He spoke of

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<sup>51</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 88.

<sup>52</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 89.

<sup>53</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 91.

<sup>54</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 93.

<sup>55</sup> Throughout the text, Rao uses the word ‘weave’ to describe the creations of Yellanna’s songs. As this is an oral tradition, ‘write’ would be insufficient. Rao’s use of the word also relates to the way in which Yellanna brings together different stories from different communities, ‘weaving’ them together to create a song. In many ways, Rao does the same with *Untouchable Spring* through weaving together different narrative threads.

every happening like the harvesting of crops, of threshing heaps of grain and of every act on the field. That was all he did. To weave on and on as and when things took place'.<sup>56</sup>

As this quotation shows, Yellanna's new poetic mode is rooted in Dalit life. As he travels from village to village, Yellanna is able to narrate the experience of Dalit life in different communities, creating a large Dalit community woven together by the thread of his songs. Through singing about the everyday, Yellanna begins to create a communal identity to which the Dalit communities in the area can subscribe. They all become connected through Yellanna and his depiction of Dalit life. He does, however, emphasise the differences between castes and communities. He notes that on his travels he saw the 'dances of the chindu people, the china madiga and the chilakala people', as well as the dances of the Yandi community, a present-day so-called Backward Caste.<sup>57</sup> Yellanna describes how the Yandis are born with waists that make their dance so much different from others: 'no other caste possesses such a beautiful waist. That waist was born to dance'.<sup>58</sup> Each community that Yellanna encounters has their own caste specific dance and performance style and he dedicates his life to learning about these different traditions. These communities highlight the complex nature of Dalit jati identity and structure, as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis. The different communities that Yellanna meets are reminiscent of the satellite castes that T. R. Singh outlines. Although these groups can come together and identify as a cohesive whole through a shared lived experience, their different dances and traditions give them distinct characteristics. Rao, therefore, shows how art is able to raise Dalit consciousness and thus unite Dalit's by highlighting their humiliation, whilst preserving the unique identities of Dalit caste communities. In *Untouchable Spring*, a wider community is formed through Yellanna and his depiction of Dalit life whilst the diverse nature of Dalit communities is preserved.

In the latter half of the novel, which is set between independence and the mid-1980s, Yellanna acts as an important figure for his descendants, who use him as a reminder of their history of caste discrimination. This can be seen when Jessie leaves to join the Naxalite movement.<sup>59</sup> His decision to join the movement has its roots in his father Immanuel's death when Jessie was a child. After his death, the text refers back to Yellanna and the generations that have come after him, and notes that they all 'contributed their own bit'.<sup>60</sup> It describes how Immanuel 'turned those steps into his weapon. Jessie too. He is walking to push that armed struggle further, a little further'.<sup>61</sup> These references to Yellanna show how the thread of Dalit consciousness runs throughout the novel as a

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<sup>56</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 96.

<sup>57</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 101.

<sup>58</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 101.

<sup>59</sup> The name Naxalite was given to a group from the Communist Part of India (Marxist-Leninist) that staged an uprising in the village of Naxalibari, West Bengal, in 1967. Although the initial uprising was quashed, the idea of an armed revolution took hold in other parts of India, and remains on the fringes of society. See Alpa Shah, *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), pp. 12-40.

<sup>60</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 247.

<sup>61</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 247.

whole, connecting the past to the present. It also highlights the development of Dalit activism. In Yellanna, at the start of the novel, we see acts of passive activism. The aspects of Yellanna's performances that have been discussed above, such as singing about daily life and introducing the Dalit elders, are radical in the sense that they are new to his community, though they are passive when compared to the radicalism of Immanuel and Jessie. Yellanna's songs, which are passed down through generations of Dalit families across Andhra Pradesh, symbolise an awakening of Dalit consciousness in these communities. This ultimately leads to the final generations that the novel discusses and the radical activism of Jessie who becomes part of this hard-Left activist movement. The novel as a whole is a development of Dalit consciousness rooted in Dalit culture. As discussed above, Yellanna did not initially see the power of his songs, which point out the struggles of Dalit life. Progressively, the characters of the novel become ever more engaged with caste related issues, such as Reuben and others discussing issues such as temple entry, Gandhi and his term 'harijan', and Periyar and the Self-Respect movement.<sup>62</sup> This persistent 'looking back' to Yellanna suggests that it is he who sparks this development of Dalit consciousness through his performance and songs, with subsequent generations wishing to continue the fight that he started.

### **Untouchable Spring and Dalit Culture**

The consciousness-raising that Yellanna sparks at the start of the novel reflects a kind of Dalit culture that is reminiscent of Gauthaman's Dalit protest culture. The songs that Yellanna weaves are rooted in Dalit life and experience and are used to create a form of protest that is transmitted throughout Dalit communities over multiple generations. Yellanna's songs, however, do not engage with the kind of violent attack on Hinduism that Gauthaman suggests is central to a Dalit protest culture. I argue that *Untouchable Spring* as a whole represents a shift from Nagaraj's view of Dalit culture that recognises the 'organic and consensual links' that Dalits have with Hinduism, to Gauthaman's view that boldly rejects Hindu culture and roots protest in Dalit cultural tradition. *Untouchable Spring* was published in Telugu in 2000 but as Satyanarayana and Tharu note, it took Rao around fifteen years to complete the novel.<sup>63</sup> The text therefore sits at the confluence of different discourses surrounding the idea of Dalit culture that were appearing during the 1990s. As Nagaraj argues, Dalits should engage with their 'mythical universe' that, in many respects, relates to Hinduism. It is in these stories where Dalits can find a true meaning of Dalit culture, one that sits in the space between Hinduism and the imagined history of the Dalit community. A clear example of this can be found in the novel through the performance of the play Chenchulakshmi.

Chenchulakshmi narrates the story of Chenchita, a girl from the Chenchu tribe, and Narasimha, an avatar of Vishnu.<sup>64</sup> Chenchita meets Narasimha in the forest and, after testing his

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<sup>62</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, pp. 192-205.

<sup>63</sup> K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, 'G. Kalyana Rao', *Steel Nibs are Sprouting*, ed. K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu (London: HarperCollins, 2013), pp. 468-471 (p. 470).

<sup>64</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 129.470

hunting and tree climbing skills, accepts his marriage proposal. This story is well known in Andhra Pradesh and has been adapted into many film versions.<sup>65</sup> The use of Narasimha in this story shows an interaction between ‘popular’ and ‘classical’ Hinduism. As Vemsani notes, Narasimha is ‘one of the most widely worshipped deities in Andhra Pradesh’.<sup>66</sup> This, however, goes against classical images, as ‘classical texts mention the incarnation of Narasimha briefly’.<sup>67</sup> In Vedic texts, Narasimha is an incarnation with a much smaller role compared to other Vishnu avatars such as Rama or Krishna. In the Andhra Pradesh context, the mythology surrounding Narasimha has grown, being ‘diversified through the addition of numerous local myths and rituals’.<sup>68</sup> This diversification shows a coming together of classical and popular Hinduism, with local folklore and landmarks being key to the stories that have been generated surrounding Narasimha in Andhra Pradesh. This leads Kalyana Rao to describe Chenchulakshmi as ‘one of the first Telugu plays created by folklore’.<sup>69</sup> We can view the inclusion of this play through the lens of Nagaraj, as the play incorporates the character of Narasimha, an avatar of Vishnu, and thereby makes it a story that is rooted in Hindu tradition. The Dalit community in *Untouchable Spring* acknowledge the connection that they have with Hinduism, and thus present stories that engage with it. However, this story comes with some subversive elements that feed into the narrative of self-respect that ultimately prevails. As noted, Chenchita is a girl from the Chenchu tribe, which in modern India is now classed as a Scheduled Tribe.<sup>70</sup> For the Dalit audience in *Untouchable Spring*, seeing someone of Adivasi origin marrying an avatar of Vishnu has the potential to be empowering. In the play, Chenchita has real agency in their relationship, as she tests Narasimha’s worth before marrying him. The tests that she puts him through are key skills of the traditionally hunter-gatherer Chenchu tribe. Once married, Chenchita is known as Chenchulakshmi, which represents Chenchita aligning with the goddess Lakshmi. Traditionally, Lakshmi is seen as the consort of Vishnu. Chenchita is therefore elevated to the status of Lakshmi, which in essence, transforms Chenchita into a goddess. For Vemsani, the Chenchita/Narasimha story signifies a ‘symbolic cultural assimilation, whereby the god becomes one with the people, rather than Hinduism assimilating an existing cult’.<sup>71</sup> This is a bold claim, particularly when viewed within the context of Nagaraj’s argument. In this story, the ‘Hindu’ and the ‘Dalit’ are combined rather than the Hindu tradition taking over a Dalit tradition. The story is created through the relationship between Dalits and Hinduism. This goes against the version of culture envisioned by Gauthaman, who argues that Dalits must reject the symbols of Hinduism in order to find self-respect. As will be discussed below, the

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<sup>65</sup> Lavanya Vemsani, ‘Narasimha, the Supreme Deity of Andhra Pradesh: Tradition and Innovation in Hinduism-An Examination of the Temple Myths, Folk Stories, and Popular Culture’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 24:1, 35-52 (p. 40).

<sup>66</sup> Vemsani, ‘Narasimha, the Supreme Deity of Andhra Pradesh’, p. 35.

<sup>67</sup> Vemsani, ‘Narasimha, the Supreme Deity of Andhra Pradesh’, p. 36.

<sup>68</sup> Vemsani, ‘Narasimha, the Supreme Deity of Andhra Pradesh’, p. 36.

<sup>69</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 268.

<sup>70</sup> See: ‘State/Union Territory-wise list of Scheduled Tribes in India, Government of India, <<https://tribal.nic.in/ST/LatestListofScheduledtribes.pdf>> [accessed 1<sup>st</sup> February 2019].

<sup>71</sup> Vemsani, ‘Narasimha, the Supreme Deity of Andhra Pradesh’, p. 47.

performance of this play in the novel generates a great amount of self-respect amongst the Dalit communities in attendance and acts as a catalyst for other forms of caste subversion. This merging of Dalit and Hindu worlds, at least in this part of the novel, offers the community a cultural history that they can be proud of, thus enabling challenges to caste structures. As the novel progresses, however, these relationships between Dalits and Hinduism begin to break down. This is signified by two major events: the conversion of Sivaiah to Christianity and the visit of Gandhi followers to Yennela Dinni. I will discuss this latter moment first before exploring the importance of Christian conversion in the novel later in this chapter.

*Untouchable Spring* is a novel that wishes to write the history of the Mala and Madiga communities in Andhra Pradesh and does so by creating a narrative that spans several generations and encompasses a breadth of cultural and historical knowledge. What it lacks, however, is an engagement with historical moments. As a novel that tracks the development of a community over a majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one would assume that it would engage with events such as independence, the Emergency, and other key moments in the history of new India that impacted every facet of society. This lack of historical engagement is, in fact, not necessarily limited to Rao, but is the case for the majority of Dalit texts. This is the argument of Toral Jatin Gajarawala, who writes in her book *Untouchable Fictions* that Dalit literature is ‘by and large bereft of the signpost historical moments that would allow it to participate in a national historical chronology’.<sup>72</sup> Instead, she argues that Dalit literature is ‘marked by a conscious historical and cultural specificity hardly interested in the timelessness and spacelessness that characterize other forms of futurism’ and that it ‘insists on its own historicity by other means’.<sup>73</sup> In the case of *Untouchable Spring*, this takes the form of a novel that narrates a history based on the cultural heritage of Dalit communities. There is, however, one moment in the text where the reader is bombarded with historical references and information. Within a span of fourteen pages, the reader is subjected to references to: Gandhi, Ambedkar, Phule, Periyar, temple entry, the Harijan debate, the Self-Respect movement, independence, and other key dates relating to caste opposition.<sup>74</sup> In a text that is otherwise bereft of historical signposting, this passage stands out from the rest of the novel. It is during this passage, I argue, that the text changes direction and begins to offer a discussion of the relationship between Dalits and Hinduism that is more in line with the arguments of Gauthaman: these intensify as the novel reaches its conclusion. The most significant moment of this passage that fuels these debates is centred on the arrival of Gandhi’s followers to Yennela Dinni wanting to hold a temple entry protest. The group want to lead a procession to the village Siva temple, where it has been agreed that Dalits are allowed to enter for the first time. Although Gandhi’s followers see this as a triumphant moment, the Dalit community of Yennela Dinni

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<sup>72</sup> Toral Jatin Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013) p. 169.

<sup>73</sup> Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions*, p. 169.

<sup>74</sup> See Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, pp. 192-205.



address it with some confusion and criticism. Reuben, for example, notes how Yellanna was a devotee of Siva and that his 'father's name was Sivaiah. A lot of people in Yennela Dinni are in fact devotees of Siva'.<sup>75</sup> So, although the Dalits of Yennela Dinni have historically been denied access to the Siva temple, this has not altered the way that they have interacted with the god. This leads Reuben to suggest that the relationship that the Malas and Madigas have with religion, as well as other key components of their culture, have occurred outside of the temple:

Let's for a moment think that malas and madigas are lowly people. But these lowly people have an art. Have a literature. Have a culture. All of this happened outside of the temple till now. Happened naturally. My grandfather brought Ganga down from the sky outside of the temple, amidst people in his song, in his dance. There's lifeless struggle in the temple.<sup>76</sup>

The introduction of temple entry debates in the village prompt Reuben and others to think about the relationship that Dalits have with Hinduism and conclude that their culture, which is a combination of religion, literature, and art, is something that has developed away from Hinduism. In fact, they see the ideas of Gandhi, including temple entry issues and self-purification, as instruments to tie Dalits to something that they are not a part of: 'this isn't in fact [for] the upliftment of Harijans. This is protecting Hindu religion' and to 'cage [the Malas and Madigas] in a frame'.<sup>77</sup> So although the Dalit community in this section of the novel is not as angry and resentful with Hinduism as Gauthaman is in his writing, they do begin to question the relationship that they have with Hinduism, which is ultimately one that sees their culture as a separate entity to that of Hindu culture.

This idea becomes more radical as the novel progresses and comes to a head with the final generation of the family that the novel presents. This is seen predominantly through Jessie, Reuben's grandson, who leaves to join the Naxalites at the end of the text. When he announces his desire to leave the village to his family, he invokes the image of Yellanna by stating that 'it is necessary to fulfil that which Yellanna yearned for'.<sup>78</sup> In essence, Jessie believes he is continuing the struggle that Yellanna sparked at the beginning of the text, though in a way that is fundamentally different. For Yellanna, song and performance were key to highlighting the struggles of Dalit communities and fighting against injustice. Jessie, however, needs more than song. Violence and fighting back against both the system and the oppressors are central to his activism. The language of the text encapsulates this anger during its closing pages, as it describes how Jessie has left 'to fight. To free his people'.<sup>79</sup> This language of rebellion mirrors the violent language of Gauthaman that is steeped in the language of rejection and hitting back. Although Jessie draws parallels between himself and Yellanna when he announces his departure, the text begins to take a turn by highlighting the differences between the two. The text notes that:

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<sup>75</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 194.

<sup>76</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 195.

<sup>77</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, pp. 195-196.

<sup>78</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 250.

<sup>79</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 251.

as Yellanna did not get an answer, he left Yennela Dinni and went away. Jessie did not do that. He went away with an answer [...] He was behaving as if he had identified his life's goal at such a young age. Singing songs he is going about places. Not alone, like Yellanna.<sup>80</sup>

Through Jessie, I argue, Rao ultimately makes a choice for the kind of activism that he thinks will help Dalits break the chains of caste. Yellanna, who throughout the novel is heralded as a quasi-mythological hero, is reduced to a figure that cannot stand up to the power and violence that Jessie and his movement seek to unleash. In the above quotation, Yellanna is depicted as someone who did not know what to do, who saw injustice and was unable to fight against it. This is in sharp contrast to Jessie, who is sure of his approach to fighting against caste. He is confident in his decision to join the Naxalites and believes that this is the best option to liberate his community. Jessie sees injustice and is committed to fight against it, whereas Yellanna saw injustice and was only able to create songs depicting it. I believe that this ending of the text, which privileges Jessie over Yellanna, also points to an answer to the debate surrounding Dalit culture. By championing Jessie, Rao suggests that this violent rejection of Hinduism, similar to the arguments of Gauthaman, is what is necessary. Although the performances at the start of the novel, which are intimately tied to Hinduism, helped to spark the activism that continues throughout the text, it is Jessie's active rejection that is key to fighting caste for the generations at the end of the text.

### **Religion and Wider Identity Questions**

The second major event in the novel that highlights the disentanglement of Dalits from Hinduism, is the conversion of Sivaiah to Christianity. This aspect of the text is most focused on by scholars. Although this is an important aspect of the text in relation to the historical use of conversion by Dalit communities (which will be discussed in depth in Chapter Four), this section of the narrative becomes much more relevant to contemporary forms of activism when we analyse it within the parameters of Dalit culture, and the impact that religious conversion can have upon it. Ruben's parents, Sivaiah and Sasirekha, convert to Christianity under the guidance of Martin, a Christian missionary they meet after fleeing Yennela Dinni due to an intense period of drought.<sup>81</sup> After burying Yellanna, Sivaiah and Sasirekha leave the village and attempt to find work in various places, only to be refused, and often attacked, on caste lines.<sup>82</sup> They are taken in by Martin who helps them to find work in exchange for their conversion to Christianity. At this point they assume Christian names, with Sivaiah becoming Simon. This creates a new Christian identity for Sivaiah, who attempts to forge a new life away from his ancestral home. This distinction between a Christian self and a Dalit self is highlighted when the text shifts into recounting Martin's story. The text describes how Martin,

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<sup>80</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 256.

<sup>81</sup> Martin is himself a Madiga, who converted to Christianity through a missionary. This missionary, Satyanarayana and Tharu note, is based on John Clough, a missionary who worked alongside malas and madigas during the famine of 1877. The work of Clough is mirrored in the character of Martin. See Satyanarayana and Tharu, 'G. Kalyana Rao', *Steel Nibs are Sprouting*, p. 471.

<sup>82</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, pp. 138-144.

originally known as Chinnodu, was relatively lazy as he believed that life ‘ought not to be so wretched’.<sup>83</sup> Martin, in the present moment, is able to see ‘clearly in front of him his “Chinnodu self” when he thinks about how he was before converting to Christianity.’<sup>84</sup> Although he does a lot to help Dalits, there is a distinct difference between his past ‘Dalit life’ and his present Christian life. This is a similar situation in which Sivaiah finds himself. After fleeing his village, and finding no other work, he is reliant on converting to Christianity and establishing a life based on the work he can do alongside Martin. ‘Simon’, then, can act as a new identity for Sivaiah, as ‘for Christ, nobody is untouchable’.<sup>85</sup> The conversions of Martin and Sivaiah to Christianity come to signify this disentanglement of Dalits from Hinduism which intensifies as the novel progresses. The generations that follow Sivaiah begin to actively challenge the dominant discourses of Hinduism. This, to an extent, is made possible via his conversion to Christianity. By Sivaiah converting to Christianity, he enables his descendants to be born into the Christian fold. Although they still experience caste discrimination, they are able to view caste and Hinduism from a different perspective as they have not been raised within the confines of Hinduism. Sivaiah’s conversion also highlights how there are no strong bonds between himself and Hinduism. Although his conversion to Christianity comes from a moment of desperation, there is no sense of a difficult decision being made on the part of Sivaiah. There is no inner turmoil about abandoning Hinduism or a feeling of sadness or regret. Instead, Sivaiah watches Simon preaching in various villages and becomes inspired by him. Quite abruptly, the text then states: ‘one day [Martin] told Sivaiah, “Christ wants to use you for his purpose. Do you like that?” [...] Sivaiah became Simon’.<sup>86</sup> The way that Sivaiah’s conversion seamlessly happens in the text highlights how disenfranchised he is within Hinduism. This is reinforced in a passage from the moments before Sivaiah and Martin’s first meeting: ‘here Vedas, religion, Manu, patience and integration are synonyms for treachery and deception [...] They plotted against Sivaiah. They deceived him’.<sup>87</sup> In the build-up to Sivaiah’s conversion, then, we begin to get the sense that he has already lost all hope in Hinduism. It is something that plots against him rather than something that works in his favour. There is no real connection, therefore, between himself and Hinduism.

Religious conversion does, however, have the potential to remove Dalits from their sense of cultural heritage, particularly in Sivaiah’s case, as not only has he converted but he has been displaced by drought and forced to move away from his village. Although he does not appear to be upset about converting from Hinduism, he is distressed about leaving behind his village.<sup>88</sup> The village of Yennela Dinni acts as a cultural site throughout the novel and is romanticised by numerous characters in the novel. Leaving the village affects Sivaiah as it symbolises his apparent detachment from his cultural

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<sup>83</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 153.

<sup>84</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 153.

<sup>85</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 159.

<sup>86</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 165.

<sup>87</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 144.

<sup>88</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 152.

identity. He does, however, know the songs of Yellanna, offering an important link to his cultural and Dalit identity. This link becomes lost once Sivaiah is killed and Reuben becomes an orphan. Reuben, therefore, grows up under a Christian teaching with a group of missionaries. It is only once Reuben visits Yennela Dinni, and learns about Yellanna, that he can reconnect with the lost sense of Dalit culture. The text notes that when Reuben visits Yennela Dinni he 'had an identity. He was the son of Siviah, the son of Yellanna, a resident of Yennela Dinni'.<sup>89</sup> It is through this interaction with Yellanna's songs that Reuben creates this sense of a true identity. Conversion, then, has the ability to change an individual's fundamental identity. In the case of Martin, his conversion to Christianity meant an eradication of his Dalit identity. Christianity takes over the 'dalitness' of his life. This was also the case for Reuben who has no idea of his Dalit identity and heritage as he was orphaned and brought up as a Christian. Once Reuben is told about his ancestry through the songs of Yellanna, this new Dalit identity in Reuben takes over. The strong Christian overtones of the novel in the chapters about Martin and Simon fade away and the text instead focuses on the struggle that Dalits face in independent India. It is through this engagement with Dalit culture in the novel that Reuben and his family are able to engage with this historic struggle and engage with Dalit issues in their present moment. Crucially, it is through these songs that this cultural identity is kept alive, and future generations engage with this identity through them. It is also important to realise how this crucial link between Reuben and his cultural history was almost lost through Reuben's adoption by the Church. We learn through Reuben's diary how, through a lucky encounter, he discovers the identity of his mother and father, and travels to Yennela Dinni to learn about his past.<sup>90</sup> Whilst there, he is taught the songs that Yellanna, his grandfather, weaved many years ago. He notes that 'a feeling overcame me. That I was far away from such a great lineage. Couldn't stop the tears'.<sup>91</sup> If Yellanna acts as a touchstone for the younger generations of this bloodline, then Reuben acts as the lynchpin that connects them to their cultural heritage.

## Conclusion

Through a complex weaving of different voices and experiences, Kalyana Rao creates a text in *Untouchable Spring* that engages with the different ideas of Dalit culture that I have discussed in this chapter. Starting with Yellanna and the songs and performances of his troupe, Rao first presents how Dalits have been tied to the structures of Hinduism in terms of religion and culture. The communities that Rao presents at the start of the text represent the ideas of an 'organic and consensual link' that Dalits have with Hindu culture that is explored by Nagaraj.<sup>92</sup> Although the narratives of these performances represent a 'dalitising' of Hindu mythology, the community is still very much tied to the ideas of Hinduism at the start of the novel. As it progresses, the novel shifts more towards

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<sup>89</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 181.

<sup>90</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 180.

<sup>91</sup> Rao, *Untouchable Spring*, p. 180.

<sup>92</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 201.

Gauthaman's idea of Dalit culture which rejects Hinduism and seeks to form a culture in opposition to it. This is something that is slowly developed throughout the text. As I have argued, this is rooted within the songs Yellanna creates as he roams around Andhra Pradesh and records the experiences of various Dalit communities. Yellanna acts as a symbol for the multiple generations who follow him and use his songs to engage with their history of untouchability. Yellanna's songs also represent the start of a kind of Dalit resistance, which intensifies as the novel unfolds. Different generations become ever more political as a result of Yellanna's consciousness raising songs at the start of the novel.

Yellanna's act of weaving together the stories of different Dalit communities in order to create a united song of resistance is replicated in the narrative form that *Untouchable Spring* takes. As I have alluded to throughout this chapter, Rao unapologetically creates a complex and often confusing text that brings together multiple narrative threads. I argue that in doing so, Rao outlines that there is no fixed notion of Dalit culture. As the narrative progresses, incorporating the experiences of new generations, Dalit culture is interpreted differently to fit with the new and urgent issues that that generation is faced with. Ultimately, the engagement with Dalit culture that I have explored in this chapter, namely through song and performance, has proven to be liberating components of the lives of the characters in *Untouchable Spring*. Throughout the text, song and performance allow different generations to engage with cultural identity in different ways. Even as politics change and the issues relating to different generations alter, it is Dalit culture that ultimately united them, and offers the inspirational means to fight caste and caste discrimination.

## Chapter Four: From Hindus to Buddhists: The Aesthetics of Religious Conversion as Activism

On 29<sup>th</sup> April 2018 (the eve of Buddha Purnima or the Buddha's birth anniversary) in the city of Una, Gujarat, an estimated 300-400 Dalits converted from Hinduism to Buddhism. Among them was Ramesh Sarvaiya, who in 2016 was attacked alongside three other members of his family by a so-called 'cow vigilante' group for skinning a dead cow. The men were stripped, tied to a car, and severely beaten with iron rods and sticks. This was filmed by the vigilante group who subsequently uploaded it to the internet 'cautioning people against killing bovine creatures unless they want to meet the same fate'.<sup>1</sup> Sarvaiya's decision to convert to Buddhism two years later was ultimately fuelled by this attack, and the way that he and his family had been treated in its aftermath. At the time of the conversion, he said that 'the kind of discrimination we faced by Hindus pains us and therefore we have decided to convert. Even the state government has discriminated against us by not fulfilling the promises made to us in the wake of the flogging incident'.<sup>2</sup> So far in this thesis, I have introduced the ideas surrounding the relationships between Dalits, religious conversion, and Buddhism in the broader sense, outlining how these relationships have contributed to the development of Dalit history. In the previous chapter, I began to explore the concept of religious conversion as a liberating act for Dalit communities and how conversion impacts multiple generations. I have also discussed how activists and social reformers such as Iyothee Thass attempted to construct a Buddhist history for Dalit communities, particularly in South India.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I wish to analyse how Buddhism is represented in the literary work of Dalit Buddhists. Importantly, this is a specific kind of Buddhism that was created by Ambedkar that related specifically to the Dalit condition. However, converting from Hinduism (a religion that in many respects dominates the daily lives of many Indians), to this new kind of Buddhism may not offer the kind of liberation that one may expect. After converting to Buddhism, Sarvaiya claimed that 'we know that abandoning Hinduism would not change anything in our life, but we will no longer pray before the same Gods whose followers thrash us and treat us like animals'.<sup>4</sup> This is an interesting yet powerful statement to make. Although he is fully aware that converting to Buddhism will not end the abuse that he and his community face on a daily basis, the act signifies a deeper meaning of moving away from a culture that views him as untouchable. It

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<sup>1</sup> Scroll Staff, 'Protests all over Gujarat against attack on Dalit men who were skinning a cow, 16 attempt suicide', *Scroll*, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2016. <<https://scroll.in/latest/812078/protests-all-over-gujarat-against-attack-on-dalit-men-who-were-skinning-a-cow-seven-attempt-suicide>> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> June 2019] (para. 6 of 7).

<sup>2</sup> Scroll Staff, 'Gujarat: Una Dalit family assaulted for skinning a cow in 2016 converts to Buddhism', *Scroll*, 30<sup>th</sup> April 2018. <<https://scroll.in/latest/877335/gujarat-assaulted-for-skinning-a-cow-in-2016-four-dalit-men-in-una-convert-to-buddhism>> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> June 2019] (para. 6 of 6).

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter One, pp. 33-34.

<sup>4</sup> Business Standard, 'Una Dalit victims embrace Buddhism with 300 others', *Business Standard*, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2018. <[https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/una-dalit-victims-embrace-buddhism-with-300-others-118042900562\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/una-dalit-victims-embrace-buddhism-with-300-others-118042900562_1.html)> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> June 2019] (para. 7 of 9).

therefore has the potential to create a feeling of self-respect, and of being in charge of one's destiny by deciding what rules and religious customs one follows. In this chapter, I will focus on the effect of religious conversion to Buddhism on the everyday experiences of Dalits, primarily through the work of Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy and Urmila Pawar. I argue that religious conversion to Buddhism not only brings self-respect to Dalit communities on an ideological level via the theoretical and religious writings of Ambedkar, but also in regards to the day-to-day lives of Dalit Buddhists. I will analyse how both Chinnaswamy and Pawar are able to present both of sides of Buddhist conversion and how it has become a central part of Dalit activism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **'I will not die a Hindu': Ambedkar's rejection of Hinduism<sup>5</sup>**

At the Yeola Depressed Classes conference held in October 1935, Ambedkar made his first public declaration that he was willing to leave the Hindu fold: 'I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power'.<sup>6</sup> Two months later, he was invited to preside over the annual conference of the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal, which would later be cancelled due to the radical nature of Ambedkar's presidential speech, *Annihilation of Caste*. Although Ambedkar made his declaration to leave Hinduism months before the invitation by the Mandal was issued, it was cited by them as one of their main concerns with the contents of his speech. In a letter sent to Ambedkar, which he published in the prologue of *Annihilation of Caste*, a representative of the Mandal showed concern 'regarding [his] declaration on the subject of the change of religion' and that he 'more than once stated in [his] address that [he] had decided to walk out of the fold of the Hindus'.<sup>7</sup> Even in its early stages, Ambedkar's idea of leaving Hinduism proved to be too radical, with reform groups such as the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal quickly distancing themselves, although this did not particularly trouble him.<sup>8</sup> As the Buddhist leader Sangharakshita notes, 'the most enthusiastic response to his speech came from the Untouchables themselves, for many of whom his promise that he would not die a Hindu carried a message of hope and deliverance'.<sup>9</sup> This declaration at the Yeola conference sparked a twenty-one year quest for Ambedkar. This was not just a quest for him to leave Hinduism; it was a quest to find the right religion for him to lead India's untouchables into. As I discussed in Chapter One, Ambedkar was radically different compared to some of his other anti-caste contemporaries (such as Periyar), as Ambedkar was set to offer Dalits a religion that they could move into once they left Hinduism. As D. R. Nagaraj controversially argues in *The Flaming Feet*, Ambedkar was influenced by Gandhi in this

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<sup>5</sup> Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013), p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World*, p. 147.

<sup>7</sup> Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, pp. 195-196.

<sup>8</sup> In the prologue to *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar explains that the organisation was run by caste Hindus and that, 'As a rule, I do not like to take any part in a movement which is carried on by the caste Hindus. Their attitude towards social reform is so different from mine that I have found it difficult to pull on with them', Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, p. 189.

<sup>9</sup> Sangharakshita, *Ambedkar and Buddhism* (Glasgow: Windhorse Publications, 1986), p. 61.

regard as he saw the power and importance of religion within the Gandhian model of liberation.<sup>10</sup> Between 1935 and 1956, the year he converted to Buddhism, Ambedkar spent his time researching and analysing multiple religions in order to ascertain which would be the most appropriate for Dalit conversion. Ambedkar's approach to this, as with the majority of his other work, was both methodical and scholarly. As Christopher S. Queen remarks:

[Ambedkar] sent delegations of his followers to attend and report back on religious conferences, he corresponded with religious thinkers and clerics, and he travelled to religious gatherings abroad [...] [H]e amassed a personal library of thousands of volumes in philosophy, history, the social sciences, and comparative religion, including critical editions and translations of the sacred literatures.<sup>11</sup>

Similar to his attacks on Hinduism, which were rooted in a deep analysis of sacred texts supported by scholarly research, Ambedkar's decision as to which religion he and his followers should convert was conducted in the same rational way. Although he did not write explicitly on this decision-making process, we are able to infer from some of his writings why he rejected certain religions as the religion of choice for Dalits. Most notably, we are able to find amongst his works criticisms of Islam and Christianity, which he argues would not accommodate Dalits.

In regards to Christianity, Ambedkar was wary of the little progress Christian missions and Christian converts had made concerning untouchability. Most significantly, he was deeply troubled by the fact that many Dalit converts to Christianity had reported that little had changed upon converting. In an essay where he presents his critique of Christianity titled 'The Condition on the Convert', he quotes at length a report submitted to the Simon Commission<sup>12</sup> by the group Christian Depressed Classes of South India, who state that Christian conversion has done little to help the communities that they represent:

In spite, however, of our Christian religion which teaches us fundamental truths [,] the equality of man and man before God, the necessity of charity and love for neighbours and mutual sympathy and forbearance, we, the large number of Depressed class converts remain in the same social condition as the Hindu Depressed Classes.<sup>13</sup>

The group goes on to use the phrase 'caste Christians' which, as they admit, is a phrase that 'sounds a contradiction, but which, unfortunately, is the correct and accepted description of high caste converts

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<sup>10</sup> See Chapter Three, pp. 80-81.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher S. Queen, 'Dr Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation', in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, ed. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 45-71 (p. 51).

<sup>12</sup> The Simon Commission was sent to India in 1928 to collect information regarding constitutional reform in India in light of the growing Independence Movement. Ambedkar contributed a significant amount to the Simon Commission, which highlights how he sought to use the independence process to better the position of Dalits, as detailed in the Introduction to this thesis. Ambedkar's contributions to the Simon Commission can be found in: B. R. Ambedkar, 'Dr. Ambedkar with the Simon Commission (Indian Statutory Commission)', in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 2*, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), pp. 315-491.

<sup>13</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, 'The Condition of the Convert', in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 5*, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), p. 454.



from Hinduism'.<sup>14</sup> These caste Christians trace their ancestry to their high caste roots in order to better their social position and find 'favour in the eyes of his fellow caste-men, the Hindus'.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, as I began to explore in the previous chapter, caste continues to be very much alive in Christian communities in India, with Dalit Christians being treated in the same ways that they were prior to conversion. This is something that I began to explore in the previous chapter. Although Sivaiah and his decedents in *Untouchable Spring* are Christians, this does little to stop the abuse that his community has been subjected to for generations. Bama's landmark autobiography of 1992 *Karukku* goes even deeper into this discussion.<sup>16</sup> Here, she details her life living as a nun and the abuse that she suffered during her time in the convent that was predicated on caste lines.<sup>17</sup> Even within the holy space of the convent, she is still placed at the bottom of the hierarchy by individuals who trace their ancestry to upper caste Hindus.

Ambedkar points to a number of reasons why caste distinctions have remained in Indian Christian communities and why the Dalit position within Christianity has not been altered. One of the main reasons he cites is that Christianity has not done enough to dissuade converts from continuing to believe in Hindu customs and beliefs. Within many previously Hindu communities that have converted to different religions, this hanging on to the old ways is very prevalent (this will be discussed in greater detail below). As Ambedkar states, 'Almost all the converts retain the Hindu forms of worship and believe in Hindu superstition. A convert to Christianity will be found to worship his family Gods and also the Hindu gods such as Rama, Krishna, Shankar, Vishnu, etc.'. <sup>18</sup> He argues that Christians have tolerated these practices as they have 'been eager to convert persons to Christianity' and therefore have 'never put up a determined fight to uproot paganism from the Convert'.<sup>19</sup> He links this idea with the reasons why Dalits convert to Christianity in the first place. He argues that 'an untouchable becomes a Christian for some advantage or he becomes a Christian because he likes the teaching of the Bible. But the case is very rare of an untouchable becoming a Christian because of a positive discontent or dislike of the Hindu religious teachings'.<sup>20</sup> This is something that we continually see in narratives related to Christian conversion, which is at the root of Sivaiah's conversion in *Untouchable Spring*. He converted as he had no other option after being displaced by drought and finding it difficult to find employment. A life within the Church offered him stability; his decision to convert was therefore rooted in practicality, not a dislike of the Hindu religion.<sup>21</sup> As conversion to Christianity was often predicated on these lines, 'Christianity becomes only an addendum to [the convert's] old faith. It does not become a substitute for his old faith. He

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<sup>14</sup> Ambedkar, 'The Condition of the Convert', p. 454-455.

<sup>15</sup> Ambedkar, 'The Condition of the Convert', p. 455.

<sup>16</sup> Bama, *Karukku* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> See in particular Bama, *Karukku*, pp. 111-114.

<sup>18</sup> Ambedkar, 'The Condition of the Convert', p. 456.

<sup>19</sup> Ambedkar, 'The Condition of the Convert', p. 456.

<sup>20</sup> Ambedkar, 'The Condition of the Convert', p. 472.

<sup>21</sup> For a more in-depth discussion see Chapter Three, p. 89-90.

cherishes both and observes them on occasions appropriate to each'.<sup>22</sup> As Christianity has not replaced Hinduism in this conversion scenario, the old customs of Hinduism run simultaneously within the lives of Christian converts. This includes a continued devotion to Hindu gods as mentioned above, but it also means that the belief in caste continues. This leads Ambedkar to conclude that 'the fact remains that Christianity has not succeeded in dissolving the feeling of caste from among the converts to Christianity', and therefore it is not a religion that offers Dalits the environment in which they are able to escape the prejudice of untouchability.<sup>23</sup>

It is this continued observance of caste that leads Ambedkar to criticise a number of the other religious options available to him and his followers, including Islam and Sikhism. Many of Ambedkar's ideas surrounding Islam can be found in a book published in 1946 shortly before the independence of India titled *Pakistan or the Partition of India*.<sup>24</sup> As the title of the text suggests, the majority of it is dedicated to the discussion of the ideas related to the partition of India and the creation of the Muslim state, Pakistan. However, Ambedkar also includes a discussion of Islam which gives us clues as to why he rejected it as a religion to which Dalits could convert. One of his main criticisms with Indian Islam is its reconfiguration of the Hindu caste system. Ambedkar boldly states that 'there can thus be no manner of doubt that the Muslim Society in India is afflicted by the same social evils as afflict the Hindu Society'.<sup>25</sup> He evidences this statement by quoting at length from the census of 1901 from Bengal which discusses the social divisions amongst the Muslim community there. A section of this is worth reproducing here:

The Mahomedans themselves recognize two main social divisions, (1) Ashraf or Sharaf and (2) Ajlaf. Ashraf means 'noble' and includes all undoubted descendants of foreigners and converts from high caste Hindus. All other Mahomedans including the occupational groups and all converts of lower ranks, are known by the contemptuous terms, 'Ajlaf', 'wretches' or 'mean people'.<sup>26</sup>

While Ambedkar relies on these categories of Ashraf and Ajlaf to criticise Indian Islam, sociological research suggests that the organisation of Muslim communities in India is much more complex. Imtiaz Ahmad has argued, for instance, that this dichotomy may be too simplistic: 'this distinction is not really meaningful in understanding the existing international pattern among the diverse social groups in any locality'.<sup>27</sup> As Muslim communities have developed in different regions of India such as Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, and the aforementioned West Bengal, they have developed their own localised hierarchies that are ultimately based upon caste identities that individuals had whilst Hindus.<sup>28</sup> In a

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<sup>22</sup> Ambedkar, 'The Condition of the Convert', p. 472.

<sup>23</sup> Ambedkar, 'The Condition of the Convert', p. 455.

<sup>24</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, 'Pakistan or the Partition of India', in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 8*, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Ambedkar, 'Pakistan or the Partition of India', p. 230.

<sup>26</sup> Ambedkar, 'Pakistan or the Partition of India', p. 229.

<sup>27</sup> Imtiaz Ahmad, 'The Ashraf and Aijaf Categories in Indo-Muslim Society', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13 May 1967. 887-889 (p. 887).

<sup>28</sup> Ahmad, 'The Ashraf and Aijaf Categories in Indo-Muslim Society', p. 887.

similar fashion to the ‘caste Christians’ described above, the top group of many of these communities are comprised of high caste Hindu converts to Islam. Again, we are able to see how connections to ideas of purity are able to survive after converting. Although names and organisational structures have changed here, the essence of the Hindu caste system remains alive. People at the top are treated as ‘noble’, whereas the ones at the bottom are untouchable. As Surinder S. Jodhka and Ghanshyam Shah explain:

Popular categories with which dalits of Pakistan are identified are not completely alien to Indians. For example, mochi, pather (brick maker) and bhangi (sweeper) are mostly Muslims and considered ‘lower’ castes on the basis of their family occupation, regardless of their religion. There are other titles, such as musalman sheikhs, mussalis (both used for Muslim dalits) and masihi (Christians), which universally refer to specific groups of people, also identified with specific occupation and used to segregate them from the rest as ‘untouchable’ groups.<sup>29</sup>

This highlights that hierarchies based on purity and pollution exist in Islam not only in the Indian context, but also in the wider South Asian context. Ambedkar finds some hope in Islam when he turns to Muslim communities outside of India who have made efforts towards social reform. However, he believes that this is impossible for Indian Muslims because of their intense rivalry with the Hindus. He argues that the ‘Hindu environment is always silently but surely encroaching on [the Muslim]... de-muslamanizing him’ meaning that there is ‘no time, no thought and no room for questions relating to social reform’.<sup>30</sup> Instead, the Muslims and the Hindus are in a ‘perpetual struggle’; ‘the Hindus [wish] to establish their dominance over the Muslims and the Muslims [wish] to establish their historical position as the ruling community’.<sup>31</sup> Although Ambedkar was offered the sum of ‘forty or fifty million rupees’ if he were to lead Dalits into Islam by a rich Muslim leader,<sup>32</sup> Ambedkar could not get past the ‘suppression of all rational thinking which is in conflict with the teachings of Islam’ presented in Indian Islam, as well as this reconfiguration of the Hindu caste system.<sup>33</sup>

The way in which other religions are able to keep the spirit of the Hindu caste system alive may be one of the reasons why Ambedkar rejected Sikhism as his religion of choice. Sikhism became one of the first choices of conversion for Ambedkar as early as 1936, where he began having serious discussions with Sikh leaders about the position of Dalits within Sikhism if they converted.<sup>34</sup> As Sangharakshita notes: ‘Ambedkar was far more attracted to Sikhism than to either Islam or Christianity’ during this time period, with many assuming that this would be the option that

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<sup>29</sup> Surinder S. Jodhka and Ghanshyam Shah, ‘Comparative Contexts of Discrimination: Caste and Untouchability in South Asia’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27 November 2010, 99-106 (p. 101). Here the authors explore how untouchability is practiced in different religions and countries across South Asia.

<sup>30</sup> Ambedkar, ‘Pakistan or the Partition of India’, p. 235.

<sup>31</sup> Ambedkar, ‘Pakistan or the Partition of India’, p. 237.

<sup>32</sup> Sangharakshita, *Ambedkar and Buddhism*, p. 61.

<sup>33</sup> Ambedkar, ‘Pakistan or the Partition of India’, p. 234.

<sup>34</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2005), p. 127.

Ambedkar would choose.<sup>35</sup> One reason for this was Ambedkar's wish not to disrupt the progress of independence. Dhananjay Keer quotes Ambedkar as saying that it is in the 'interest of the country that the Depressed Classes, if they chose to change their faith, should go on to Sikhism'.<sup>36</sup> His rationale for this stems from the impact the Dalits converting to either Islam or Christianity would have numerically:

Conversion to Islam or Christianity will denationalize the Depressed Classes. If they go over to Islam, the number of Muslims will be doubled; and the danger of Muslim domination also becomes real. If they go on to Christianity, the numerical strength of the Christians becomes five to six crores [50-60 million]. It will help strengthen the hold of Britain on the country.<sup>37</sup>

There is another cultural reason, however, why Ambedkar was initially set upon Sikhism. This reason, when viewed through the long lens of history, appears to be very un-Ambedkarite for Ambedkar. He believed that if Dalits were to become Muslims or Christians, then they would not only be going out of the Hindu religion 'but they also go out of the Hindu culture. On the other hand, if they become Sikhs they remain within the Hindu culture'.<sup>38</sup> This seems like an extraordinary statement coming from Ambedkar who during this time period had published *Annihilation of Caste*, which completely dismantles Hindu culture. This statement is also interesting when viewed within the broader context of the discussions that were taking place surrounding Dalit conversion to Sikhism. Sangharakshita explains that:

The only Caste Hindus to give even qualified approval to Ambedkar's decision to renounce Hinduism were some of the more far-sighted leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha, but even they gave their approval only on condition that Ambedkar and his followers embraced Sikhism, which according to them was a sect of Hinduism.<sup>39</sup>

Right-wing Hindus such as the Hindu Mahasabha saw Sikhism as a sect of Hinduism and believed that Dalits converting to Sikhism was a compromise that they could tolerate. In this context, the radical nature of conversion is diminished. Converting from Hinduism to Sikhism, a religion that many see as being intrinsically connected to the former, does not match the radicalism of Ambedkar's call for conversion that is present within his Yeola speech in 1935, and in *Annihilation of Caste*.

It is not entirely clear why Ambedkar abandoned this idea to convert to Sikhism; however, there are multiple stories which tie together into one larger narrative. One story is that in 1936, Ambedkar sent a group of his followers to Amritsar in Punjab to gather information about Sikhism. A few of these followers converted to Sikhism whilst there and began to spread the news of their conversion and encourage others to do so.<sup>40</sup> Gail Omvedt believes that this may have been a reason that Ambedkar pulled away from Sikhism, 'over the issue of control of the conversion process and the

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<sup>35</sup> Sangharakshita, *Ambedkar and Buddhism*, p. 63.

<sup>36</sup> Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1971), p. 280.

<sup>37</sup> Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, p. 280.

<sup>38</sup> Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, p. 279.

<sup>39</sup> Sangharakshita, *Ambedkar and Buddhism*, p. 63.

<sup>40</sup> Gail Omvedt, *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2004), p.49.

institutions being created'.<sup>41</sup> He did not want to risk conversions taking place *en masse* before he had confirmed the relevant details with the main leaders. Harish K. Puri presents a different argument. He argues that Sikh leaders were concerned that their positions of power would be threatened by Ambedkar and the estimated sixty million Dalits that would convert with him. He notes that 'there was an apprehension that once Ambedkar became a Sikh with all his followers, no one from the existing Sikh leaders like Baldev Singh would be nominated to the Viceroy's executive council as a representative of the Sikh community'.<sup>42</sup> He further suggests that key Sikh leaders directly told Ambedkar to drop the idea of converting to Sikhism altogether. Although all of these events, when considered together, may have made it difficult for Ambedkar to continue this line of converting to Sikhism, I believe that there is one more issue that has not been discussed in relation to Ambedkar's reasons behind not converting to Sikhism - the issue of caste. Just as Indian Islam has been able to keep alive the essence of caste within certain communities, Sikhism too features a reconfigured form of the Hindu caste system. As Puri explains, 'Sikhism did not lead to the creation of an egalitarian community or end of caste hierarchy and discrimination. But the caste pattern had undergone a change parallel to that of the Hindu caste hierarchy'.<sup>43</sup> Within the Sikh community, the Jats are the dominant social group. Although in the Hindu varna order the Jats are classed as Shudras, being from agricultural backgrounds, they have been able to assert their dominance within the Sikh hierarchy.<sup>44</sup> Differing from Brahmins, the Jats are not the guardians of religious and sacred knowledge in Sikhism as priests can be from a variety of different social groups. However, most significantly, a tiered system of social organisation exists in Sikhism, acting as a reconfigured version of the Hindu caste system. One of the fundamental criticisms that Ambedkar aimed at Islam and Christianity is their inability to remove caste and untouchability. In India, caste has become a core value of these religions, which is why I believe he ultimately rejected Sikhism. He wished to convert into an indigenous religion, one that would embrace Dalits and give them a space to find self-respect. Ultimately, he found this in Buddhism.

### **Ambedkar and his Dhamma? Buddhism and self-respect.**

On 14<sup>th</sup> October 1956, Ambedkar ended his twenty-one year quest and converted from Hinduism to Buddhism. In front of a crowd of an estimated 35,000 Dalits in the central Indian city of Nagpur, he set in motion a practice of conversion that lives on in today's India. For years after the initial conversion, communities continued to convert to Buddhism *en masse* as followers of Ambedkar spread his message across the country. This was the case for Urmila Pawar who provides a detailed account of the conversion of her community in her autobiography *The Weave of My Life*. Pawar

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<sup>41</sup> Omvedt, *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India*, p.49.

<sup>42</sup> Harish K. Puri, 'Scheduled Castes in Sikh Community: A Historical Perspective', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38:26 (2003), 2693-2701 (p. 2698).

<sup>43</sup> Puri, 'Scheduled Castes in Sikh Community', p. 2697.

<sup>44</sup> Puri, 'Scheduled Castes in Sikh Community', p. 2694.

explains that her community converted shortly after the death of Ambedkar in December 1956 and that, prior to this, ‘we hardly had an idea of what conversion meant, nor did we know who this Dr. Ambedkar was who had asked us to convert to Buddhism’.<sup>45</sup> The story of her conversion is narrated in a surprisingly understated way, considering the impact that Buddhism and Ambedkar had on her life. The conversion ceremony is simply described as a large number of people arriving at the grounds of a nearby college from multiple villages in the surrounding area. The crowd then follows instructions that are dictated to them through large speakers after a spell of chanting. She concludes by stating, ‘after the ceremony, we went home’.<sup>46</sup> Although I will explore the ways in which Pawar expands and condenses stories in her autobiography and short stories later in the chapter, it is important to dwell on this episode here in order to observe the differences between conversion experiences. Although many Dalits converted to Buddhism at the same time and in the days following Ambedkar, many did not until months, or even years later. As Pawar further explains, her community did not even know much about Ambedkar prior to converting. It was via the work of other activist circles that her community came to know of Ambedkar and his liberating message. This highlights the polarising nature of Ambedkar during his lifetime. On the one hand, he was a national leader who was able to inspire millions of Dalits and enact real change in the newly independent India. Yet on the other hand, he was relatively unknown to many Dalit communities, including Pawar’s, who lived in Maharashtra and theoretically would have had a better chance of encountering him.

What Ambedkar was asking his followers to do was not simply to convert from one religion to another. It was a move from Hinduism into a Buddhism of Ambedkar’s devising. After having confirmed that Buddhism was the right religion for Dalits, Ambedkar embarked on a deep analysis of the religion, rejecting many of its key teachings. He essentially refashioned Buddhism to fit with his philosophy and ideology. This radicalism, at the time of the conversion, was relatively unknown to a majority of his fellow converts. He had not yet published his major work on Buddhism, *The Buddha and his Dhamma* (published in 1956), where he outlines his ideas about this ‘new’ kind of Buddhism. There were, however, some elements of Ambedkar’s radicalism present within the conversion ceremony itself. This radicalism comes in the form of the twenty-two vows that Ambedkar took during his conversion. These were written by him and encapsulate the radicalism that he was enacting through abandoning Hinduism. Some of these vows were related to how Ambedkar wished to live his life such as ‘I shall not steal’ or ‘I shall not tell lies’.<sup>47</sup> Others, on the other hand, were a final condemnation of Hinduism. These include:

I shall have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, nor shall I worship them, I shall have no faith in Rama and Krishna, who are believed to be the incarnation of God, nor shall I worship them, I shall not allow any ceremonies to be performed by Brahmins, [and] I renounce

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<sup>45</sup> Urmila Pawar, *The Weave of my Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 91.

<sup>46</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of my Life*, p. 92.

<sup>47</sup> Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma, ‘Editors’ Introduction’, in *The Buddha and his Dhamma: A Critical Edition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. xxix-xxiii (p. xxi).

Hinduism which is harmful for humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopt Buddhism as my religion.<sup>48</sup>

These vows offer a brutal attack on the Hinduism that he was leaving behind. Not only are these radical statements to make, but they are radical in the sense of what he was encouraging the Dalit community to do: denounce these Hindu gods and a religious culture that ‘impedes the advancement and development of humanity’. Not only was Ambedkar’s departure from Hinduism radical, the kind of Buddhism that he curated for Dalits was just as radical, so much so that it has historically been denied a place in the Buddhist tradition.<sup>49</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I have split this radicalism into two parts: the first being Ambedkar’s rejection of the Four Noble Truths, and the second being the way he strips Buddhism of its magical and supernatural elements. Once these two elements have been outlined, I will then be able to analyse the ways Chinnaswamy and Pawar engage with Ambedkar’s Buddhism, and religion more broadly.

One of the central components of the teachings of Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths, which comprises of four concepts: *Dukkha* (suffering), *Samudaya* (the origin of suffering), *Nirodha* (the cessation of suffering), and *Magga* (the path to the cessation of suffering).<sup>50</sup> This final truth is typically known as the Noble Eightfold Path, the path through which one is able to end one’s suffering and break the cycle of rebirth. Ambedkar was a believer of the Noble Eightfold Path, and pledges to follow it in number eleven of his Buddhist vows: ‘I shall follow the “noble eightfold path” of the Buddha’.<sup>51</sup> However, he fundamentally rejects the idea of the Four Noble Truths primarily because of their focus on the innate being of suffering. He makes this clear from the introduction to *The Buddha and his Dhamma* where he outlines four problems with traditional renderings of Buddhism that he wishes to overcome in his text. Ambedkar questions whether the idea of the Four Noble Truths was an original element of Buddhism, spoken by the Buddha himself, or if they were ‘a later accretion by the monks’.<sup>52</sup> Ambedkar finds the Four Noble Truths and their focus on suffering ‘a great stumbling block’ as they ‘deny hope to man’.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, he believes that they make Buddhism a ‘gospel of pessimism’, going against some of the liberating qualities that he found in the religion.<sup>54</sup> In *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, Ambedkar challenges the Four Noble Truths by altering the events of the Buddha’s first sermon, where these truths were allegedly spoken, by giving his own version of events. Once the Buddha becomes enlightened, instead of coming to the conclusion of the

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<sup>48</sup> Rathore and Verma, ‘Editors’ Introduction’, pp. xxi-xxii.

<sup>49</sup> See Johannes Beltz, ‘Introduction’ in *Reconstructing the World: B. R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, ed. Surendra Jondhale and (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 1-17 (p. 4). Sangharakshita argues that Ambedkar’s legacy did not live on in the general Buddhist tradition because traditional Buddhists ‘found it difficult to teach [Ambedkar’s] Dharma – difficult, that is, to teach it in such a way that their hearers could grasp its basic principles and apply them to their own lives’. Sangharakshita, *Ambedkar and Buddhism*, pp. 168-169.

<sup>50</sup> Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (Bedford: The Gordon Fraser Gallery, 1967), p. 16.

<sup>51</sup> Rathore and Verma, ‘Editors’ Introduction’, p. xxi.

<sup>52</sup> Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. xxx.

<sup>53</sup> Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. xxx.

<sup>54</sup> Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. xxx.

Four Noble Truths, Ambedkar narrates that the Buddha ‘realized that there were two problems. The first problem was that there was suffering in the world, and the second problem was how to remove this suffering and make mankind happy’.<sup>55</sup> This conclusion is foreshadowed in an earlier passage before the Buddha becomes enlightened where he reflects on the nature of conflict at the root of suffering:

the conflict between nations is occasional. But the conflict between classes is constant and perpetual. It is this which is the root of all sorrow and suffering in the world [...] I have to find a solution for social conflict.<sup>56</sup>

These passages highlight how the Ambedkarite notion of fighting against social injustice is infused with the teachings of the Buddha. As Christopher S. Queen notes, ‘human suffering (the first Noble truth in traditional accounts) is not chiefly caused by the sufferer’s ignorance and cravings (the second truth), [Ambedkar] held, but by social exploitation and material poverty – the cruelty of others’.<sup>57</sup> Social exploitation, then, is at the root of individual suffering rather than the inherent human failings of the individual. Through this rejection of one of the basic teachings of Buddhism, Ambedkar radically refashions Buddhism to fit his wider project of social reform. This idea continues throughout the Buddha’s first sermon until the end where he describes the purpose of his Dhamma: ‘its purpose is to remove Avijja, by which I mean ignorance of the existence of suffering. There is hope in it because it shows the way to put an end to human suffering’.<sup>58</sup> It is this passage where I believe we most clearly hear Ambedkar’s voice, vocalised through the Buddha. Up until this point in time when he was writing this book (the mid-1950s), it had been Ambedkar’s aim to raise the problem of untouchability on a national level and to use his accrued power to help remove it. In other words, it had been his mission to remove the ignorance of the existence of suffering. He made untouchability a national issue, making it impossible for national leaders to ignore its existence. In the above passage, Ambedkar instils this idea within the teachings of the Buddha, enshrining this commitment to eradicate the ignorance of suffering within the religion of his people.

Not only does Ambedkar reject the Buddhist teaching of the Four Noble Truths, but he also rejects other religious concepts that would have been central to the beliefs of the people he was asking to convert with him. As he states in his depiction of the Buddha’s first sermon:

He began by saying that his path which is his Dhamma (religion) had nothing to do with God and Soul. His Dhamma had nothing to do with life after death. Nor has his Dhamma any concern with rituals and ceremonies. The centre of his Dhamma is man and the relation of man to man in his life on earth.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 49.

<sup>56</sup> Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 41.

<sup>57</sup> Queen, ‘Dr Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation’, p. 47.

<sup>58</sup> Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 75.

<sup>59</sup> Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 68.



Ambedkar's Buddhism, then, is a stripped back religion that denies the existence of the soul, and therefore the concept of rebirth.<sup>60</sup> This comes as no surprise, especially once read in the context of the book's preface. Here, Ambedkar states that 'if a modern man who knows science must have a religion, the only religion he can have is the Religion of the Buddha'.<sup>61</sup> It is this focus on the modern that drives *The Buddha and his Dhamma* and thus the radical edge of Ambedkar's Buddhism. Queen has placed Ambedkar within Perter Berger's framework of the universalization of heresy. Berger explains that 'for premodern man, heresy is a possibility – usually a rather remote one; for modern man, heresy typically becomes a necessity'.<sup>62</sup> Queen suggests that over his career, Ambedkar evolved into a 'modern man', 'one who rejected the sacred canopy of Hinduism, systematically studied the religious options available in India, and finally adopted Buddhism'.<sup>63</sup> Queen takes this one step further to argue that via his reworking of Buddhism, Ambedkar became a postmodern man 'driven not only to choose a religious tradition, but to dismantle and reassemble it with elements of faith and practice appropriated in his wide-ranging studies and travels'.<sup>64</sup> I have already explored how Ambedkar has achieved this in regards to faith through reconstructing the Buddhist teachings of the Four Noble Truths, but he also does this in terms of religious practice, namely the stripping away of magical moments that are replaced with rationality.

Ambedkar himself describes Buddhism as a religion based upon rationality: 'it preaches Rationalism, and Buddhism is nothing if not rationalism'.<sup>65</sup> This sense of rationalism can be found in multiple elements of *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, most notably in the renderings of key events. Here, Ambedkar eliminates 'miraculous and mythological elements' and replaces them with 'a rationalization of events'.<sup>66</sup> An example of this is how the Buddha finds his first converts after he attains enlightenment. He seeks to find five monks that he had a previous encounter with before becoming enlightened and tell them of his newfound knowledge. In the original Buddhist texts, the Buddha uses his 'power of divine clear wisdom'<sup>67</sup> to locate these men, whereas in *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, he simply 'ask[s] for their whereabouts'.<sup>68</sup> Stripping away these magical elements reinforces the rationalist image of the Buddha as a social reformer. Instead of the Buddha performing miracles and using divine powers, he preaches a gospel that is rooted in rationalism and emphasises the need to remove social suffering. This is not to say that *The Buddha and his Dhamma* is entirely

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<sup>60</sup> Ambedkar goes into great detail surrounding his ideas of the soul and rebirth in Buddhism. See Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, pp. 179-182.

<sup>61</sup> Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. xxv.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Queen, 'Dr Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation', p. 45.

<sup>63</sup> Queen, 'Dr Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation', p. 45.

<sup>64</sup> Queen, 'Dr Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation', p. 46.

<sup>65</sup> Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 133.

<sup>66</sup> Adele Fiske and Christoph Emmrich, 'The Use of Buddhist Scriptures in B.R. Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma*', in *Reconstructing the World: B. R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, ed. Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 97-119 (p. 101).

<sup>67</sup> Fiske and Emmrich, 'The Use of Buddhist Scriptures', p. 105.

<sup>68</sup> Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 67.

devoid of magical encounters as there are certain stories that Ambedkar presents that retain their mystical elements. One of these is the birth of the Buddha. Here, ‘the gods over the space of the sky were shouting the word “Buddha”’ at the moment of his birth, who was ‘shining with all brilliance’.<sup>69</sup> Adele Fiske and Christoph Emmrich argue that Ambedkar retained the magic in scenes such as this in order to win over his readers with ‘some of the wonders which they were accustomed to seek in religion. Before initiating them into his own rationalism’.<sup>70</sup> I believe that this is a clear example of how Ambedkar had come to view religion, as argued by Nagaraj.<sup>71</sup> Ambedkar was quick to disregard key religious ideas such as the soul and rebirth as they in many ways helped to reinforce the idea of untouchability. However, he recognised that his reconfiguration of Buddhism still needed to feel somewhat recognisable to the Dalit community who, in leaving Hinduism, were abandoning a way of life more so than a religion. Retaining some of these magical moments was a compromise that Ambedkar was willing to accept in order to ‘uproot paganism from the Convert’, a challenge that many other religions had failed to do.<sup>72</sup>

### **Rational Buddhism in Practice**

As I have shown, Ambedkar’s intellectualised Buddhism is one that is based on rationalism rather than emotion and prioritises a belief in social justice over a belief in god. Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy encapsulates this Ambedkarite struggle between rationalism and ritual culture in his poem ‘The cow of reason is tied to a post’.<sup>73</sup> In this poem, Chinnaswamy highlights a number of ways in which the cow, a sacred animal in Hinduism, is used in various rituals. He gives examples of cow dung being used to purify land and parading a cow around a house as a housewarming ritual.<sup>74</sup> Chinnaswamy embeds a deep sense of irony in these images through their association with Dalits. In the first stanza, the cow dung is spread across a temple courtyard after a Dalit boy runs in to retrieve his ball. In the second stanza, a second cow is brought to the housewarming ritual after the first turns out to belong to a Dalit:

When people heard it belonged to a cobbler  
there was yelling and shouting.  
Another cow was brought  
and sent in with sighs of relief.<sup>75</sup>

The ironic, yet highly disturbing reality of these incidents is that the cow is seen as purer than the Dalit. Cow dung, in this first image, is used to cleanse the ground after a Dalit child enters the temple ground, exposing the bleak reality of temple culture. Rowena Hill, the translator of the

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<sup>69</sup> Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> Fiske and Emmrich, ‘The Use of Buddhist Scriptures’, p. 104.

<sup>71</sup> Nagaraj argues that Ambedkar’s engagement with Gandhi made him realise the importance of religion to the general public. See Chapter Three of this thesis, pp. 79-81

<sup>72</sup> Ambedkar, ‘The Condition of the Convert’, p. 456.

<sup>73</sup> Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy, ‘The cow of reason is tied to a post’, in *Before it Rains Again* (Liverpool: erbacce-press, 2016), pp. 70-71.

<sup>74</sup> Chinnaswamy, ‘The cow of reason is tied to a post’, p. 70.

<sup>75</sup> Chinnaswamy, ‘The cow of reason is tied to a post’, p. 70.

Chinnaswamy's poems, believes images such as this make his poetry different from other examples of Dalit poetry. She argues that in his poetry 'there is a restraint, a sublimation that needs to be respected for the poem to carry out its work of arousing pity and horror'.<sup>76</sup> She believes that this is achieved through the imagery that Chinnaswamy evokes, noting that 'much of the anger and horror is contained in the images'.<sup>77</sup> This is the case in this poem, where Chinnaswamy presents us with two images in which the cow is placed above Dalits in the realms of ritual and spirituality. This leads Chinnaswamy to conclude that, when the second cow is brought in, 'the cow of reason was tied to a post outside'.<sup>78</sup> Reason and rationality do not play a role here as tradition and ritual culture dominate the customs on display.

It is this focus on ritual and religious practice that Ambedkar hoped to stamp out through his rationalised Buddhism. However, the sudden switch from a tradition that is steeped in millennia's worth of tradition to a new, stripped back culture has the potential to come as a shock for communities. As Pawar mentioned, her community hardly knew what conversion meant for them at the time, and it is only after converting that learning can commence. This is something that Chinnaswamy has also highlighted. He notes that 'at the beginning Ambedkar was the force behind my accepting Buddha. But when I started learning Buddhism, I realized that it was a necessity in order to overcome suffering'.<sup>79</sup> In the case of both Pawar and Chinnaswamy, it was the conversion to Buddhism led by Ambedkar that came first with a deeper leaning and understanding of the religion following in the years afterwards. Pawar explores this dynamic in her short story 'The Cycle of Dhamma'.<sup>80</sup> In this story, the 'new' Buddhist way of doing things is contrasted with the 'old' Hindu way as the village debates what to do upon the death of an elderly man. The man's wife protests that her husband should be buried in conjunction with the community's previous practice. Now that they have converted to Buddhism, however, the custom is to cremate the dead. In his unpublished book 'Untouchables or The Children of India's Ghetto', Ambedkar briefly discusses the tradition of Dalits burying their dead as opposed to upper caste communities who cremate them. He quotes from the 1911 census report which gives ten statements to determine whether an individual is an untouchable, with number nine reading: 'bury their dead'.<sup>81</sup> He later elaborates on this, explaining that:

The Touchable Hindus dispose of the dead body by cremating it. Just because it is a presumption on the part of the Untouchables to initiate [sic] the ways of the Hindus which are marks of their superior status, the Untouchables must necessarily bury their dead even if they do not wish to do so.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy and Rowena Hill, 'Poet and translator: A dialogue between Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy and Rowena Hill', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 54: 1 (2019), 105-115 (p. 112).

<sup>77</sup> Chinnaswamy and Rowena Hill, 'Poet and translator', p. 111.

<sup>78</sup> Chinnaswamy, 'The cow of reason is tied to a post', p. 70.

<sup>79</sup> Chinnaswamy and Rowena Hill, 'Poet and translator', pp. 112-113.

<sup>80</sup> Urmila Pawar, 'The Cycle of Dhamma', in *Motherwit* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013), pp. 222-237.

<sup>81</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, 'Untouchables or The Children of India's Ghetto' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 5*, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014) p. 7

<sup>82</sup> Ambedkar, 'Untouchables or The Children of India's Ghetto', p. 44.

Upon converting to Buddhism, the community in Pawar's story have abandoned the practice of burying the dead and have opted to cremate them. This is shown early on in the story when Vikas, the grandson of the deceased, walks home from school after learning of the news of his grandfather's death: 'this path led through the old burial grounds for people from his side of the village. Those grounds were now closed to his people'.<sup>83</sup> When he arrives home, he finds the 'bamboo bier still unoccupied in the yard'.<sup>84</sup> Before we are introduced to the main issue of the story, we are able to draw conclusions about how the practices of this community have changed through these two images. We are told that the practice of burying the dead was a Dalit tradition as the closed graveyard was previously used by the people from Vikas' side of the village – the Dalit side. The image of the vacant bier shows that cremation is now the custom of the Dalit community.

A majority of the story takes place at a village panchayat meeting that is called after Vikas' grandmother refuses to let her husband's body be cremated. When Vikas arrives at the panchayat to find his father, he finds the group of men arguing about how traditions have changed since they converted to Buddhism:

When we went to Malvan to convert to Buddhism, we decided to give up all the old ways, didn't we? So why are we now trying to decide whether to burn Roopaji's father's body at the funeral pyre or to bury him? [...] This question has been raised again only because of the old woman.<sup>85</sup>

The grandmother cannot accept this new tradition of cremation over what she has known her entire life. The meeting is interrupted as the men are made aware that she has started to drag the body to the old cemetery herself, with children following ready to dig a grave. It is at this point where we see a direct opposition between rationalism and emotion. The panchayat has spent the day debating the issue, with the village elder evoking the image of Ambedkar in order to affirm that it is the new Buddhist way that they should be following.<sup>86</sup> However, this delay in attempting to rationalise the situation has not helped to quell the feelings that the grandmother has after losing her husband. Ultimately, she wants to do what she feels is right and bury the body, regardless of what the community believes is the correct thing to do. When she is confronted by the village and told to follow the decision made by the village, she replies: "what decision? Yes? What decision has the village made?" as the text describes that 'her whole body as well as her head was trembling with emotion. Her eyes were red hot embers'.<sup>87</sup> There is no way to rationalise the intense feelings of anger and despair that she is feeling. Even when the village attempts to do this by pointing to the fact that they have decided to 'live according to modern times', she sarcastically berates them as being 'all so intelligent and smart'.<sup>88</sup> This creates a dichotomy between the 'modern' customs of these 'intelligent'

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<sup>83</sup> Pawar, 'The Cycle of Dhamma', p. 224.

<sup>84</sup> Pawar, 'The Cycle of Dhamma', p. 225.

<sup>85</sup> Pawar, 'The Cycle of Dhamma', p. 228.

<sup>86</sup> Pawar, 'The Cycle of Dhamma', p. 233.

<sup>87</sup> Pawar, 'The Cycle of Dhamma', p. 235.

<sup>88</sup> Pawar, 'The Cycle of Dhamma', p. 235.

men and the 'old traditions' of this emotional lady. When the family is threatened with ostracisation from the village, her son Roopaji intervenes and declares that his father will be cremated: 'he pushed her to the side and with the other men picked up the bamboo bier of his father, and they started towards the new cemetery'.<sup>89</sup>

In a last attempt to get the community to listen to her, she tries to explain that burying the dead helps to nourish the ground and that it is going against nature to burn bodies:

"Arey, listen to me. The body is dust and must go back into the dust. Why do you have to burn the skin, flesh, and bones to make smoke? Dust gains more power when that which is born of it is put back into it. This is a cycle, a cycle; don't you know?"<sup>90</sup>

Eventually, she gives up hope: 'Exhausted she added "Go and do what you want, whatever you want".<sup>91</sup> Within the story, the rationalism of the new Buddhist way triumphs over the old traditions that the grandmother attempts to keep alive. However, the text itself appears to champion her views and wishes. At the end of the story, Vikas reflects on the idea of life cycles, stemming from what his grandmother had previously been talking about, as the text states that 'it was starting to make sense now somehow'.<sup>92</sup> This links the story back to the beginning where Vikas is at school learning about biology; 'the teacher's words just hovered around his head like knats [sic]'.<sup>93</sup> In the introduction to *Motherwit*, Veena Deo notes that 'this conflict teaches Vikas more about the relationship between biology in the classroom and its implications for real-life concerns'.<sup>94</sup> He learns more about biology through listening to his grandmother speak about the connections that humanity has with the earth than he does in school. This leads Deo to argue that:

Pawar clearly articulates why education is not merely about book learning, nor is it blind emulation of ideas offered by elders and respected village officials, but a critical and holistic understanding of one's environment, one's history, and the village politics where even an illiterate old village woman might have a role to play.<sup>95</sup>

Not only can this argument be applied to what and how Vikas learns in the story, but it can also be applied to the critique of the ultra-rational Buddhism that Ambedkar created. What this story shows is that there is no room for emotion in this Buddhism that is focused on rationalism, intellect, and the removal of suffering. In the moment of the husband's death, none of these is what the grandmother needs from a religion. She needs the comfort of tradition and the feeling of security that what is happening to her husband's remains is right. There is no space in this rationalised religion for these feelings to be articulated.

This conclusion presents a contradiction of sorts. As will be discussed shortly, Pawar is a strong Ambedkarite and dedicates much of her autobiography to discussing the ways in which she

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<sup>89</sup> Pawar, 'The Cycle of Dhamma', p. 236.

<sup>90</sup> Pawar, 'The Cycle of Dhamma', p. 236.

<sup>91</sup> Pawar, 'The Cycle of Dhamma', p. 237.

<sup>92</sup> Pawar, 'The Cycle of Dhamma', p. 237.

<sup>93</sup> Pawar, 'The Cycle of Dhamma', p. 222.

<sup>94</sup> Veena Deo, 'Introduction', in *Motherwit* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013) pp. xiii-xlii (p. xxxviii)

<sup>95</sup> Deo, 'Introduction', p. xxxviii.

helped support the Dalit movement and how she has been inspired by Ambedkar. However, this does not stop her offering a critique of Ambedkar's rational Buddhism and presenting characters who wish to hold on to the views and traditions that may seem contrary to Ambedkarite philosophy. A similar notion is presented in one of Chinnawamy's most well-known poems, 'Sandals and I'.<sup>96</sup> In this poem, Chinnaswamy presents us with a Dalit subject who is eager to enter the local temple to be with the gods but is forced to stand outside. The opening stanza of, 'When I go to the temple/I don't leave my sandals outside/I stay outside myself', highlights how Dalits have been historically denied access to temples.<sup>97</sup> Even though this is the case, the subject of the poem still wishes to engage with the gods and see inside the temple. Through tiptoeing and looking into the temple, the person is able to see a myriad of wonderful sights such as 'the diamond-studded crown/the necklace and the sacred thread'.<sup>98</sup> Dalits are ultimately cut off from these lavish things. However, this does not deter the subject of the poem from finding a connection with god on the temple site. The closing stanza of the poem reads:

As I stand everyday on the porch,  
craning my neck and peering,  
my soul, becoming pure,  
grows close to the gods  
inside.<sup>99</sup>

Although the Dalit subject is denied access to the temple and is forced to stand outside, he still wishes to engage with this culture and the gods. In asking the Dalit community to convert to Buddhism, Ambedkar underestimated how important this kind of cultural heritage was to certain portions of the community. Although this poem is not strictly about Buddhism, it does highlight the contradictions that exist within Dalit communities and their relationships with temple culture. The subject of this poem still wishes to be part of this culture even though it rejects them, which is something that cannot be simply rationalised and abandoned via conversion.

### **Hindu Practices in Dalit literature**

As these two poems by Chinnaswamy and the short story by Pawar suggest, Hindu practices are still an important element of Dalit life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to those who both have and have not converted to Buddhism. A critique of this is something that Pawar repeatedly goes back to, particularly in her autobiography *The Weave of My Life*. Towards the end of text, Pawar returns to her village where she has not been since she was a young girl. Whilst there, she visits her aunt, Thoralibai, whose appearance instantly surprises Pawar: 'what intrigued me most was the holy ash mark on her forehead'.<sup>100</sup> Upon entering her house, Pawar comes to realise what the situation is:

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<sup>96</sup> Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy, 'Sandals and I', in *Before it Rains Again* (Liverpool: erbaccee-press, 2016), pp. 22-23.

<sup>97</sup> Chinnaswamy, 'Sandals and I', p. 22.

<sup>98</sup> Chinnaswamy, 'Sandals and I', p. 22.

<sup>99</sup> Chinnaswamy, 'Sandals and I', p. 23.

<sup>100</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 242.

Behind the stove, there was a *devhara*, the god's platform, with a coconut bearing signs of regular worship. Near the roof hung many bones, goodness knows of which animals, tied in a bundle of red cloth [...] She had become the priestess of the whole village'.<sup>101</sup>

The revelation that Thoralibai is now the village priest comes as a complete shock to Pawar, and stands in firm contrast to the events described earlier in the narrative. After her community converted to Buddhism, 'the villagers collected the idols of various pictures of the gods and goddesses adorning [their] walls [...] and threw them into a basket'.<sup>102</sup> After the whole village had done this, they marched to the source of their local river and discarded them.<sup>103</sup> In the following days, Pawar's elder cousin 'hung a portrait of Dr. Ambedkar on the wall in the god's room and kept a Buddha idol in the place vacated by the gods. His daily prayers had stopped'.<sup>104</sup> As years have passed, however, the old ways of ritual and superstition have made their way back into the lives of Pawar's community. Seeing this troubled Pawar who decides to leave rather than stay for a local wedding. On the bus ride home, she laments about how difficult it is to uproot 'superstition', as she terms it, from people's lives:

On the one hand, there was the rational, radically transforming aspect of Buddhism. On the other, superstitions' frightening hold on the human mind was back with a vengeance! It was not very long since Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had cleansed our minds of them, yet people got caught in the same web of superstitions, again and again. It was alarming!<sup>105</sup>

Although Buddhism offers Dalit communities a rational and radically transformed platform for communities to build upon, one cannot simply abandon the traditions that have been entrenched in communities for generations.

In her autobiography, this idea is difficult for Pawar to comprehend. She cannot understand why Hindu practices are able to creep back into the lives of converted communities against all rational logic. Here, it seems 'superstition' triumphs over rationality. However, Pawar is able to reconfigure this in her fiction writing, particularly in her short story 'Mother'.<sup>106</sup> In this story, narrated by a young girl, an uncle attempts to seize the land of his dead brother from his sister-in-law by convincing her that the site is cursed by an evil spirit. The rationale for this comes from two sources: the sudden death of his brother, and the illness of his nephew (the brother of the narrator). At the start of the story, the uncle, named Tatya, arrives in town to convince his sister-in-law to move back to the family village. With him is a *buwa*, a 'religious man and a healer',<sup>107</sup> whom Tatya believes will tell them about 'the quality of this land'.<sup>108</sup> It is Tatya's aim to use the *buwa* to show his family that the land is responsible for the recent death and that they should leave. However, the narrator's mother puts up a fight against this early on in the story. When asked to return to the family village, she replies: 'my

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<sup>101</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 242.

<sup>102</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 92.

<sup>103</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 93.

<sup>104</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 93.

<sup>105</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 243.

<sup>106</sup> Urmila Pawar, 'Mother', in *Motherwit* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013) pp. 1-10.

<sup>107</sup> Urmila Pawar, 'Glossary', in *Mother Wit* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013) pp.238-244 (p. 240).

<sup>108</sup> Urmila Pawar, 'Mother', p. 5.

husband told us that Babasaheb Ambedkar told us to leave our villages and move to towns'.<sup>109</sup> This rational Ambedkarite argument comes up against the beliefs of the village as the narrative progresses. The buwa initiates a healing sacrifice to cure the narrator's sick brother, Krishna. The elaborate nature of this sacrifice is described in great detail as the buwa 'slapped three dried stems with mango leaves on the floor' before taking a fowl to be sacrificed.<sup>110</sup> Later, the buwa takes a basket of 'lemons pricked with needles, ashes, vermilion, coconut, rice, incense, camphor' and walks out of the house until he stops abruptly.<sup>111</sup> He digs a hole on the spot and, after putting his hand in, comes out covered in blood: 'this is sacrificial blood!... This land needs more blood!'.<sup>112</sup> This scene frightens the narrator and her siblings, who agree to go with their uncle to the village the next day. However, their mother is found wailing outside the following morning, 'my dear husband... my master... my love... You told me not to trust your brother, Tatya... They are waiting to sell you land'.<sup>113</sup> The mother, then, does not give in to the belief that the land is haunted and instead believes that Tatya is attempting to trick them.

Interestingly, the same, yet simplified, version of this story is told in *The Weave of My Life*. However, there is one fundamental difference that changes the impact of the story. In *The Weave of My Life*, there is no sick brother, as Pawar's real brother had died shortly after her father. The morning after the digging of the hole, Pawar's mother realised the plan and wails outside, as depicted in the short story, driving away the perpetrators.<sup>114</sup> In 'Mother', however, it is the sick brother who helps the mother realise the plan. As the buwa goes out to dig the hole, Tatya tells the family to follow as he waits inside with Krishna.<sup>115</sup> After finding blood in the hole, Tatya calls everyone back in where they find Krishna 'convulsing and foaming at his mouth'.<sup>116</sup> The buwa applies ash to his body that begins to stop the convulsions. During the night, the narrator hears Krishna tell his mother: 'at night after you all went out, Tatya gave me some medicine to drink and then I don't know what happened'.<sup>117</sup> 'Mother', then, gives us more of a logical and rational conclusion to this story than the version in *The Weave of My Life*. In the short story, we are given concrete proof that the whole night was a charade, with Tatya going as far as to drug his nephew. Here, rationality wins over religious belief. Although Pawar's mother realises the plan in the autobiography, it is not based on any rational evidence as it is in 'Mother'. This may have something to do with the strikingly different forms that these two stories take. In 'Mother', Pawar is able to fully articulate the struggle between rationality and religious practice through both evoking the ideas of Ambedkar and using the sick brother as a device to expose the uncle's plan. In *the Weave of My Life*, this story is placed directly before Pawar explains the story

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<sup>109</sup> Urmila Pawar, 'Mother', p. 4.

<sup>110</sup> Urmila Pawar, 'Mother', pp. 6-7.

<sup>111</sup> Urmila Pawar, 'Mother', p. 7.

<sup>112</sup> Urmila Pawar, 'Mother', p. 8.

<sup>113</sup> Pawar, 'Mother', p. 10.

<sup>114</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 91.

<sup>115</sup> Pawar, 'Mother', p. 7.

<sup>116</sup> Pawar, 'Mother', p. 8.

<sup>117</sup> Pawar, 'Mother', p. 9.



behind the community's conversion to Buddhism. This story acts as a comparative note to the rational Buddhism that the community will convert into later on. For example, the opening sentence to the paragraph following this story reads, 'All such things—ghosts and supernatural experiences—stopped abruptly after the conversion ceremony took place. That was later, of course! In truth, we hardly had an idea of what conversion meant'.<sup>118</sup> This is later undermined by the fact that the community moves back to the Hindu practices that they leave behind through conversion, as discussed above.

In *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays*, Nagaraj offers a critique of the Dalit autobiography genre for the way that it spectacularly condenses key moments of a person's life. In his discussion of Siddalingaiah's 1996 autobiography *Ooru Keri*, Nagaraj reproduces a section in which Siddalingaiah discusses the suicide of his uncle. This leads Nagaraj to comment that 'a novel is squeezed into the space of an extremely restrained paragraph [...] For this reason, I am somewhat uncomfortable with the genre of Dalit autobiographies: within one tale, ten sagas are miniaturized'.<sup>119</sup> He terms this radical condensing 'bonsaization'. 'Massive trees', he argues 'like the suicide of an uncle, are dwarfed'.<sup>120</sup> This critique of Dalit autobiography goes against the generally positive reception that the genre has had. Sharmila Rege, whose writing focuses exclusively on Dalit women's autobiographies, including Pawar's, argues that Dalit autobiographies 'forge the right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the "official forgetting" of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance'.<sup>121</sup> Rege's description of Dalit autobiography perfectly encapsulates the efforts of *The Weave of My Life*, which challenges this 'forgetting' of caste resistance and the role that women played in this struggle. Her analysis conforms to the 'traditional' way of viewing Dalit literature that places it within the sociological framework.<sup>122</sup> However, Nagaraj's argument is perfectly valid when we analyse these texts on a literary level. The complex nature of Dalit autobiographies, that see one story trigger another in a non-linear fashion, creates texts in which multiple stories are told briefly. As Nagaraj argues, many of these stories could form the basis of a novel in their own right, but instead are condensed and constrained into a single paragraph. Pawar gives us a rare example of how this can be evidenced. Through a comparison of 'Mother' and the narrative in *The Weave of My Life*, we are able to see how a story is able to be expanded and reshaped in the form of a short story. In the short story form, Pawar is able to offer a real critique of Hindu practices that she is unable to do within the parameters of the autobiography. This fusing of fact and fiction, combined with the room to manoeuvre that the short story form offers, enables Pawar to give us a story in its own right, rather than a tale that gets lost in the sea of anecdotal discussion.

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<sup>118</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 91.

<sup>119</sup> D.R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays*, ed. Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi (London: Seagull Books, 2011) p. 194.

<sup>120</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 194.

<sup>121</sup> Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013), p. 16.

<sup>122</sup> See Chapter Three, pp. 74-76.

## **Buddhist Symbolism and Dalit Identity**

Just as Pawar levels a critique at the continuation of Hindu practices within communities post-conversion, she also explores the difficulties of communicating the ideological message of Ambedkar to these communities. Upon forming a Dalit women's organisation, Pawar explains that 'there are so many issues concerning the women in our community, such as ignorance, superstitions, caste discrimination, employment, and others. That is why it is necessary for all of us to come forward and unite'.<sup>123</sup> Following in the tradition of Ambedkar, this organisation has the aims of fighting against caste discrimination with a focus on the lives of women. This is combined with the rational Buddhist logic of eradicating ignorance and rejecting Hinduism. However, the communities that they encounter do not necessarily care for the ideologically driven ideas of development that Pawar and her organisation are trying to bring. In one episode presented in *The Weave of My Life*, after making their pitch to a group of people, an old woman protests: 'Bai, that is all very well! But our young men don't have jobs, what will you do for them?'<sup>124</sup> After explaining that their organisation is for women's development, the old woman replies, 'I have seen many like you! Ha! Development indeed! Enough of this! Come on, come on, get going'.<sup>125</sup> Pawar later recounts a similar encounter:

They all seemed to feel that the programs we planned were of no use. Instead they wanted us to distribute saris or sewing machines among women or books among children or mosquito nets to save them from malaria in the slums. Such programs would indeed be useful. But our point was a more basic one. We wanted to treat the root cause rather than give a symptomatic treatment to the disease. We wanted to awaken the sense of identity and selfhood in everyone.<sup>126</sup>

With regard to this latter point, I argue, Pawar and her organisation make a fundamental error. The identity that they wish to 'awaken' in these communities is one that is ultimately based on Ambedkar's rational Buddhism and the Ambedkarite values of self-respect. Although this outlook is something that has become liberating for Pawar and her group of friends, it should not be taken for granted that it would have the same effect on all Dalits. Here, this group that Pawar speaks to do not necessarily care about the ideological implications of Ambedkar's writings. Instead, they are more concerned about the lack of jobs and the education of their children; practical measures come before ideological concerns. Buddhist conversion, for them, has not brought about any real change. This can also be seen as a reason why individuals revert to old Hindu practices. Since abandoning these traditions has not created any change in terms of physical and material gains, going back to them would not thwart any perceived progress.

In these episodes narrated in *The Weave of My Life*, Pawar has difficulty awakening this new identity in poor Dalit communities, who seem to be unaffected by a conversion to Buddhism. But Pawar also shows us how this is the case for Dalits at the other end of the social spectrum. When out

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<sup>123</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 224.

<sup>124</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 224.

<sup>125</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 224.

<sup>126</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 231.

trying to recruit people to their organisation, Pawar and Meenakshi Moon attempt to find other Dalit residents living in Meenakshi's apartment block.<sup>127</sup> Although they knew that many Dalits live there, 'the name plates of the doors told a different story; they were all Brahmin names'.<sup>128</sup> After gaining entry to one apartment and reciting their speech to the lady who lives there, she interrupts them saying: 'how did you know we were one of you?'.<sup>129</sup> This triggers a debate between Pawar, Meenakshi and the lady, who believes that self-interest has more impact than attempting to improve the lot of the community: 'ultimately, it is individuals who make a community, and communities in turn make the country, right? So each one should look after himself'.<sup>130</sup> Unable to persuade the lady to their way of thinking, they leave, but only after she tells them where they can find other Dalits living in the building. When they visit these people, they find images of the Buddha in their homes, but in ways that differ from convention.

Some had hung the image of Padma Pani [Buddhist image of compassion] rather than that of the Buddha on the wall as a decorative piece and some kept tiny images with their plants, so that they would not show clearly. Some had hidden them in embroidery and knitting and hung them as showpieces with decorative frames. In short, they took great care to keep these symbols of their caste hidden from the public eye, in a less prominent place.<sup>131</sup>

The image of the Buddha, then, is intertwined with a Dalit identity. The Buddha becomes an important symbol for Pawar in order to ascertain whether an individual is a Dalit or not. For these upper-class Dalits, who are presenting themselves to the world as Brahmins, the Buddha is an image that exposes them and reveals their true identity. Ultimately, this shows that Buddhist conversion, and the ideological teachings of Ambedkar, have also had limited impact on this demographic of Dalits. Instead of embracing the self-respect that conversion offers, these upper class Dalits seek to hide their identity. The irony of this, as Pawar shows, is that this identity is not that hidden at all. The lady that they encounter first in the apartment block, for example, is able to give them a list of other Dalits living in the building, even though she believes that no one knows that she herself is a Dalit.<sup>132</sup> Although the person from the above quotation wishes to hide her Dalit identity and present herself as a Brahmin, the fact that she still has small images of the Buddha in her home suggests how strongly the Buddha is tied to Dalit identity, particularly in Maharashtra. She is still able to fund something in Ambedkar's Buddhism, even if it has not helped her to fully embrace her Dalit identity.

## **Conclusion**

Through exploring the work of both Pawar and Chinnaswamy, we can come to the conclusion that Dalit conversion to Buddhism has had a varied impact on the Dalit community. The evidence that

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<sup>127</sup> Meenakshi Moon is the wife of Vasant Moon, a famous Dalit writer and editor of *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*.

<sup>128</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 225.

<sup>129</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 225.

<sup>130</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 226.

<sup>131</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 226.

<sup>132</sup> Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, p. 226.

these writers present in their work suggests that conversion has not had the desired affect that Ambedkar had hoped. As shown in *The Weave of My Life*, Ambedkar's rationalised and highly intellectualised Buddhism has impacted the Dalit community at both ends of the social spectrum differently. Upper class Dalits, as shown in the example above, still wish to cling on to the social position that they have created for themselves through denying their caste identity. The self-respect that Ambedkar hoped to achieve for the Dalit community through fashioning a religion away from Hinduism has not influenced the way of life of upper-class Dalits, who wish to hide their Dalit roots. Similarly, Pawar shows how poorer Dalits have not fully embraced Ambedkar's rational Buddhism as they are more concerned about jobs and education than the ideological concerns of religion and identity formation. As Pawar outlines in her autobiography and short stories, individuals and communities have reverted back to ways of life before conversion, readopting Hindu practices. In my analysis of 'The Cycle of Dhamma', I argued that the old woman wished to bury the body of her husband as she finds comfort in following old traditions at a time of great sadness, as opposed to following newly adopted customs. I will discuss this idea in more depth in the following chapter, where I analyse the representation of Dalit gods in Dalit literature. The Dalit poet and activist Siddalingaiah believes that village deities will become more popular as 'people will turn to these deities out of helplessness' as they cannot afford basic necessities such as medical care.<sup>133</sup> It is this sentiment that we find in Pawar's writing. Ambedkar's Buddhism is unable to offer some individuals the comfort that they desire in their times of need, forcing them to turn back to previous customs. I argue that this is because of the 'unreligious' nature of Ambedkar's Buddhism. Ambedkar wished to frame his ideological principles and ideas of social reform around the framework of religion so that communities would feel comfortable abandoning Hinduism- they were able to move from one religion to another. However, the lack of recognisable religious elements have forced some to turn away from it, limiting the impact of Ambedkar's message. That said, Ambedkar's Buddhism has had a tremendous impact on Chinnaswamy and Pawar as individuals. The ways in which they attack Buddhism, and follow Ambedkarite principles, show that Buddhism has had an impact on their lives. However, they are aware that this has not been the case for everyone, and that work needs to be done to convince communities to follow Ambedkar's message in order to fight against caste.

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<sup>133</sup> Siddalingaiah, 'Village deities', in *Seminar*, August 2010. < <https://www.india-seminar.com/semframe.html> > [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2019] (para. 4 of 46).

## Chapter Five: Fierce Gods: Dalit Mythology and Self-Respect

In September 2018, a Dalit man from Himachal Pradesh was severely beaten for touching the palanquin of a deity that belonged to an upper-caste man.<sup>1</sup> As he walked past the figure of the Gugga deity, the man stopped to receive a blessing. He reports that as he did so: ‘I was beaten up and the upper caste people hurled casteist slurs at me. I was asked to offer a “bakra” (goat) as a fine. They even threatened to chop me into pieces if I did not pay the fine’.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the fine was for the purification of the statue. This incident, along with others that have been addressed in this thesis, highlights the bleak reality for Dalits in 21<sup>st</sup> century India. Not only does the practice of untouchability still exist, with the Dalit man seen as polluting an object and being forced to pay for its purification, but Dalits are also barred from interacting with certain gods and goddesses. As this news article explains, the lower castes in this region have their own gods, as do the upper castes.<sup>3</sup> D.R. Nagaraj refers to these gods ‘Dalit gods’. ‘Dalit gods’ is a phrase used by Nagaraj to describe the different gods that Dalit communities’ worship across India. Although this may seem to be a fairly simple idea and turn of phrase, the idea of Dalit gods is not only a complex one but also a highly controversial one. Nagaraj views Dalit gods, and the mythological universes which they inhabit, as something that stands separate and removed from the main focus of Dalit activism. Dalit activism, particularly the Ambedkarite mode, has sought to move away from Hinduism, abolish a belief in ‘superstition’, and focus on the uplift of Dalits in the social sphere that would ultimately abolish caste. By focusing on this highly rational form of activism, Nagaraj believes that Dalit communities have been denied a cultural history. He argues that the problem with this form of activism, which inevitably centralises the suffering of Dalit communities, is that it:

swallows the very limited definition of the notion of the Dalit as a totally impoverished being at all levels of existence – economic, social, political, and yes, cultural too [...] [T]his politics of knowledge systems is to remove culture, which is also a source of power, from the definition of the Dalit’s being.<sup>4</sup>

By stripping away the cultural histories of the Dalit community, Nagaraj argues that Dalits have been reduced to the ‘memoryless poor’.<sup>5</sup> In chapters three and four of this thesis, I analysed the relationships of Dalits with culture and religion. In chapter three, I explored how Dalit activism is rooted in a Dalit culture that is mediated by religious constructs. In chapter four, I argued that

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<sup>1</sup> See: Ramlal Kondal, ‘Dalit Man Beaten up For Touching Deity Belonging to Upper Castes, Fined a Goat to Purify God’, *News 18*, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2018. <<https://www.news18.com/news/india/dalit-man-beaten-up-for-touching-deity-of-upper-caste-fined-a-goat-to-purify-god-1875415.html>> [accessed 18<sup>th</sup> June 2020].

<sup>2</sup> Kondal, ‘Dalit Man Beaten up For Touching Deity Belonging to Upper Castes’, (para. 6 of 12).

<sup>3</sup> Kondal, ‘Dalit Man Beaten up For Touching Deity Belonging to Upper Castes’ (para. 11 of 12).

<sup>4</sup>D.R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays*, ed. Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi (London: Seagull Books, 2011), p. 203.

<sup>5</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 203.

Ambedkar's version of Buddhism is more of a cultural movement that sought to frame the social discourse of Ambedkarism in the confines of a religion. In this chapter I wish to explore a further aspect of the relationship between Dalit culture and religion: Dalit gods. I focus on N. D. Rajkumar's poetry collection *Give us This Day a Feats of Flesh*, Cho. Dharman's novel *Koogai*, Imayam's short story 'The Binding Vow', and C. Ayyappan's short stories 'Ghost-Speech', and 'Guardian Spirit', and will argue that these writers are able to reignite an interest in Dalit culture in order to create a feeling of self-respect and move away from the image of the 'memoryless poor'.<sup>6</sup> These texts engage with a plethora of gods that range from an allegorical figure of the Dalit community to gods who emerge from the deaths of Dalits who were killed by the upper castes. I argue that these representations of the Dalit body as a divine figure renders the Dalit body as touchable, or as a site of resistance. This radical depiction of the Dalit body ultimately underpins the self-respect that these texts generate, both in terms of individual and cultural self-respect. I then analyse how this representation of the Dalit body as divine enables writers to subvert caste hierarchies and experiment with form. Ayyappan's short stories, for instance, use a combination of mythology and experimental storytelling to represent Dalit bodies as touchable and sites of resistance, whilst pointing to the absurdist nature of caste hierarchy.

### **Conversations with the Gods**

Throughout his writings, the cultural critic D. R. Nagaraj repeatedly goes back to the poet Siddalingaiah as a writer who encompasses the arguments that Nagaraj is putting forward, ranging from his ideas surrounding Dalit self-respect to writings on Dalit culture. Siddalingaiah is an important figure in the world of Dalit literature and Dalit politics in Karnataka. Satyanarayana and Tharu describe Siddalingaiah as a 'figure who has made history in more ways than one' and declare that he is acknowledged as 'a symbol of the Dalit movement and a leading public individual and Kannada poet'.<sup>7</sup> As a student leader in the mid-1970s, he became a prominent leader of the Dalit movement in Karnataka in its early stages. He then met Nagaraj, as they were both involved in the same activist circles. In 1974, Siddalingaiah became the first Dalit to hold office in the students' union at the Government Arts and Science college in Karnataka, which angered the upper caste students.<sup>8</sup> In *Steel Nibs are Sprouting*, Siddalingaiah notes that Nagaraj, along with others who supported Siddalingaiah, were beaten up by these upper caste protesters. He also discusses another

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<sup>6</sup> N.D. Rajkumar, *Give us This Day a Feat of Flesh* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2010); Cho. Dharman, *Koogai* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 2015); Imayam, 'The Binding Vow', in *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing*, eds. Ravikumar and R. Azhagarasan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 2012), pp. 57-75; C. Ayyappan, 'Ghost-Speech', in *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India*, eds. K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu (London: Penguin Books India, 2011), pp. 350-355; C. Ayyappan, 'Guardian Spirit', in *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India*, eds. K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu (London: Penguin Books India, 2011), pp. 355-363.

<sup>7</sup> K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, 'Siddalingaiah' in *Steel Nibs are Sprouting: New Dalit Writing from South India*, eds. K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu (London: HarperCollins, 2013), pp. 151-155 (p. 151).

<sup>8</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, p. 153.

issue that resulted in physical violence, but this time ‘D.R. Nagaraj and some of the others ran away’.<sup>9</sup> These anecdotes show the closeness of the two men, both personally and politically, which explains why Nagaraj often uses Siddalingaiah and his writing as textual examples. I argue, however, that there is another reason Nagaraj became so fascinated by the writing of Siddalingaiah. Siddalingaiah’s poetry and prose track a shift in Dalit literary aesthetics that I believe has been more widely adopted by other Dalit writers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Between the 1970s and the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Siddalingaiah’s writing, in terms of tone and content, undertook a dramatic change. Nagaraj characterizes this transformation as a shift from the aesthetics of political rage to one of cultural affirmation.<sup>10</sup> Nagaraj describes Siddalingaiah’s early poetry as ‘fire-spitting’ that emerged from a period that saw the ‘emergence of Ambedkarite politics in Karnataka, with its heavy emphasis on a cultural rejection of Hinduism and its symbols’.<sup>11</sup> He argues that this kind of poetry offers a significant problem as it reduces the Dalit to a poor and impoverished being.<sup>12</sup> Through focusing on political and social rage, Nagaraj argues that Dalit poetry of this period was limiting in the sense that it could not explore other facets of Dalit life besides the turmoil of their social situation. Nagaraj argues that it is in response to this that Siddalingaiah ‘began his conversations with Dalit gods and goddesses’.<sup>13</sup> Engaging with Dalit gods enabled Siddalingaiah to write ‘from a vantage point to define Dalits in categories other than political fury and social rage’.<sup>14</sup> This initially began as a project to endorse the rational edge of Dalit activism. Speaking about his 1981 book *Avataragalu*, which explores the world of Dalit gods and goddesses, he notes that mockery was central to the narrative: ‘because of my rationalist background, I used to make fun of gods for a few years. That’s when *Avataragalu* was published, which appealed to a rationalist youth. But, I don’t think like that anymore’.<sup>15</sup> Instead of viewing a belief in the gods with cynicism, he began to question beliefs and practices in an attempt to understand them. This shift from ridicule to understanding came at a point when Dalit communities were beginning to turn back to the gods they had once abandoned, as depicted in Pawar’s *The Weave of my Life*.<sup>16</sup> Siddalingaiah believes that this is down to the ‘weakening of progressive ideologies’.<sup>17</sup> He notes that ‘with all the economic changes around us, I think the village deities could become even more popular. I mean, if medicines become unaffordable, people will turn to these deities out of helplessness’.<sup>18</sup> As is the case in *The Weave of My Life* and *Motherwit*, when physical and practical concerns get in the way of ideological and philosophical change, communities often go back to the traditions and culture of the past.

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<sup>9</sup> Satyanarayana and Tharu, p. 154.

<sup>10</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, pp. 196-197.

<sup>11</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, pp. 196-199.

<sup>12</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, pp. 201.

<sup>13</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 205.

<sup>14</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 205.

<sup>15</sup> Siddalingaiah, ‘Village deities’, *Seminar*, (para. 4 of 46).

<sup>16</sup> Urmila Pawar, *The Weave of my Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Siddalingaiah, ‘Village deities’, *Seminar*, (para. 8 of 46).

<sup>18</sup> Siddalingaiah, ‘Village deities’, *Seminar*, (para. 8 of 46).

Ultimately, Siddalingaiah's engagement with Dalit gods attempts to reconstruct Dalit religious tradition in the post-Ambedkar age. This involves two key processes: allowing Dalits to be proud of these traditions, and linking them to the continued effort to create self-respect. Siddalingaiah only began this process, which I argue has continued in Dalit literatures throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This idea of allowing Dalit communities to be proud of their traditions is routinely emphasised by N.D. Rajkumar in his poetry collection *Give us This Day a Feast of Flesh*. 'Our Gods do not hide', in particular, seeks to present Dalit gods in opposition to Brahminical Hinduism. The poem begins with the lines:

Our gods do not hide  
Within the Brahman  
Or tell stories only  
In languages known  
To the few<sup>19</sup>

The poem begins with the communal 'Our', which immediately creates an oppositional tone and places Dalit gods against upper caste traditions. Moreover, beginning the poem in this way connects Rajkumar and his poetry to the wider tradition of Dalit literature. The use of the word 'our' occurs frequently in Dalit literatures and is commonly used in Dalit autobiography. This is one of the distinctive features of the genre as Dalit autobiographies often shift the attention away from the individual to the community through the use of 'our'. In his analysis of Bama's autobiography *Karukku*, Pramod K. Nayar notes that the text is 'not a personal autobiography alone, but a collective archive of suffering'.<sup>20</sup> Although Bama is recounting the events of her life, she is also documenting the lives of her community and speaking for those who do not have the platform that she does. The communal 'our', then, has been used by Dalit writers to bring Dalit communities together and to unite them in their collective pain and experiences of living a life in the clutches of caste. However, Rajkumar's uses the word to different effect. Instead of uniting the community in their pain and suffering, Rajkumar's 'Our' unites the community through reference to their gods and traditions. 'Our gods' implies a sense of ownership and suggests that Rajkumar is attempting to generate a feeling of having something to claim rather than looking at things to reject.

This sense of ownership runs throughout the poem, not just in respect to gods but with regard to the cultural practices of the community that Rajkumar describes. He notes that these gods 'Eat pig flesh/ Drink arrack/ Smoke a cigar' and live amongst the community 'next to sewer ditches'.<sup>21</sup> Through evoking these practices, the gods that Rajkumar describes here can be defined as 'criminal gods'. Alf Hildebeitel explains that criminal gods are ones who 'violate the sacred codes and

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<sup>19</sup> N.D. Rajkumar, 'Our Gods do not hide', in *Give us This Day a Feast of Flesh* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2010), p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> Pramod K. Nayar, 'Bama's *Karukku*: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 41.2 (2006), 83-100 (p. 85).

<sup>21</sup> N.D. Rajkumar, 'Our Gods do not hide', p. 35.



boundaries by which other gods, and humans, would seek to live'.<sup>22</sup> Significantly, these codes are 'specifically Indian codes [that] they violate – societal, sexual, theological, culinary, sacrificial'.<sup>23</sup> Rajkumar's gods encapsulate the essence of what a criminal god is. The practices of eating meat, drinking alcohol and smoking are all considered as polluting and are often associated with Dalits. However, as Rajkumar ties these community practices to the gods, he begins to generate a sense of self-respect as there is no shame attached to these practices in the poem. It does not dwell on the fact that the Dalit community is forced to consume meat or may view it as humiliating. The gods are also described as living amongst the community in the ghetto, rather than inhabiting temples. This is significant as Dalits are not allowed access to certain temples and are thus denied the opportunity to interact with the gods that they may worship.<sup>24</sup> This is emphasised through the use of the communal 'our' at the start of the poem. By the end, we are left with the sense of 'our' gods eating and living amongst us in ghetto; 'their' gods are vegetarian and will not touch us. The fundamental question that the poem raises is: why would a community wish to engage with gods and a religious culture that views them as inferior and polluted when they could engage with gods that are like them and respect their way of life? Through connecting Dalit cultural practices with Dalit gods, Rajkumar is able to generate self-respect and sense of pride in one's community.

### **Fierce Gods**

It is not just through subverting cultural and religious norms that Rajkumar's gods are able to fight Brahmin hegemony; they also fight back against oppressors with violence and rage. As Sara Dickey explains, 'deities of the lower castes [...] are often quick to anger, and their heated character may require animal sacrifices in appeasement', whereas upper caste gods 'are calm, contained, and vegetarian (they include, in addition to Shiva and Parvati, deities such as Vishnu and his avatars, Lakshmi, and Saraswati)'.<sup>25</sup> These violent traits are shown throughout Rajkumar's poetry in various forms, with one being in relation the god Sudalai. Sudalai is typically seen as the son of Shiva and Parvati<sup>26</sup> and is most commonly worshiped by Dalits and lower castes in south India in places such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala.<sup>27</sup> Traditionally, members of the Kaniyan caste, the caste to which Rajkumar belongs, are the community that play a significant role in the rituals associated with Sudalai. As S. Simon John notes, 'this means that though the Kaniyan community is socially backward, it occupies a dominant role in the ritual and performance of the annual celebration'.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, Sudalai is the

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<sup>22</sup> Alf Hiltebeitel, 'Introduction', in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 1-18 (p. 1).

<sup>23</sup> Hiltebeitel, 'Introduction', p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> This is demonstrated in Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy's poem 'Sandals and I', which I discussed in Chapter Four, p. 109.

<sup>25</sup> Sara Dickey, *Living Class in Urban India* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2016), pp. 203-204.

<sup>26</sup> Although Sudalai is much lesser known than their other sons Kartikeya and Ganesha.

<sup>27</sup> S. Simon John, 'Kaniyan: Ritual Performers of Tamil Nadu, South India', *Asian Ethnology*, 67:1 (2008), 123-135 (p. 125).

<sup>28</sup> John, 'Kaniyan', p. 125.

god of the graveyard, and is usually depicted as the one who protects communities from the evil forces that are generated in such places.<sup>29</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, Dalits have a close association with graveyards due to them being denied cremations which are reserved for the upper castes. Generally, Dalits are the ones most often buried upon death, thus tying them to this idea of ‘evil forces’ which come from graveyards. Burial grounds are usually located on the periphery of villages, where many Dalit areas also exist.<sup>30</sup> Through associations with graveyards and other cultural practices such as meat eating, Rajkumar presents Sudalai as a Dalit figure in his poetry. In ‘He will sing and dance the Original Song’, for example, Rajkumar narrates how Sudalai leaves the gods after a quarrel for Earth, leaving behind a ‘steady diet/of butter and boiled vegetables’.<sup>31</sup> Once he arrives on Earth, he follows a group preparing for an animal sacrifice, who then offer the meat to the god. After he eats the ‘meat spiced with love’, he promises to protect those who continue to offer meat to him. This marks a clear difference between what the god ate before coming to Earth and the food to which he has now become accustomed. As Dickey notes in the above quotation, upper caste gods are often defined by being vegetarian. As Sudalai rejects a vegetarian diet for a meat-eating diet in the poem, we can already see how this is a deity that belongs to the lower castes. What makes Sudalai such a divisive figure in Rajkumar’s poetry is when this taste for meat eating is combined with violent imagery. This is the case in poem ‘45’, where Sudalai’s meat eating goes beyond the likes of sacrificed goat. The poem describes Sudalai in violent and angry terms. He is shown ‘din[ing] on burning bodies’, holding a ‘skull filled with/ pulled flesh from the cooked carcass’. The father of the narrator, who is summoning Sudalai, notes that ‘you do not go around bathing/ fasting, praying, chanting/ the litany of praise’ in order to summon the god, but instead one should eat meat.<sup>32</sup> This image of Sudalai, then, is a powerful and frightening one. If we take him as a Dalit figure (through the association with meat eating), this becomes a striking statement. Sudalai is a fierce and violent god who is ready to protect Dalits, his meat-eating brethren.

Although Dalit gods are often presented as violent, as emphasised by Sudalai, the gods in the mythological universe that Cho. Dharman constructs in his novel *Koogai* are not. Instead, Dharman presents the Koogai god as an allegory of the Dalit community that does not know its own strength and power. Instead of being depicted as a strong and powerful god able protect the community through force, the Koogai is shown to be a feeble god that hides away from others. The novel notes that ‘*All the other creatures strike at Koogai and chase it away... Frightened and wounded all over, it flies towards a hollow and slips inside... It’s accustomed to a life of skulking, thus. That is the very*

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<sup>29</sup> John, ‘Kaniyan’, p. 125.

<sup>30</sup> See Diane P. Mines, *Fierce Gods: Inequality, Ritual, and the Politics of Dignity in a South Indian Village* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> N.D. Rajkumar, ‘He will sing and dance the Original Song’, in *Give us This Day a Feat of Flesh* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2010), p. 57.

<sup>32</sup> Rajkumar, ‘He will sing and dance the Original Song’, p. 57.

*secret of the art of pouncing. Koogai skulked and waited for the right moment*'.<sup>33</sup> This description of Koogai relates to the historical depictions of Dalits as a community that has been attacked and abused for generations. Although the Koogai does not respond to attacks with violence, he does come to the aid of the Pallar community that worships him in the novel. At the start of the novel, a local Brahmin landlord leaves his land in the charge of the Pallar community after he moves to Madras. This gives the Pallars a newfound independence. They are able to grow the crops that they want and keep the profits for themselves. They also no longer need to work as daily wage labourers for other local landlords. This angers the landlords, who then attempt to sabotage the Pallars through various means, such as cutting them off from local irrigation networks.<sup>34</sup> The ways in which Koogai helps the Pallars, therefore, relates to struggles that come with their independence. For example, there is a key scene in the novel in which the harvest is threatened by an infestation of giant worms. The worms had already infected other fields in the area and were beginning to eat the crops on the Pallars' fields. Seeni, who is considered a leader within the community and the one who brought the worship of the Koogai to the village, suggests that the village make offerings to Koogai for help: 'Seeni believed that Koogai, who had saved his family would also make it prosper and bring forth new branches'.<sup>35</sup> It is vital that the Pallars have a successful harvest to prove that they can get by on their own and that they can overcome the obstacles created by the upper castes. Upon receiving the offerings from the Pallar community, Koogai helps them by sending a flock of cranes down onto their fields to eat the worms.

*Like jasmine blossoms falling from loosened hair, the stars drift down from the clouds. The flying conches dive down to the earth, the drifting stars and the falling conches turn into flocks of cranes, that settle in Iyer's fields to seize the worms and fill their gizzards to satiation. They swarm over the flat bean and groundnut plants like mushroom growths, they fall from the sky like chunks of ice in a hailstorm. And not a single crane goes into any other field other than Iyer's.*<sup>36</sup>

This magical realist episode of the novel brings the Koogai god into direct contact with the Dalit community. The realist mode of depicting Dalit life is shattered here as Koogai appears to conjure up the cranes to protect the Pallar's crops. Dharman's use of magical realism runs contrary to Ambedkar's use of magical moments in his retelling of the Buddha's life. As I discussed in Chapter Four, Ambedkar stripped back many of the miraculous moments one finds in religious texts and replaces them with rationalised events. This fits with his attempt to present a rational version of Buddhism that on the surface looks like a religion, yet below one finds Ambedkar's ideas on social reform. Dharman, however, does not present a rational solution to the problem that the Pallars have. Instead, a miracle is performed by the Koogai god that protects the Pallar's crops. It is a belief in Dalit

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<sup>33</sup> Dharman, *Koogai*, p. 95. Italics in original.

<sup>34</sup> Dharman, *Koogai*, p. 98.

<sup>35</sup> Dharman, *Koogai*, p. 118.

<sup>36</sup> Dharman, *Koogai*, p. 119. Italics in original.

gods and Dalit cultural traditions that make this possible, as opposed to the rationalism of Ambedkar. The Pallars are protected by something that is rooted in their cultural history, and looks out for their interests.<sup>37</sup>

This belief, however, is not fully sustained throughout the novel. Once the community has reaped the benefits that the Koogai has helped them achieve, the Pallars begin to turn their backs on the god. During a village meeting on plans to tear down the Koogai shrine and replace it with a Kali temple, one villager points to how other communities joke about the Pallars worshipping the owl: ‘all the people from other villages are laughing at us! They’re saying, “Go, da, you uncultured fellows! Who would build a temple to an owl, and pray to it, in this day and age?”’<sup>38</sup> Building a Kali temple, it appears, would be seen as more respectable. Seeni, however, is hesitant about this decision. Although he is not against the installation of a Kali temple, he is against the destruction of the Koogai shrine and the community halting their worship to the Koogai. He declares: ‘it is only after we began to worship Koogai-Saami that the goddess of good fortune came [...] You’re rolling in cash [...] You have become owners of fields!’<sup>39</sup> This solidifies the link between the community’s prosperity and the Dalit god. It was the belief in something that was their own and represented them that ultimately helped the Pallars achieve what they have.

Interestingly, the goddess that the community wish to build a temple to in favour of the Koogai, Kali, is considered to be a violent goddess and is often depicted with a violent aesthetic. As David Kinsley explains, the goddess is often described as:

having a terrible, frightening appearance. She is always black or dark, is usually naked, and has long, dishevelled hair. She is adorned with severed arms as a girdle, freshly cut heads as a necklace, children’s corpses as earrings, and serpents for bracelets. She has long, sharp fangs, is often depicted as having clawlike [sic] hands with long nails, and is often said to have blood smeared lips [...] She is usually shown on the battlefield, where she is a furious combatant who gets drunk on the hot blood of her victims.<sup>40</sup>

Although Kali is associated with different traditions such as bhakti in West Bengal and the practice of Tantra, her development as a central figure in Hinduism is complex.<sup>41</sup> In her early history (before being incorporated as a central figure of the bhakti tradition in West Bengal), Kali was associated with those at the periphery of society. As David Kinsley explains: ‘Kali’s association with the periphery of Hindu society (she is worshiped low-caste people in uncivilized or wild places) is also seen in an architectural sixth to eighth centuries, [it was said] that Kali temples be built far from villages and

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<sup>37</sup> I have discussed this section of *Koogai* in greater depth elsewhere. See: Daniel Bilton, ‘The Changing Message of Dalit Literature: From Victimhood to Empowerment’, in *Caste, Gender and Race: A Politics of Hegemony*, ed. Dharamdas Shende and Sanjay Palwekar (New Delhi: AuthorsPress, 2020), pp. 173-190.

<sup>38</sup> Dharman, *Koogai*, p. 260.

<sup>39</sup> Dharman, *Koogai*, pp. 261-262.

<sup>40</sup> David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 116.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of Kali in the context of West Bengal, see June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 209-263.

towns, near the cremation grounds and the dwellings of the Candalas (very low-caste people)'.<sup>42</sup> This early representation of Kali existing at the periphery of society underscores why the Pallar community in *Koogai* choose to build a temple to her (this will be discussed in more depth below). Kali's violent nature in many ways likens her to the criminal gods outlined by Hildebeitel, and her behaviour is similar to that of Sudalai, who is depicted in the poetry of Rajkumar. As Kinsley remarks, [Kali] is almost always associated with blood and death, and it is difficult to imagine two more polluting realities in the context of the purity-minded culture of Hinduism'.<sup>43</sup> Although Kali is not necessarily classified as a 'Dalit god', various aspects of her presentation and mythology relate to the aesthetics of Dalit gods thus enabling Dalit communities to worship her as their primary deity.

This is the case for the Pallars in *Koogai*, with the image of Kali directly contrasting with the Koogai god, who is depicted as being a reserved and calm deity. Kali is also a goddess that Rajkumar turns to for inspiration and depicts in a number of his poems. In the poem 'My father with his powerful magic', for example, the speaker describes his father summoning a spirit with his 'powerful magic'.<sup>44</sup> Although Kali is not named in the poem, the items used in the summoning indicate that it is Kali that is being summoned. For example:

I gather the skulls  
Of our murdered kin  
String them all  
Into a garland  
Place it  
Upon her neck<sup>45</sup>

This garland of skulls is reminiscent of the heads that often adorn the neck of Kali. By using the skulls of 'murdered kin', the poem is suggesting that Kali is being summoned to take revenge on the people that murdered them. The role that Kali plays in this poem, however, is the opposite of the Koogai god whom the Pallar community in *Koogai* wishes to replace. As I have discussed above, the Koogai god is able to aid the Pallars in peaceful ways that directly affect them. Seeni addresses this fact in his appeal to the village to keep the Koogai god. He asks:

but are you ready for such worship? [...] to the power behind Anger itself, behind Rage and Revenge, and the Thirst for Raw Blood, and Fear and Terror? [...] You are not ready for that kind of worship... Stay with Koogai, there's no god that's more peaceful.<sup>46</sup>

Seeni appreciated the peaceful nature of the Koogai god that is able to bring prosperity to the Pallar community without the use of violence and rage. However, the community do not feel the same. They are unconvinced by Seeni's warnings and declare that 'from now on we don't want a peaceful god!

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<sup>42</sup> David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, p. 104.

<sup>43</sup> Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, p.113.

<sup>44</sup> N.D. Rajkumar, 'My father with his powerful magic', in *Give us This Day a Feat of Flesh* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2010), p. 38.

<sup>45</sup> Rajkumar, 'My father with his powerful magic', p. 38.

<sup>46</sup> Dharman, *Koogai*, p. 262.

We want a god who's smart and quick'.<sup>47</sup> The ways in which violent Dalit gods are able to explode with rage are privileged by the community over the way in which Koogai 'keeps his pain, his suffering, his sorrow, and his grief inside himself, and he teaches how to live and survive'.<sup>48</sup> Although there is a stark contrast in the representation and the values of Rajukmar and Dharman's gods, this does not mean that one is better than the other. Whether it be through violence or peace, these gods have something to offer both the communities that worship them in the texts, as well as the Dalit readership. They are able to offer protection to Dalit communities and fight against caste oppression. This in turn brings a renewed faith in Dalit culture, and brings a sense of self-respect to Dalit cultural practices.

### **Yellamma: The Case for and Against Dalit Gods**

The Koogai god in Dharman's novel can be read as an allegory of the Dalit community. However, there are examples that take this connection further between Dalits and the gods in which the Dalit body itself becomes divine. The Yellamma goddess, who is usually worshiped in south India, is an interesting example of this. In Karnataka, Yellamma is mainly associated with the practices of Bettaleseve (nude worship), and temple dedication. Both of these practices are associated with Dalits, although the goddess is worshiped by multiple castes, both high and low. Temple dedication involves women and girls being married to the goddess and living a life in service to her.<sup>49</sup> In Kannada, they are called Devadasis. One of their main functions is to be on call to local men for sex, and priests will often command a high price for a man to take a girl's virginity. Being drawn mainly from Dalit families, offering children to be married to the goddess is often seen as the only way for families to receive a regular income.

There are many different stories surrounding Yellamma and how she came into being. In her book *Servants of the Goddess*, Catherine Rubin Kermorgant presents one version of the story told by a group Devadasis:

Yellamma, you see, was married to the sage Jamadagni, and every morning she went to the river to fetch water for his puja. She would make a jug out of the sand in the riverbank and carry the water home on her head [...] One day, deciding to test her chastity, Jamadagni followed her to the river and disguised himself as a *gandharva* [...] Yellamma saw the *gandharva* frolicking with a nymph in the reflection of the water. Holding the jug on her head, she did not look away [...] An 'impure' thought crossed her mind. The jug she built from the riverbank crumbled; Yellamma became wet.<sup>50</sup>

When Jamadagni sees this, he becomes enraged, and asks his sons to cut off her head. Three refuse, but the youngest, Parasurama (an avatar of Visnu) agrees. Yellamma flees and is helped by a Dalit woman named Madiga. When Parasurama finds them, he cuts off both of their heads. His father then

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<sup>47</sup> Dharman, *Koogai*, p. 262.

<sup>48</sup> Dharman, *Koogai*, p. 262.

<sup>49</sup> For an historical overview of the development of the practice, see Catherine Rubin Kermorgant, *Servants of the Goddess* (London: Random House, 2014), pp. 6.8.

<sup>50</sup> Kermorgant, *Servants of the Goddess*, p. 110.

agrees to grant any wish Parasurama may have, and he requests that his mother be brought back to life. In doing so, Jamadagni attaches Madiga's head to Yellamma's body creating a deity that is part high-caste, part Dalit.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, this version differs from other accounts that Kermorgant is told throughout her fieldwork, including the story told by the village priest. This version has three significant changes. The first difference lies in the endings of the stories. In the upper caste version, Jamadagni erases Yellamma's memory of what had happened, and the family continues to live as they had previously. In the Dalit version, Jamadagni flees to become a recluse in the Himalayas, with the future of Yellamma left uncertain. The upper caste version has a 'happy' ending to some extent, whereas the latter does not. Secondly, the issue of justice is not raised in the upper caste version. As Kermorgant explains, 'Yellamma has an impure thought, and was therefore punished'.<sup>52</sup> In the women's version, however, there is an overriding sense that this is not Yellamma's fault: '[this] version implied that Jamadagni had asked his wife to uphold an impossible feminine ideal and cruelly put her to the test'.<sup>53</sup> The final, and most crucial difference, is that in the upper caste version of the story, the reference to the goddess being part high-caste, part Dalit is omitted from the story entirely. The most empowering part of the story for a Dalit audience has been erased from the narrative told in upper caste circles. It is this 'forgotten' element of the story that the women Kermorgant interviews hold on to the most as they are able to see their own lives reflected in the goddess. As Kermorgant explains, 'like many devadasis, Yellamma was repudiated by her keeper, reviled as impure, and reduced to begging'.<sup>54</sup> This therefore renders the Dalit body as divine and thus helps the Devadasis come to terms with their situation. By seeing a goddess that is part Dalit go through the struggles that they themselves face brings a sense of self-respect to this community.

However, some do not see this identification with Yellamma as uplifting and view it purely through the lens of oppression and exploitation. This is highlighted by Chinnaswamy in his poem 'Service in the nude'.<sup>55</sup> In this poem, Chinnaswamy frames Yellamma as a conduit through which male priests are able to exploit women through the lens of nude worship that Yellamma is often associated with. In some versions of the Yellamma myth, as Linda J. Epp explains, Yellamma escapes from Parasurama and is therefore not decapitated. As she runs, 'she lost her sari and exposed her buttocks' before being swallowed up by the earth.<sup>56</sup> As she was accepted into the earth in her nude form, 'devotees conclude that she likewise calls on them to worship in similar child-like innocence'.<sup>57</sup> Nude worship, therefore, involves women bathing in a river during the Yellamma festival period

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<sup>51</sup> Kermorgant, *Servants of the Goddess*, p. 110.

<sup>52</sup> Kermorgant, *Servants of the Goddess*, p. 112.

<sup>53</sup> Kermorgant, *Servants of the Goddess*, p. 111.

<sup>54</sup> Kermorgant, *Servants of the Goddess*, p. 112.

<sup>55</sup> Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy, 'Service in the nude', in *Before it Rains Again* (Liverpool: erbacce-press, 2016), p. 67.

<sup>56</sup> Linda J. Epp, 'Dalit Struggle, Nude Worship, and the 'Chandragutti Incident'', *Sociological Bulletin*, 41:1/2 (1992), 145-168 (p. 148).

<sup>57</sup> Epp, 'Dalit Struggle', p. 148.

before ‘walk[ing] the four kilometres from the wilderness and up the mountainside to the temple, shivering and shouting’.<sup>58</sup> Activist groups such as the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS) have since the 1980s been vocal in their opposition to the practice.<sup>59</sup> Thanks to their efforts, the practice was banned in Karnataka, although it still occurs as it is difficult to police during festival time.<sup>60</sup> Chinnaswamy’s poem highlights the exploitative nature of this practice. Here, the goddess appears before a male priest and asks for his ‘heart’s desire’.<sup>61</sup> He replies that on the Yellamma festival every year ‘the womenfolk should go naked/ in your presence. The whole body/ should be revealed to us’.<sup>62</sup> After Yellamma grants his wish, the poem ends by saying that ‘an atrocity/ was sanctioned by the gods’.<sup>63</sup> Here, Chinnaswamy makes his opinions on these practices clear- the Yellamma cult is exploitative and works to favour upper-caste men. Yellamma is not shown in a good light in the poem, as her only role is to grant the wish of the priest and sanction this practice of nude worship. For Chinnaswamy, Yellamma does not offer any hope to Dalit women.

A similar sentiment can be found in Gogu Shyamala’s short story ‘Raw Wound’, in her collection *Father may be an elephant and mother a small basket, but...*<sup>64</sup> This story is based on a young girl who is chosen by the head of the village to become dedicated to the temple. Her father explains that ‘the patel will take her as his woman in the name of god, with the approval of all the upper castes [...] she will then be available to every man in the village’.<sup>65</sup> To prevent this from happening, the family send the girl to a boarding school, initially unbeknownst to the upper castes. When they find out, they severely beat the girl’s father and, when the family refuse to take her out of school, they are banished from the village.<sup>66</sup> Although this comes as a devastating blow to the family, the story ends on an optimistic note in that the education of the girl will see the family through: “‘We’ve suffered this fate because we decided to send you to study [...] Don’t worry, daughter. Study well and become a big officer’”.<sup>67</sup> In this story, it is the Ambedkarite dedication to education that ultimately prevails. Education is the one thing that protects the girl from a life in service to the goddess and what is hoped will help her family out of their current situation. On a related note, characters in the story do not necessarily believe in the power of the goddess. As the family defy the orders of the village to dedicate their daughter to the goddess, they do not fear any repercussions from the goddess herself. They are more concerned about the welfare of their child, and wish for her to gain

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<sup>58</sup> Epp, ‘Dalit Struggle’, p. 145.

<sup>59</sup> P. Radhika, ‘Nude Worship in Karnataka’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44 (3<sup>rd</sup> November 2012), 30-34 (p. 30).

<sup>60</sup> Kermorgant, *Servants of the Goddess*, p. 326-327.

<sup>61</sup> Chinnaswamy, ‘Service in the nude’, p. 67.

<sup>62</sup> Chinnaswamy, ‘Service in the nude’, p. 67.

<sup>63</sup> Chinnaswamy, ‘Service in the nude’, p. 67.

<sup>64</sup> Gogu Shyamala, ‘Raw Wound’, *Father may be an elephant and mother a small basket, but...* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2012), pp. 131-158.

<sup>65</sup> Shyamala ‘Raw Wound’, p. 141.

<sup>66</sup> Shyamala, ‘Raw Wound’, p. 157.

<sup>67</sup> Shyamala, ‘Raw Wound’, p. 158.



an education that will enable her to move away from the village and its structures. Similarly, the upper castes in the story do not appear to believe in the power of the goddess either. When the landlords beat the father for sending his daughter to school, their decision for selecting her to be dedicated to the goddess is framed around duty, rather than gods will. An upper caste character explains this within the context of varna, in which each caste has a specific occupation and role in society. They note that 'each person has an occupation, a skill. Our village is a self-contained republic [...] Each has to do his duty'.<sup>68</sup> Through contextualising their decision in this way, the upper castes believe that it is the duty of the Dalit family to dedicate their daughter to the goddess. This therefore cements the upper castes decision in terms of caste, rather than the goddess declaring that the girl must be dedicated.

Shyamala's interaction with the gods in this story is markedly different from what we see in the work of Rajkumar and Dharman. 'Raw Wound' presents an experience with the goddess in purely realist terms. The goddess does not appear in the text, and the community do not feel the wrath of the goddess when the girl is sent to school. Shyamala's use of a realist narrative form, underpinned by Ambedkarite principles, means that the goddess is unable to exist in 'real' terms, such as the Koogai god. In *Koogai*, there is no questioning the existence of the god as he interacts with the characters and physically helps them, as discussed above. Instead, Shyamala uses the story to present the dangers and exploitative nature of temple dedication, that are ultimately based on caste.

### **Dalit as Divine**

Irrespective of how the Yellamma goddess can be interpreted, she is an interesting figure in how she is part Dalit, part upper caste. The Tamil Dalit writer Imayam takes this process of the Dalit body becoming divine further in his short story 'The Binding Vow', in which a deceased Dalit woman is transformed into a goddess. The story focuses on the fictional annual festival of Ponnuruvi Saami, in which the goddess traditionally brings rains. Through flashback sections, we learn that twenty years previously, Ponnuruvi died under suspicious circumstances following her relationship with an upper caste boy. She became pregnant with his child, forcing the village to come up with the 'best possible' solution. After months of debating, it is decided that the pair will be married and sent away from the village to live out their lives. Ponnuruvi, and her mother Nagammal, have no choice in the matter and must follow through with the decision of the upper castes. Once this has been decided, Ponnuruvi is handed over to the upper castes 'at the designated place, at the designated time, just as agreed, in great secret'.<sup>69</sup> The following morning, she is found dead in a local water tank.<sup>70</sup>

Interestingly, the tank was reserved for the use of the upper castes, which causes a violent backlash against the Dalit community. The upper castes protest: 'how could a woman from the colony dare to approach the tank? Now how was it possible it possible for the upper castes to use the tank

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<sup>68</sup> Shyamala, 'Raw Wound', p. 149.

<sup>69</sup> Imayam, 'The Binding Vow', p. 62.

<sup>70</sup> Imayam, 'The Binding Vow', p. 62.

water'.<sup>71</sup> As the upper castes abandon the tank in favour of a new, 'non-polluted' one, the Dalit community are fined.<sup>72</sup> Although the upper castes conclude that Ponnuruvi had slipped and drowned in the tank, the suspicious nature of the death leads us to believe that she was in fact murdered by the upper castes. After the death, a number of deaths occur around the tank, including a young boy drowning and a man dying of a heart attack on its banks.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, other deaths occur after Ponnuruvi's death, including deaths relating to three upper caste men that played a pivotal role in the dispute leading to her death. Although we are not directly shown Ponnuruvi killing these men, it is assumed by the village that she is responsible. As this is the case, we can begin to see evidence of Ponnuruvi conforming to the 'fierce god' aesthetic that was discussed above. Here, Ponnuruvi takes revenge on the men responsible for her banishment from the village, and who potentially were instrumental in her death. In his poem 'The family, to gain religious merit', Rajkumar presents further examples of murdered women transforming as goddess to seek revenge on the men that wronged them.<sup>74</sup> Although these women are not Dalit, the ways in which they come back from the dead as goddess is presented in a much more explicit way than Ponnuruvi. In the poem, a woman working as a maid is raped by a Brahmin priest. This is allowed to happen by the family she works for in order for them to 'gain religious merit/in the next life'.<sup>75</sup> It is shown that after feeding him on rice, they 'let the Brahmin rape her' in the backyard.<sup>76</sup> The Brahmin uses his religiously endorsed power to force the family into letting the rape happen. When the Brahmin leaves after blessing the family, he promises to come back in the next life.<sup>77</sup> This becomes too much for the woman to bear, knowing that she will be raped again in her next life. Ultimately, she kills herself in order to escape this prospect. Once she is dead, we are told that she comes back as the goddess Kollangottu Amman, who 'shrieks for human sacrifice'.<sup>78</sup> In the poem, the emergence of this goddess is the direct result of victim being raped by the Brahmin priest, with the goddess rising to seek revenge. There is no questioning the existence of the goddess in the poem, who is rendered as a powerful and violent being that will be responsible for the deaths of 'evil men'.<sup>79</sup> With regards to Ponnuruvi, however, this is not the case. The text does not make it explicitly known that she is directly responsible for these deaths. Furthermore, the characters at this point in the story do not imagine her as a goddess. The text notes that village was 'overcome with fear [because] everyone believed that all these events happened because of Ponnuruvi's curse'.<sup>80</sup> So although the village believe she is responsible for the deaths, they view it in terms of a curse left

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<sup>71</sup> Imayam, 'The Binding Vow', p. 63.

<sup>72</sup> Imayam, 'The Binding Vow', p. 63

<sup>73</sup> Imayam, 'The Binding Vow', pp. 63-64.

<sup>74</sup> N.D. Rajkumar, 'The family, to gain religious merit', in *Give us This Day a Feat of Flesh* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2010), pp. 9-10.

<sup>75</sup> Rajkumar, 'The family, to gain religious merit', p. 9.

<sup>76</sup> Rajkumar, 'The family, to gain religious merit', p. 9.

<sup>77</sup> Rajkumar, 'The family, to gain religious merit', p. 9.

<sup>78</sup> Rajkumar, 'The family, to gain religious merit', p. 9.

<sup>79</sup> Rajkumar, 'The family, to gain religious merit', p. 10.

<sup>80</sup> Imayam, 'The Binding Vow', p. 64.

by Ponnuruvi because of the circumstances surrounding her death. In other words, she is viewed as a spirit that needs to be appeased in order for the deaths to stop. Her development into a goddess is much more complex than Rajkumar's goddess who is born out of sheer violence and rage. For Ponnuruvi, the offerings that are made to appease her and stop the deaths from occurring is just one part of the wider narrative that transforms her into a goddess.<sup>81</sup>

The second element that contributes to Ponnuruvi becoming a goddess can be found in the natural way that community comes to see her as such. This process is initially triggered by her mother, Nagammal, who begins to plant various plants around the water tank. Over time, the tank 'became an important place in the village'.<sup>82</sup> It becomes a community space where people can socialise, rest, and conduct meetings. Nagammal then creates a small shrine to Ponnuruvi at the tank and begins to offer prayers to her. Slowly, others begin to do the same. The text notes that this happens 'casually' and 'gradually', as villagers offering prayers to Ponnuruvi becomes part of everyday life.<sup>83</sup> It is this casual progression that leads the text to declare that 'it was they [the community] who turned Ponnuruvi into a deity'.<sup>84</sup> It continues:

Ponnuruvi was dead. But her story became established as a never-ending myth. [...] Ponnuruvi was no longer Nagammal's daughter. She was a deity, a god. A god who never failed to grant the prayers and vows made to her. A god who brought the rains on the day she died, because she was murdered.<sup>85</sup>

Ultimately, it is the community that transforms Ponnuruvi into a goddess and turns the deceased Dalit body divine. This could be for a number of reasons. Firstly, it enshrines the memory of Ponnuruvi in the collective memory of the community- both Dalit and non-Dalit. It is noted that 'you couldn't point to a single person from the surrounding villages who had not prayed to her'.<sup>86</sup> The story of the injustice done to this Dalit woman, as well as her community, has been enshrined within the mythology of the area. She will not be forgotten as her status as a goddess forces people to listen to her story and remember what happened to her. This, in itself, has activist potential. As a Dalit who has been murdered in the name of caste, her position as a god has the potential to unite Dalit communities in the area. Secondly, the impact that her death had on the geography of the village is great, giving another reason for the community to turn her into a goddess. As mentioned, the upper castes stopped using the water tank after her death and began using a different one. This enables the space to become a communal area with Nagammal planting various plants, and it eventually becomes the spot of the Ponnuruvi shrine. Through her death, the space becomes devoid of caste hierarchy. It moves from a

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<sup>81</sup> The village decide that Pongal should be offered to try and appease Ponnuruvi. Pongal, from the Tamil 'bubbling up', is a dish of boiled rice in milk with jaggery. It is traditionally cooked during the Pongal festival in south India. Although the upper castes believe this should be done, they are unable to make the offering, making it the responsibility of the Dalit community. Imayam, 'The Binding Vow', p. 64.

<sup>82</sup> Imayam, 'The Binding Vow', p. 65.

<sup>83</sup> Imayam, 'The Binding Vow', p. 65.

<sup>84</sup> Imayam, 'The Binding Vow', p. 65.

<sup>85</sup> Imayam, 'The Binding Vow', p. 66.

<sup>86</sup> Imayam, 'The Binding Vow', p. 66.

space in which caste dictated who could and could not use it to one that becomes an important site for the wider community. As the text notes: ‘if Ponnuruvi had not floated as a corpse in Pottai Tank, had the upper- caste people continued to use the tank for their needs as was their custom, had her death been like all the other deaths that befell the villagers, it would have been forgotten easily’.<sup>87</sup> The fact that her death triggered a deep change in village custom, thus changing the caste dynamics of the village, makes Ponnuruvi’s death important for the community and thus a figure that should be remembered in the form of a goddess.

Crucially, it is the fact that the community transforms Ponnuruvi into a deity that makes her different from Rajkumar’s gods. In his poetry, Rajkumar’s gods are born out of caste abuse. The women in his poetry are killed which causes goddess to come back and take revenge. It is anger and rage that turn their bodies into deities, and thus into sites of resistance. In the case of Ponnuruvi, it is collective will that transforms her into a goddess. Another key difference is how the goddesses are represented. As discussed above, the mythological universe that Rajkumar creates in his poetry treats the gods as real entities. In ‘The family, to gain religious merit’, the power that the goddess has to kill and seek revenge is presented as real and something to be fearful of. This is the opposite to how the Yellamma goddess is presented in ‘Raw Wound’, who appears to hold no power over the Dalit family. The presentation of Ponnuruvi in ‘The Binding Vow’ lays between these two narratives. The story does not follow the strong realism of ‘Raw Wound’ but is not fully immersed in the magic realism of *Koogai* or the mythological universe of Rajkumar’s poetry. The way in which the story treats the idea of belief can be summarised through an analysis of its final pages. In the ‘present day’ of the story, twenty years following the death of Ponnuruvi, the large annual Ponnuruvi festival takes place. The festival is presented as a large event, with the crowd growing and the noise intensifying throughout the day.<sup>88</sup> It is believed that on the day of the festival, Ponnuruvi brings the rains that are much needed for the area. However, as the day goes on, there is no sign of rain coming. The text notes that ‘usually, on the day of the Pongal offering to Ponnuruvi, the skies would darken by midday [...] But it was doubtful, looking at the skies, whether, on this occasion, it would happen. The sun’s heat threatened to turn their faith into a false belief’.<sup>89</sup> Although the worshipers believed in Ponnuruvi as a goddess, the lack of rain on this day erodes this belief. By the end of the day, the crowds begin to leave, with one man saying ‘if the god doesn’t keep a promised word, then what’s left? When all’s said and done, she was born just a human, after all’.<sup>90</sup> This marks an important point in the story. Just as it was the community that transformed Ponnuruvi into a goddess, it is the community that can remove the power of the goddess from her. By the end of the text, when most of the worshipers have left, the text notes that ‘the western sky began to darken’.<sup>91</sup> This can be read as rains beginning to arrive, which would

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<sup>87</sup> Imayam, ‘The Binding Vow’, p. 66.

<sup>88</sup> Imayam, ‘The Binding Vow’, p. 67.

<sup>89</sup> Imayam, ‘The Binding Vow’, p. 69.

<sup>90</sup> Imayam, ‘The Binding Vow’, p. 69.

<sup>91</sup> Imayam, ‘The Binding Vow’, p. 75.

have sustained the worshiper's belief in the goddess. Ultimately, the text places it upon the reader to decide whether the goddess is real or not. Imayam does not force us to agree with the supernatural logic as Rajkumar and Dharman do, nor does he strip away belief as Shyamala does. Instead, he leaves the reader to make their own judgment.

### **Living with Ghosts**

Imayam's goddess is an example of how engaging with Dalit gods has the potential to turn the Dalit body into a site of resistance, and directly challenge caste structures. C. Ayyappan, a Dalit writer from Kerala, takes this process one step further to explore how the Dalit body is able to become touchable through engaging with the world of the supernatural. His short story 'Ghost-Speech', which explores the social stigma of inter-caste relationships, inadvertently makes a Dalit woman touchable through her spirit possessing the body of an upper caste.<sup>92</sup> The story is told from the perspective of an unnamed Dalit woman who has committed suicide because her relationship with an upper caste man. The narrative is in the form of a second person narration, with the Dalit narrator explaining herself to her lover's sister, before giving her instructions on how to trap her spirit back in her grave. As Udaya Kumar notes, ghosts are not the products of normal deaths, but 'inauspicious and unmitigated' deaths cause ghosts to appear.<sup>93</sup> Kumar continues:

The forced exit from the life is the act of injustice against which the spectre's continued desire for speech and life struggles. The dead person's spirit returns to the world again and again to fulfil the desires unrealised in life, an appeasement the form of which needs to be determined anew.<sup>94</sup>

The desire of the Dalit woman in the story is to be with her former lover in a way in which she could not have whilst alive. The couple had a sexual relationship for several years, instigated by Kunjakko when the narrator was fifteen.<sup>95</sup> She longs to start a family with him, but begins to realise that this cannot happen. The narrator notes that 'when he learnt about my dream [to have children with him], he said he felt like puking and he cleared his throat and spat a length'.<sup>96</sup> After multiple arguments with her family and with Kunjakko, the narrator commits suicide as she comes to terms with the fact that he does not love her. Her untimely death causes her spirit to come back from the grave to appease the need that she failed to fulfil – being in a loving relationship with Kunjakko. The only way that she

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<sup>92</sup> Although it is not made explicit to what caste he belongs, he is referred to throughout the story as being a Christian. In Kerala, Christian sects often relate to caste hierarchy, with groups either tracing their ancestry back to ancient Brahmin castes, or through absorbing caste hierarchy into Christianity. Although we do not know what sect this man belongs to, the way that their relationship his framed shows that he is of a higher status than the narrator and is thus considered as being an 'upper caste'. For clarity, I will refer to him as being 'upper caste' in my analysis of the story. For more on the relationship between caste and Christianity in Kerala, see C. J. Fuller, 'Kerala Christians and the Caste System', *Man*, 11:1 (1976), 53-70; Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), pp. 26-29.

<sup>93</sup> Udaya Kumar, 'The Strange Homeliness of the Night: Spectral Speech and the Dalit Present in C. Ayyappan's Writings,' *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences*, xvii: 1/2 (2013), 177-91 (p. 173).

<sup>94</sup> Kumar, 'The Strange Homeliness of the Night', p. 173.

<sup>95</sup> Ayyappan, 'Ghost-Speech', p. 351.

<sup>96</sup> Ayyappan, 'Ghost-Speech', p. 352.

believes she can do this is by inhabiting the body of Kunjakko's younger sister. The narrator (inhabiting the body of Kunjakko's sister), ends up sleeping with Kunjakko. When Kunjakko's father finds him sleeping with his sister, he kills him.<sup>97</sup>

Bold statements regarding touching and not-touching are able to be made in this story as caste is mediated via the spirit realm. As Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai discuss, touch is one of the main ways in which we interpret the social world, including caste: 'the sociality of caste is primarily through the sensation/ repulsion of social touch'.<sup>98</sup> They use the example of shaking hands to demonstrate how touching becomes a marker for accepting who socially belongs to a community. They write:

We do not shake hands with those who do not belong to our communities in the same way that we do with those who do belong. We do not shake hands with children, for example, the way we do with other adults. We may not even want to shake hands with beggars or in the Indian social context with people who do not belong to our caste communities. Shaking hands is a form of touching the other and in the very act of touching there is a social sanction. We would not shake hands if we did not have social sanction to do that.<sup>99</sup>

The example of shaking hands extends into other aspects of social life including marriage and sharing food. Within the caste societal logic, one is not sanctioned to perform these acts of touching with people outside of one's caste community. The physical act of touching and not-touching people also extends to objects. An example of this is the 'two-glass' system that is often employed in tea stalls and other food and drink establishments. As Hugo Gorringer explains, 'the "two-glass" system refers to the once prevalent custom of serving Untouchables in a receptacle separate from everyone else's, because they were seen as dirty and impure'.<sup>100</sup> Interestingly, Guru and Sarukkai explore how objects in some cases can act as a medium through which individuals can be connected by touch, but also how certain social taboos can be ignored in favour of others, which bears importance to my analysis of Ayyappan's story. They use the example of a football team, who are connected through the ball itself. They write: 'a football team is a social entity and becomes a team through modes of touch that reveals the social'.<sup>101</sup> They become a connected entity through the 'shared-touch' of the ball. However, they point out that 'touching the dead leather [of the football] is not a ritual taboo for an upper caste football player but this player avoids touching the lower caste player; hence the Dalit is a goalkeeper'.<sup>102</sup> The Dalit is forced to play in a position that places them away from the rest of the team, minimising the chance of physical contact. However, the leather of the ball, which is often associated with Dalits, is not viewed as untouchable to the upper caste players.

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<sup>97</sup> Ayyappan, 'Ghost-Speech', p. 354.

<sup>98</sup> Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press India: 2019), p. 68.

<sup>99</sup> Guru and Sarukkai, *Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social*, p. 69.

<sup>100</sup> Hugo Gorringer, *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratization in Tamil Nadu* (New Delhi: Sage India, 2004), p.113.

<sup>101</sup> Guru and Sarukkai, *Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social*, p. 70.

<sup>102</sup> Guru and Sarukkai, *Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social*, p. 70.

We can apply this logic to the relationship between the narrator and her lover in Ayyappan's 'Ghost-Speech'. The narrator's body is seen to be touchable in the private space between her and Kunjakko. He is willing to touch her body for sexual pleasure and continues to do so even when others know of their affair. However, in the public space where touch signifies who belongs and who does not, the narrator is again rendered as untouchable. He will not marry her and is disgusted at the thought of having children with her. This bears similarities with the football example used by Guru and Sarukkai. The leather of the ball should, in principle, be seen as untouchable. It is the Dalit's role to make the leather from skinning the dead cow to making the final product. However, these issues are put aside in favour of avoiding the physical touch of a Dalit, which is seen as the most important thing to avoid. In the story, the laws of untouchability are ignored by Kunjakko when the situation works to his advantage, but he does not want to face the consequences of marrying a Dalit woman. He is able to pick and choose what social rules to follow at what times, thus rendering the Dalit body in a state of flux between touchable and untouchable.

It is this constant change between being seen as touchable and untouchable that ultimately leads to the narrator's suicide. This is framed in the story as the narrator realises that Kunjakko does not actually love her, but I argue that this can also be read as the narrator realising that she can never be considered as touchable by Kunjakko, and will be forever seen as untouchable by the wider community. It is this fact, I argue, that brings the narrator's spirit back from the dead. She wishes to fulfil her desire to be in a relationship with Kunjakko through becoming touchable. She tries to achieve this through possessing the body of an upper caste person. In doing so, the Dalit spirit becomes touchable. This is exemplified through what the narrator says to Kunjakko's sister in the story. She explains that 'it was my nudity that Kunjakko unveiled – when he took you in his arms, you were me. It was me, to me alone, that he did wrong'.<sup>103</sup> Through possessing her body, then, the upper caste body *becomes* the Dalit body. Kunjakko's death at the hands of his father is framed through the lens of incest, with him being killed for sleeping with his sister on two counts.<sup>104</sup> I argue that his death signifies him breaking the codes of untouchability through sleeping with the possessed body. The narrator gets what she wants – to lie with Kunjakko in a touchable state. However, as the possession has turned this body into a Dalit body (it is the narrator's nudity not the sister's), Kunjakko must pay the price of violating these codes. This story highlights that there are no shortcuts in eradicating untouchability. Although the narrator may become 'touchable' through possession, she does not become respected. Untouchability has not been eradicated here; it has simply been reconfigured.

As Guru and Sarukkai discuss, touch forms the basis of social interactions in the Indian context, with social rules and cues being developed to avoid touching people that 'should not be touched'. Caste identity, then, is ever present in the social realm, with it dominating all forms of social

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<sup>103</sup> Ayyappan, 'Ghost-Speech', p. 354.

<sup>104</sup> It is revealed that the narrator is, in fact, the half-sister of Kunjakko.

interaction. Aniket Jaaware takes this idea further to discuss how caste identity manifests before an individual is even born. He notes that, barring the use of sonograms, a child's sex can only be determined after it is born, whereas its caste is known from its conception – the baby will 'be "of" the same caste as its parents'.<sup>105</sup> He argues that, 'the sex of a baby has to be cognized first in order to become determinant, whereas the caste of an unborn baby is always already cognized and is already determined'.<sup>106</sup> Taking this idea to its logical conclusion, Jaaware further argues that the caste of a baby exists even if a couple does not have any children as 'it is determined that that if they were to have a baby it will be of this or that caste'.<sup>107</sup> This is what makes caste so durable and unrelenting. That even the *idea* of a child, a child that does not and may never exist, having a caste identity shows how difficult it is to break and how ingrained into society caste is. Ayyappan attempts to interrogate this idea of caste identity existing at birth in his story 'Guardian Spirit'. Similar to 'Ghost-Speech', this story is told from the point of view of a male spirit (Sankunni) that has possessed the body of a woman (Devi) whom he loved whilst alive. Devi was married to Vasu, but would repeatedly sneak off with her lover named Baby. The shame of this affair causes Vasu to commit suicide. It is Sankunni who finds Vasu hanged, who then becomes angry at the fact that the death has occurred: 'my anger caught fire. I wanted to see Vasu. To talk to him. Ask him why he hanged himself'.<sup>108</sup> It is at this point in the story where the engagement with the world of the supernatural begins. Sankunni hangs himself in order to find Vasu in the afterlife. As Sankunni explains: 'my journey after that has been most horrendous. I roamed all the fourteen worlds looking for his soul, but could not find him anywhere'.<sup>109</sup> After exhausting all of his options, he finds God to ask him where Vasu is. God explained that Vasu had asked to be reborn as the baby with which Devi was currently pregnant: 'are sons not born of one's soul as well!'<sup>110</sup> God then gives Sankunni the option to be born as Vasu's brother, and says that he can 'ask Baby to sow the seed in her'.<sup>111</sup> This angers Sankunni who in a rage 'spat on Gods's face. One of his eyes broke'.<sup>112</sup> This is not the first angry encounter one of Ayyappan's characters has with God. In 'Ghost-Speech', the narrator reacts angrily toward God once he reveals her parentage to her: 'I gave him a mouthful on his face'.<sup>113</sup> These brazen interactions with God highlight the somewhat playful nature of Ayyappan's storytelling and exemplify the ways in which he toys with the ideas of spirits, the afterlife, and reincarnation. These very real ideas that form the foundations of belief in India across religions are used by Ayyappan in his stories as plot devices. By doing so, he begins to unearth the contradictions that lie at the heart of such ideas. Sankunni's

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<sup>105</sup> Aniket Jaaware, *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), p. 149.

<sup>106</sup> Jaaware, *Practicing Caste*, p. 149.

<sup>107</sup> Jaaware, *Practicing Caste*, p. 149.

<sup>108</sup> Ayyappan, 'Guardian Spirit', p. 361.

<sup>109</sup> Ayyappan, 'Guardian Spirit', p. 361.

<sup>110</sup> Ayyappan, 'Guardian Spirit', p. 361.

<sup>111</sup> Ayyappan, 'Guardian Spirit', p. 361.

<sup>112</sup> Ayyappan, 'Guardian Spirit', p. 362.

<sup>113</sup> Ayyappan, 'Ghost-Speech', p. 355.



suicide in 'Guardian Spirit', for example, is a ploy in order to find Vasu. It does not come as an escape from a terrible life or signify that he has lost all hope, with which suicide is commonly associated. On the contrary, his suicide is used as a vehicle to move from one world to another, with God's proposal of him being reborn showing how easy it is for one to traverse the various realms of existence.

However, God's proposition to Sankunni goes beyond the humorous and begins to explore the logic of assigning caste at birth. In the story, the caste identities of the main characters are not made explicit apart from Devi, who is identified as a Pulaya. This identification comes from Sankunni, who asks a friend 'why do you want to destroy these poor pulaya girls?' when the friend admits to raping Devi's sister.<sup>114</sup> Through addressing Devi's caste in this way, we can assume that Sankunni is of a higher caste, but it is not clearly stated. This is also the case for the other characters in the story: we are not made aware of their caste identities. This is an interesting ploy in and of itself as it challenges our assumptions and expectations of Dalit literature. We assume that writing by Dalits must be *about* Dalits and discuss caste oppression. By not making the caste identities of these characters explicit, and featuring a narrator who is not Dalit, the story shifts from being a 'Dalit story' to a wider-reaching story. There is no immediate ideological baggage attached to the story as it does not openly engage with the issue of caste. Ironically, then, we are able to analyse how the story highlights the flaws of the caste system through the fact that caste and caste discrimination are not the main focus of the text. This is particularly so when we explore the possibility of Sankunni being reborn as Devi's child. As Jaaware points out, the caste of an unborn child is predetermined. However, in this story, we simply do not know what caste this imagined baby would be, as we do not know the exact caste identities of most of the characters in the story. Furthermore, the story creates the possibility of Devi giving birth to a child that is not the caste that it is assumed to be. In a hypothetical reading of the text, we could conclude that Devi and the father of the 'Sankunni baby' are of the same caste, whilst Sankunni himself is of a different caste. When this child is born, its identity would be the caste of Devi and the father. But as this is in fact Sankunni reborn as Devi's child, his caste identity would not be fixed in the way that Jaaware argues is always the case. The absurdist elements of this story, from Sankunni committing suicide to find Vasu, to the questions that Sankunni's rebirth raises, ultimately highlight the futility of caste. The highly creative and complex ways Ayyappan presents caste here forces us to recognise how absurd the idea of caste is. This links Ayyappan's mode of storytelling with Dharman's ideas of the function of Dalit literature. Instead of relying on the typical narratives of pain and suffering, Dharman wishes to write 'new and unusual stories'.<sup>115</sup> Ayyappan's writing underscores this idea in these highly experimental narratives. Ayyappan

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<sup>114</sup> Ayyappan, 'Ghost-Speech', p. 358.

<sup>115</sup> Aparna Karthikeyan 'There is no such thing as Dalit writing', *The Hindu*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2016. <[www.thehindu.com/books/literary-review/aparna-karthikeyan-in-conversation-with-cho-dharman/article7619145.ece](http://www.thehindu.com/books/literary-review/aparna-karthikeyan-in-conversation-with-cho-dharman/article7619145.ece)> [accessed 6th February 2019] (para. 9 of 10).

uses the spiritual logic of caste, rooted in rebirth, and uses it to undermine itself. How can one believe in caste structures that are legitimised by religious belief systems in the face of characters seamlessly traversing from Heaven to Earth; body to body; identity to identity? The story shows how ‘easy’ it is for God to simply transfer the soul of one person into the foetus of a new human, without bringing caste into the equation. Caste, in this story, is rendered as the ultimate construct that has no bearing on the lives of the characters both before and after death.

### Conclusion

As discussed above, Rajkumar and Imayam’s gods resist the perpetrators of caste-based violence and discrimination. However, they also resist the Hindutva forces that seek to absorb Dalit culture into the structures of mainstream Hinduism. As Rajkumar notes, the statues of Dalit goddesses ‘are being tamed to make them fit mainstream Hinduism [...] These men find the statues of our gods too wild, in some elemental fashion, as if their very mode of address goes against the patriarchal bent of the Hindu scriptures’.<sup>116</sup> This is an interesting way for Rajkumar to frame the gods of his community. If Hindu nationalists are attempting to assimilate these deities into ‘mainstream Hinduism’, then in what religious construct do they currently reside? As I discussed in Chapter Three, the debates surrounding Dalit culture and its relationship with Hinduism are complex, with *Untouchable Spring* highlighting both the positive and negative aspects of this relationship. I argue that that Rajkumar’s gods and their relationship with ‘mainstream Hinduism’ occupy the space in which the arguments of Nagaraj and Raj Gauthaman coalesce. Although Gauthaman argues that Dalits should create a counterculture that attacks and dismantles the ‘hegemonic culture and its signs and symbols’, he believes that this counterculture is rooted in pre-existing Dalit culture.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, Nagaraj argues that Dalit gods are an example of how Dalits can celebrate their culture, and criticises the Ambedkarite mode of protest that denies ‘any truce with the present and the real in Hinduism’.<sup>118</sup> Rajkumar’s use of the phrase ‘mainstream Hinduism’ suggests that the gods of his community are tied to a broader idea of Hinduism, but *not* the Hinduism of the Hindu nationalists.

This is a position that all of the texts discussed in this chapter occupy. The gods that are central to these texts, whether ‘real’ in the sense that they are worshiped by communities in the real world, or ‘imaginary’ beings created by the authors, are placed at the periphery of Hinduism to which Dalits are tied. The central struggle of these texts is how these Dalit gods can survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when subjected to multiple pressures. One pressure, as highlighted above by Rajkumar, is the inevitable assimilation of these gods into ‘mainstream Hinduism’. This is tied with the rejection of Dalit gods, which are often viewed as ‘primitive’, for more ‘respectable’ gods. *Koogai* is an example

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<sup>116</sup> Anushiya Sivanarayanan, ‘Translating Tamil Dalit Poetry’, *World Literature Today*, 78:2 (2004), 56-58 (p. 56).

<sup>117</sup> Raj Gauthaman, ‘Dalit Culture’, in *No Alphabet In Sight: New Dalit Writing From South India* ed. K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011), pp. 149-157 (p. 154).

<sup>118</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 207.

of this, as the Dalit community rejects the Koogai god in favour of Kali. This links to another pressure that is related to the survival of Dalit gods in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the advancement of progressive ideologies. Although Siddalingaiah argues that communities will always turn to village deities when in desperate situations, the poetry of Chinnaswamy highlights the tension that exists in Dalit communities between old traditions and new ideologies. His poem in protest to the culture surrounding Yellamma is an example of how progressive ideologies can remove injustice and the bad treatment of Dalits. However, it fails to highlight the real and necessary impacts that the Yellamma cult can have on communities that need it to survive.

Although the future of Dalit gods may be uncertain, their representation in Dalit writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century shows how important it is for Dalit communities to engage with this vital part of Dalit culture. Rajkumar, Dharman, and Imayam present Dalit gods that are not ‘backwards’ but instead offer radical interpretations of Dalit life. Through the mythical and supernatural powers of the gods, they are able to transform the Dalit body into sites of resistance that actively fight against upper-caste oppressors. Ultimately, this is down to the break from the realist mode of writing that these writers explore in favour of creative ways of representing Dalit life and culture. As I have argued, the realism of Shyamala’s ‘Raw Wound’ makes the goddess absent from the text. In texts such as *Koogai* and Ayyappan’s short stories, the magical realist elements enable the writers to explore the activist potential of Dalit gods through making them ‘real’. By breaking away from the realist mode of writing that is often found in Dalit literature, these writers are able to create new and interesting stories that still fight against caste. Through making Dalit bodies sites of resistance, these texts are equally (if not more) radical than previous Dalit literature. This interaction between literary form and fighting caste is what makes these texts so radical. As I have shown, it is through focusing on literary form that we are able to draw out the radical elements of these texts. Moreover, it is the literary form that these writers experiment with that makes these texts radical and allow them to present powerful Dalit characters that resist upper caste oppression.

## Conclusion: Defining Self-Respect in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Throughout this thesis the phrase ‘self-respect’ has been used to describe many different things. In the Introduction, I started to explore the concept of self-respect through the categories that Rawat and Satyanarayana use to define the emerging field of Dalit studies – dignity and humiliation. In this regard, self-respect implies two broad notions: the quest for dignity and the ending of humiliation. The ways in which these goals can be achieved, however, vary. In Chapter One, I discussed how self-respect gained a political edge via Periyar and the Self-Respect movement. In this context, Periyar’s conception of self-respect takes on the radicalism of atheism and non-Brahminism. Periyar believed that a rejection of religion and the ending of Brahmin domination lay at the heart of finding dignity and ending humiliation. However, as has been discussed prominently throughout this thesis, religion plays a key role in India and amongst Dalit communities. Ambedkar saw the importance of religion and thus defined a new kind of Buddhism and encouraged Dalits to reject Hinduism and follow the Buddha. In more recent years, a revaluation of Dalit gods has also highlighted how important religious culture is for Dalits. This goes to show how complex the nature of conceptualising and finding self-respect can be. On the one hand, it can mean abandoning the shackles of religion and living by the rules one prescribes for oneself. On the other, it can mean making bold choices about which religion one follows, thus making religion a core factor in one’s self-respect. This thesis has engaged with multiple literary texts that speak to various ways of generating the feeling of dignity amongst Dalits in terms of culture and religion. This conclusion will take stock of the issues raised in relation to the definition and generation of respect for oneself and one’s community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Dalit culture, and the ways in which communities engage with it, has been central to this thesis. As has been explored, Dalit culture manifests in different forms and has often divided activist circles and cultural critics. We can therefore interpret these divides as different articulations of self-respect in the context of Dalit culture. As detailed in Chapter Three, G. Kalyana Rao’s *Untouchable Spring* highlights multiple aspects of Dalit culture and articulates how its different interpretations can help communities find dignity. The beginning of the novel represents an engagement with Dalit culture that, as Nagaraj argues, has an ‘organic and consensual link’ with Hinduism.<sup>1</sup> Through presenting examples of Dalit folk performance, Rao highlights how communities can find dignity through art forms that have fundamental connections with the Hindu religion. The performances in the novel subvert caste structures, impacting the Dalit community and ‘lift[ing] their self-respect to the sky’.<sup>2</sup> As the novel progresses, however, self-respect is found in other art forms and activist exercises,

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<sup>1</sup> D.R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays*, ed. Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi (London: Seagull Books, 2011), p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> G. Kalyana Rao, *Untouchable Spring* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2011), p. 75.

shifting towards a view of Dalit culture outlined by Raj Gauthaman. For the later generations of *Untouchable Spring*, a sense of dignity is found in the songs of Yellanna that were passed down over the years. These songs detail the struggles of the Dalit community, providing hope and inspiration for Yellanna's descendants. Yellanna's songs, I have argued, create the foundations of a Dalit consciousness that is developed by the subsequent generations. With this in mind, his songs represent a Dalit culture that is in line with Gauthaman's 'Dalit protest culture'. Yellanna roots his songs in the pain and suffering of Dalits, as opposed to Hindu myths and epics. This creates a specific kind of Dalit culture that is uniquely Dalit in nature. At the start of the novel, set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Dalit communities were able to find self-respect through the radical folk performances that were ultimately rooted in Hindu tradition. As the novel progresses, this is not enough for the future generations, who have different issues to contend with. For them, a different interpretation of Dalit culture is needed which is rooted in Dalit consciousness, as opposed to Hinduism.

The self-respect that is found in Yellanna's songs ultimately leads to an engagement with the radical politics that the novel concludes with. As I discussed in Chapter Three, Jessie evokes Yellanna as he explains his reasons for leaving the village and joining the Naxalites. Jessie uses the self-respect that his family inherits from Yellanna's struggle and channels it into a need to create real change. The feeling of dignity is not enough for Jessie; he demands respect from society. Crucially, it is the self-respect that previous generations of the family had generated that makes it possible for Jessie to demand respect. One must have self-respect in order to demand respect from society. Reuben, Jessie's grandfather, feels a great sense of pride when he discovers his Dalit family after being raised by priests. This pride, coupled with the empowering songs of Yellanna, increased this level of pride and dignity in the following generations. Jessie grew up in a community that had self-respect and was proud of its cultural heritage. It is this feeling of dignity, instilled in Jessie from birth, that makes it possible for him to leave home to fight for an assertion of Dalit rights. This articulation of self-respect, in which one demands respect, is something that is becoming more visible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As I discuss in the introduction of Chapter Four, converting from Hinduism to Buddhism can bring dignity to individuals and communities. Ramesh Sarvaiya notes that upon converting to Buddhism, he knew that his daily life would not change.<sup>3</sup> Conversion would not make him touchable or stop discrimination. What conversion was able to do, however, was bring self-respect to himself and his community by abandoning Hinduism. This, however, is not enough for contemporary Dalit activists. Although conversion played an important role in the years up to and after Ambedkar's death in generating self-respect, this act of consciousness raising has been replaced by something more urgent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As can be seen by Rohith Vemula and the activist circles that he was a part of,

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<sup>3</sup> Scroll Staff, 'Protests all over Gujarat against attack on Dalit men who were skinning a cow, 16 attempt suicide', *Scroll*, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2016 <<https://scroll.in/latest/812078/protests-all-over-gujarat-against-attack-on-dalit-men-who-were-skinning-a-cow-seven-attempt-suicide>> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> June 2019] (para. 6 of 7).

contemporary activism builds on the self-respect that past generations developed and instilled into Dalit communities. Today, Dalit activism is concerned with directly challenging caste and Hindutva, whilst asserting Dalit rights and demanding respect by society. This has been made possible thanks to the kinds of cultural activism that are presented in *Untouchable Spring*.

As I have alluded to above, religion has also been a key component in helping Dalit communities find dignity in both historical and political contexts. Periyar rooted his Self-Respect movement in the abandoning of religion altogether, and instead adopted a radical atheism whilst attacking Hinduism and Brahminism. Iyothee Thass, on the other hand, attempted to create a new history for Tamil Dalits that placed them outside of Hinduism. By furnishing a Buddhist history for Tamil Dalits that emphasised the violent and dominating aspects of Brahminism, Thass was able to offer Dalits a cultural framework outside of Hinduism in which they were able to find a feeling of self-worth. Through developing a history in which Dalits had been Buddhist and forced to follow Hinduism and caste principles by Brahmins, Thass gave Tamil Dalits the cultural and religious space in which they could confidently reject caste and their position in society. This idea was revised and expanded by Ambedkar in his interpretation of Buddhism. As outlined in Chapter Four, Ambedkar sought to strip Buddhism back to its bare bones and determined that finding a way to end suffering was at the heart of the Buddha's teaching. Following Thass, Ambedkar also rooted Dalit history in Buddhism, arguing that Dalits were originally Buddhists who were forced to follow Hinduism by Brahmins. These two features of Ambedkar's Buddhism were then combined with Ambedkar's determination to convert from Hinduism. Ambedkar was therefore able to offer Dalits the opportunity to gain self-respect through moving away from the religion that defined them as untouchable, and into a religion that has Dalit roots and is ultimately designed to end suffering.

Although we are able to find personal testimonies that articulate how Buddhist conversion can bring dignity to individuals and communities, the literary texts that this thesis has engaged with do not fully support the mode of Ambedkarite Buddhist conversion as a tool for achieving complete self-respect. Although both Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy and Urmila Pawar have found this through Buddhism, the communities that they present in their poetry, fiction, and autobiographical accounts have not always done so. A clear example of this is how Dalit identification with the Buddha is hidden by middle-class Dalits in Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*. As I argued in Chapter Four, these middle-class Dalits seek to hide their Dalit identity through assuming Brahmin surnames and subsequently integrate themselves into Brahmin communities. However, they hide small signs of their Buddhist beliefs throughout their homes, taking 'great care to keep these symbols of their caste hidden from the public eye, in a less prominent place'.<sup>4</sup> Here, Buddhist conversion has not brought dignity and a sense of self-worth. In fact, the Buddhist symbols of Dalit self-respect are hidden from

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<sup>4</sup> Urmila Pawar, *The Weave of My Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 226.

view, as to not expose their caste identity. Buddhist conversion, therefore, has not given this particular group of Dalits the dignity that Ambedkar envisaged conversion would bring.

So, although Ambedkar's vision of Buddhism may not have had the impact that he had hoped for, a synthesis of Dalit culture and religion may have the potential to bring self-respect to Dalits who are unable to convert to Buddhism or who have not felt the benefits of conversion. Pawar points to multiple examples in her autobiography of Dalit communities moving back to the 'old ways' as Buddhist conversion did not bring the material gains that they expected. As Siddalingaiah notes, 'with all the economic changes around us, I think the village deities could become even more popular. I mean, if medicines become unaffordable, people will turn to these deities out of helplessness'.<sup>5</sup> In this context, self-respect comes to take on a different meaning. Although reading Ambedkar, converting to Buddhism, and active forms of protest can bring dignity to one part of the Dalit community by inspiring them to demand respect from society and assert their rights, it does not necessarily mean that it is brought to all. This is why, as Siddalingaiah argues, many communities turn back to traditional village customs and deities. I argue that it is this reason Dalit writers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have sought to engage with Dalit gods in their work – to generate self-respect amongst those who have not found it by the usual modes of Dalit activism. Crucially, this represents the largest divide between contemporary Dalit activism and Dalit literature. Dalit activism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is staunchly Ambedkarite, firmly against Hinduism, and demands an assertion of Dalit rights. Through engaging with the idea of Dalit gods, contemporary Dalit literature is able to have a much different conversation with the Dalit community that, in many respects, could be considered a step backwards. However, I argue that both approaches are ultimately destined for the same destination: self-respect. Contemporary Dalit activism, although fighting for the rights of all Dalits, represents a specific community in India. It is often a young, urban, and radical community that is not afraid (but also has the means) to stand up to the authorities that continue to deny them their rights. Conversely, there are communities that may not be able to take part so visibly in such activism and instead return to traditional methods that were rejected years before. Dalit literature, through validating Dalit gods, represents this community. As I have argued in Chapter Five, the ways in which Dalit gods are presented in Rajkumar's poetry and Dharman's *Koogai* not only bring dignity to the characters in their work, but also have the potential to generate self-respect amongst a Dalit readership too. There are a number of routes, therefore, that individuals and communities can take to feel a sense of dignity through religion. On the one hand, it can be found through Buddhist conversion.<sup>6</sup> On the other, it can be generated through an engagement with Dalit culture and a reinterpretation of Dalit gods. Although these may appear to be at odds with each other, it highlights the complex discourses that exist

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<sup>5</sup> Siddalingaiah, 'Village deities', in *Seminar*, August 2010. < <https://www.india-seminar.com/semframe.html> > [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2019] (para. 8 of 46).

<sup>6</sup> As I discussed in Chapter Three, Dalits have historically converted to other religions such as Christianity in order to find dignity. See pp.88-90. Before deciding upon Buddhism, Ambedkar conducted an analysis of other religions to ascertain which would offer Dalits the most dignity. See Chapter Four, pp. 94-100.

amongst Dalit communities. This thesis has engaged with a number of these discourses and has shown that the relationship between Dalit activism and literature is not as straightforward as it may appear.

As I set out in the Introduction and Chapter One, the conventional way of reading and analysing Dalit literature is from a sociological perspective. Through focusing on pain, suffering, and deprivation, activist writers of the 1970s and 80s were able to build an activist base to challenge caste hegemony. This mode of writing can be considered, in many ways, as 'realist'. Dalit literature of this time period wished to present 'evidence' of the Dalit situation in order to inform and expose and in doing so, created narratives that offered a clear window into the daily lives of Dalits. This writing was radical in terms of literary production as Dalits had seldom been part of the literary culture of India. The Dalit Panthers, as discussed in Chapter One, shocked the literary culture of Maharashtra with their angry and militant literature. The fact that Dalits were writing in their own language about their own lives, and the caste structures that dominated them, proved to have a radical impact upon Indian literature. This began to generate pride amongst Dalits who, possibly for the first time, were able to see their lives reflected in literature.

However, as I have argued throughout this thesis, Dalit writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is beginning to take a different path. Instead, Dalit writers are producing work that breaks away from these traditionally realist modes of writing and instead focus on formal experimentation. Dharman's *Koogai*, for example, paints a picture of Dalit cultural heritage through the magical realist Koogai god who interacts with the Dalit community. This experimental Dalit literature inspires Dalit readers through new and interesting representations of Dalit life. By moving away from the constant references to pain and suffering, and instead presenting innovative literature that still challenges caste and hegemonic structures, a contemporary Dalit audience are able to be encouraged and excited by this literature. It rejects the mode of presenting the Dalit as weak and defenseless, and instead imagines new articulations of a Dalit identity that can be formulated through formal and narrative experimentation. Rajkumar's gods, for instance, are a mythical reading of Dalit gods that are able to represent strong Dalit characters who fight against the caste system. As outlined in the Introduction, my formulation of 'experimental' literature follows that of Nicole Thiara, who argues that formal experimentation in Dalit literature is rooted in 'anti-caste resistance' and 'envisage[s] a world free from caste discrimination'.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, although this kind of literature does not follow the traditional path of older Dalit literature, it is still able to engage with its fundamental principles.

The short stories of C. Ayyappan highlight this idea succinctly. As I argue in Chapter Five, the complex and often bizarre nature of his stories ultimately provide a commentary on the absurdity of caste in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through resurrecting the spirits of deceased Dalits, and toying with the idea of caste identity in life and death, Ayyappan exposes the ways in which caste is a man-made

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<sup>7</sup> Nicole Thiara, 'Subaltern Experimental Writing: Dalit Literature in Dialogue with the World', *Ariel*, 47:1-2, (2016), p. 254.



construct. The radical and anti-caste statements that his stories make are made possible by the formal experimentation that constitute the texts. The creative elements of stories such as these can generate a new and different kind of self-respect. In the Introduction, I highlighted numerous discourses that have attempted to formulate what Dalit literature is. The consensus is that Dalit literature is not written to be creative literature, nor is it read to be enjoyed. As Arjun Dangle argues, ‘this literature of the Dalits is intimately related to social reality and is not imaginary or entertainment-oriented’.<sup>8</sup> Although this may be the case for some of the hard-hitting literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (particularly the autobiographical form), this thesis has argued that some Dalit literature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be read as entertainment and be enjoyed. Ayyappans’ stories, Dharman’s novel, and Rajkumar’s poetry, although often addressing difficult issues, are written in engaging ways that make them enjoyable to read. Ayyappan’s stories, for example, are often funny to read, and the reader is captivated by the complex and bizarre worlds that he creates. As I discussed in Chapter Three, the director Pa. Ranjith wishes to create bright and colorful worlds in his films as opposed to rooting the Dalit experience in poverty and pain. Through engaging with gods and Dalit cultural traditions, many of the texts that I have discussed throughout this thesis place the Dalit in a world that is vibrant and culturally rich. I argue that through writing in this way, Dalit writers can generate dignity for a Dalit readership that is not rooted in pain. The ultimate purpose of self-respect is to make an individual feel proud of themselves and their community; to abolish humiliation and to find a sense of dignity. Focusing solely on pain and suffering cannot achieve this in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This new mode of writing is what ultimately separates Dalit literature from Dalit activism in contemporary India. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the anger of Dalit activism was reflected in the literature of Dalit writers, making literature a vital tool of the activist project. The activist writers of the Dalit Panthers built the foundations of Dalit literature on their social and political activism. This anger still exists, particularly amongst the youth in India as represented by university-based protests and movements. However, this anger is not necessarily represented in the literature that has made up the corpus of my study. Angry social realism has given way to creative methods of representing Dalit life. Crucially, one should not be prioritised above the other. Through highlighting the creative aspects of contemporary Dalit literature, the radical nature of these texts is not diminished. On the contrary, it uncovers a *new* kind of radicalism that complements the radical nature of Dalit activism. Conversely, in celebrating this aspect of Dalit literature, the activism occurring in the social realm should not be considered as unnecessary or old fashioned. The actions and protests of Rohith Vemula and his associates, the Bhim Army, and other local and national organisations are just as urgent as ever. What I have shown in this thesis is that one sphere does not need to be defined by the other. The activism of the social sphere does not need to be defined by the literary texts of Dalit writers. More significantly, Dalit writers do not, and should not, be

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<sup>8</sup> Arjun Dangle, ‘Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future’, *Poisoned Bread*, ed. Arjun Dangle (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Limited, 1992), pp. 234-266 (p. 255).

defined by the exploits of Dalit activists. Dalit writers do not *need* to represent activist circles; they are able to generate self-respect through their own means.

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