

Caste and Nation in Indian Society

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Caste and the Writing of History

Caste is seen as both the most archaic and the most contemporary reality of India – a persistent but paradoxical presence in historical time. Perhaps for this reason, caste seems to act as a challenge to the writing and teaching of history. This essay seeks to understand the ways in which caste as a category has, for a long time, escaped history as a discipline. It also explores the newer ways in which historians today try to interrogate and renegotiate history itself, in their effort to fashion modes of writing adequate to the workings of caste in India. This essay therefore is as much about history-writing as it is about the category of caste.

Caste and Nation

History, as we practice it today, emerged in India in the second half of the nineteenth century, as a colonial, modern form of knowledge that sought to reinvent time, both as concept and as experience. One of the many ways in which time was reconstituted – as past-present continuum, as empty numerical chronology, as unidirectional progress and so on – most crucial was a new way of imagining the past.

1. I (Chandramouli) have written about this reconstitution of time and history in *Politics of Time: 'primitives' and history-writing in a colonial society*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2006. Discussion on this aspect is also found in the following selected works:

2 Akshay Chandra Sarkar, *Sanatani*, Calcutta, 1911, pp. 52-5, 135-36.

3 Jogen Ghosh, *Brahman and Shudra or the Hindu Labour Problem*, Calcutta, 1902.

4 Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, 'Samajik Prabandha', 1892, Bhudev Rachanasambhar Calcutta, 1957; Brahmamadhav Upadhyay, 'Varnashramdharma', *Bangadarshan*, phalgun, 1901.

Most crucial is the new way of imagining the past.

In history, this past, to make any sense, had to be represented in its entirety, as a single story of necessarily a single protagonist, namely the nation. In this imagination of history as always already 'history of', the past appeared comprehensible only in a totalized form, only by virtue of its identity with a unified entity. Once the past thus became a singular narrative and an undifferentiated space, categories like that of caste emerged as a problem for history-writing, for

such a differentiating element as caste could only reappear as a dangerous contaminant that threatened to undo the unity and coherence of the nation's, and the historian's, story.

Early texts of history, written by the early beneficiaries of colonial education, namely upper-caste, middle-class male professionals, took great pains therefore to make caste into a benign category. Many histories, for instance, did not acknowledge caste as a differentiating element at all, arguing instead that the caste structure served to keep Indians together, despite economic inequalities, in a systemic whole – this being what made Indian society superior to western societies fraught with class antagonisms.

Some historians reconfigured the caste system as a rational division of labour and occupations. Others saw caste as a spiritual hierarchy, and therefore superior to hierarchies generated by crass material parameters like wealth and state-power.

Of course, there were historical facts which did admit that caste actually prevented the rise of national unity. Yet many of these saw specific caste practices like untouchability as recent corruptions of an earlier and more rational and justifiable ancient varna system. Gandhi himself, till the 1940s, was one such thinker who sought to fight the 'evils' of caste while expressing faith in the varna system as a fundamental historical institution of the Indian civilization.

(Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 251.

Rosalind O'Hanlon *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, especially Ch 10; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The movement against untouchability in twentieth century Punjab*, California, 1982.)

In the context of Bengal, a re-historicization of caste status was found among the Ranjbansis, who claimed that they were originally Kshatriyas, who had to hide from the wrath of Parashuram in the dense forests of north Bengal, and thus forgot their high-caste practices and customs. (Harakishore Adhikari, *Rajbansi Kulapradip*, Calcutta, 1908, in Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997, p.34.)

The following works are also very important for discussing such issues:

Nicholas Dirks, 'The invention of caste: Civil society in colonial India', *Social Analysis*, Sept. 25, 1989, pp. 42-52; P. Constable, 'Early dalit literature and culture in late nineteenth and early twentieth century western India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 31(2), 1997, pp. 317-38.

Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-8*, New Delhi, Peoples Publishing House, 1973; also 'The Many Worlds of Indian History', in Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, p. 34.

Bhiku Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An analysis of Gandhi's political discourse*, New Delhi & London, Sage, 1989.

However, already by late nineteenth century, these historicist strategies to gloss over caste for the sake of the nation seemed to be failing decisively. For one, the very act of history-writing was now appropriated and redeployed by lower-caste groups, jeopardizing the objectivity-claims of history itself. A very large number of lower-caste counter-histories began to be written and published, which defined caste-status – neither as an ancient and immutable tradition nor as a permanent birth-mark on the individual – but as a contingent and arbitrary attribute, acquired by a people at a certain historical moment in the past, at the moment of defeat or fall, so to speak. For the other, there was also the emergence of numerous lower and middle-caste associations, fighting for greater power and enhanced status, which challenged the upper-caste monopoly of public space and civic institutions. And there was, above all, the gross failure, by early twentieth century, of nationalist organizations to mobilize, in the name of a united nation, lower caste (and Muslim) peasantry in a united anti-colonial activism. 8 Needless to say, all this forced a recognition of the ‘caste-question’ onto mainstream history-writing by early twentieth-century.

Yet, even as caste began to be acknowledged as a question before history, caste was incorporated into the discipline through a strategy of subordination. Caste in history-writing was relegated to a ‘social’ category, different in conceptual status from self-evidently political categories like the nation (and later, in the Marxist tradition, class). It is well known that the crucial point on which Ambedkar and Gandhi fell out was precisely this.9 Ambedkar alleged that Gandhi, by reducing the issue of caste, to issues of social reform and ethical protocol, was actually seeking to prevent caste from becoming a full-blown political question, which would determine ways in which independent India would imagine the state and the region, rights and representation, even marriage and succession. This conceptual distinction – between the social and the political – that was produced by nationalist politics – would be later institutionalized in terms of academic domains and departments in independent India.

Not surprisingly, therefore, in academic locations of the newly independent nation, it was sociology that would become the ‘natural home’ for the study of caste. History as a discipline would have very little place for it, preoccupied as it was with what it saw as clearly political categories like the state (colonial and pre-colonial) and with political economic categories like class and modes of production. Political and political economic categories, it was implicitly and sometimes explicitly argued, functioned through a structural and impersonal logic of change. All that which did not follow such a consistent and rational transformative logic, all that which persisted against reason, all that were local and particular, all that could only be explained in terms of customs and culture and not in terms of generalizable laws of history and causality seemed to fall in the messy, everyday domain of the social. This was a domain that was amenable to empirical description, perhaps even to empathetic understanding and occasional policy intervention, but not quite to whole-scale politicization in terms of a national agenda and a national future. In so far as history and historians were concerned, caste resided in just such a domain, the domain of disciplines like sociology and in some cases, anthropology, against which history as a discipline sought to define itself.

In other words, caste as a category remained repressed within texts of history precisely because history above all was the narrative of a nation and its political development. It is not surprising, therefore, that mainstream political language, today as in the first half of the twentieth century, has often judged caste mobilizations precisely in these terms, of being either national or anti-national. The Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu had once faced the charge of anti-nationalism as did Ambedkar himself, for his stand on separate electorates and what was seen as a pro-Muslim League position on federalism and regional autonomy. Even today, the pro-liberalisation polemic of Chandrabhan Prasad, or the global presentation of caste as a human rights issue in the UN are positions that are overwhelmingly accused of being anti-nation. Could one then go on to argue that caste can be adequately historicized only when the nation as a territorial integrity is decisively put to question? This is not merely to argue that historians must expose the limits and dangers of nationalism as ideology or go beyond nationalist historiography. Most serious historians have already successfully done so. This is to make a more difficult proposition – that history in our context can no longer be simply written as Indian history – which all of us seem bound to do in terms of disciplinary and institutional definitions – if historical understanding could do justice to caste as a category.

Chandrabhan incidentally has a rather nuanced and discriminating position vis a vis liberalization and nationalism; see ‘Interview of Chandrabhan Prasad by Siriyavan Anand’ posted in www.ambedkar.org/chandrabhan/interview.htm.

I (Chandra Mouli) have in mind the United Nations Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban in August-September 2001, where untouchability was presented by some dalit activists as a case of race injustice.

I thank G. Arunima for forcefully putting this point across to me. The following resources discuss the above-mentioned issues.

G. Arunima, *There Comes Papa: colonialism and the transformation of matriliney in Kerala, Malabar, c. 1850-1940*, Delhi, Orient Longman, 2003

R. Jeffrey ‘The Social Origin of a Caste Association, 1875-1905’, *South Asia*, 4, 1974, pp. 39-59

K. Saradamoni, *Emergence of a Slave Caste: Pulayyas of Kerala*, Delhi, People’s Publishing House, 1980.

Robert Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamilnad*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969.

E. Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit: essay on Ambedkar movement*, Delhi, Manohar, 1992.

Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision*; Nandini Gooptu, ‘Caste and Labour: Untouchable social movements in urban Uttar Pradesh.

There are two dimensions to this proposition, one that is already being worked upon by historians and another that is not yet fully formulated. The first dimension is to acknowledge the

‘region’ as a crucial location for historical studies. This is something, which mainstream coalition politics has already made us admit in the electoral arena in the last couple of decades.¹² Historians, primarily of the south but also elsewhere, now argue that understanding caste and caste-movements is only possible if we set our study in context of the region, where the region becomes more than and different from merely a geographical or cultural unit of national territoriality. The region in such work must be recovered in its full autonomy, in its defiance of the hegemonic national story, and in its contingent and changing relationship with the national. It is in this mode that we must draw upon historical works done on caste, in terms of the regional stories of the Nairs and Namboodris and the Iravas and Pulayas of Kerala, the Nadars of Tamil Nadu, the Mahars of Maharashtra, the Chamars of Punjab, UP and Chattisgarh, the Balmikis of Delhi, the Namasudras of Bengal and so on.

The following works throw some light on the issues mentioned above with data and analysis:

Twentieth century in Dalit Movements and the Meaning of Labour in India, ed. Peter Robb, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1993.

Saurabh Dube, Untouchable Pasts: Religion, Identity and Power in a Central Indian Community, New York, State University of New York Press, 1998.

Shekhar Bandopadhyay, Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: the Namasudras, 1872-1947.

Richmond, Surrey, Curzon Press, 1997; Vijay Prashad, Untouchable Freedom: a social history of a dalit community, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2000.

Sugata Bose, A Hundred Horizons: the Indian Ocean in the age of global empire, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2006, especially Chapter 3.

Nicholas Dirks, ‘Castes of Mind’, Representations, winter, 1992, pp. 56-78.

For a lucid argument against seeing caste and religion as primarily products of colonial governmentality, see Sumit Sarkar, Beyond Nationalist Frames, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003.

Such histories have served to irreversibly disaggregate the dominant national story. At the same time, we must also take note of another kind of regional history that has emerged recently, which actually helps us imagine alternate extra-national regionalisms. I have in mind as example a work on the Bay of Bengal caste-network of the Chettiars or the Indian Ocean caste-network of the Gujrati bania, stretching as far as the east coast of Africa, or the caste dynamics of labour migration, say from Bhojpur to Mauritius or from Jharkhand to West Indies.

In fact, once seen through the speculum of caste/region, the question emerges whether one can talk of a nation at all that pre-existed the emergence of the fundamentally caste-inflected identity of the Maratha or the Dravidian or the Bengali bhadralok. Or whether we must indeed talk of a nation-effect that was produced in late nineteenth-century onwards, out of the conflict

and consolidation of jati-s, where the term jati actually worked to ensure, significantly, the critical slippage and oscillation, as context would demand, of identity between locality, nation and caste.

There is however another question about caste and the nation which is yet to be formulated clearly by historians, and I believe, the reason behind this is that writing the history of India, till today, always takes the form and practice of Indian history. This is the question of the place of caste in the definition of India – that is, the question of whether caste as a form of stratification is peculiar to India as a nation and if so, is caste then really for us the national form of inequality. In other words, is subalternity experienced in India in a unique, different and over-determined manner – that is, via caste – which sets India apart from the rest of the world and thus historically makes India a nation? (Responses such as there is caste also in south east Asia and in a different form in Japan, I think, only postpones the question) the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of this question is apparent, recent historiography argues that what we see as caste in today's India is really a very recent invention - the product of the orientalist discourse, of colonial ethnology and the modern technology of census and governmentality¹⁵ the argument goes as follows: that caste was neither an over-determining category in pre-colonial times, nor were the categories of jai and varna exactly the same as what we experience as caste in contemporary times. Caste, therefore, has never been a quintessential national trait, and that, it was argued, contemporary caste experience is really the product of a very specific and contingent kind of colonial, modern encounter and should never be seen as the primary way of defining ourselves as Indian. There is no denying the strength of this argument, and yet this position also invites the criticism – both from historians and activists – that such an argument really functions as a kind of disguised nationalism, which seeks to exonerate pre-colonial India from owning up to the evil of caste and gets away by blaming, as it were, the colonial masters for everything. The critics point out that the very long-term and historical nature of caste injustice in India is thus vicariously denied in this argument, defeating at the outset the ongoing political struggle against caste in our times.¹⁶ The paradox, of course, is that this critique itself ends up equating caste and India, in a kind of eternal national formula, which in turn defeats the equally political struggle of making caste appear historically contingent and thus, amenable to immediate change and even abolition.

Our argument is that this strange impasse about caste within history-writing is an impasse inherent in having to necessarily think history via the nation – which disallows the staging of the question of caste in any way other than in terms of its being, or not being, a national reality. Despite powerful critiques by historians of nationalism as ideology and framework, the nation as hegemonic category thus continues to throw its shadow over, and thus keep repressed, narratives of caste. The following works vividly present the related issues:

G. Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997.

The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1992.

Caste and Religion

One way in which history-writing in India has rendered caste somewhat invisible is through its particular way of foregrounding of religion. At the most obvious level, we must admit that Indian historiography till date has generally been seen as the religious/communal division between Hindus and Muslims as the main question before the nation, and the problem of caste therefore as somewhat secondary. This was of course the case with conventional nationalist historiography. However, this way of problematizing the nation via religion and identity continued well into the 1990s, when, with the rise of Hindutva forces, ‘communalism’ reappeared in a new way as the most popular theme for history-writing in India. This long-term dominance of the question of religion/secularism resulted in a sub-sumption of caste as a question under the question of nationalism/communalism.

The critique of nationalism as ideology that was developed by historians of communalism like Gyanendra Pandey¹⁸ in the 1990s was indeed pathbreaking – in that it showed up communalism and nationalism to be continuous rather than oppositional phenomena, as nationalist history had argued till then. In the process, nationalism and its apparently secular-modern rhetoric was exposed for sharing in the very same self-other logic which fuelled communalist mobilizations – working to constitute the Muslim (or Pakistan) as an external, and yet paradoxically, also as an internally threatening, other. While studies like these changed the nature of Indian historiography for good, they, however, stopped short of setting religion up as a category for problematization (beyond recording that the modern notion of Hinduism as a unitary doctrine, with a scriptural foundation and with a historical antagonism with Islam, was indeed a colonialist, Indological construction). This silence about religion itself – even in studies of religious mobilization – is particularly significant for us, because religion as a central question had been placed on the table, as it were, by theorizers and critics of caste very early in India’s colonial history.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, when the phenomenon called communalism had consolidated as a recognizable form of modern political mobilization in India, we see Ambedkar offering a re-definition of religion as a category through his work on Buddhism and through his arguments surrounding marriage as an institution. We also see Periyar debating religion and atheism. There has been a great amount of historical discussion on Gandhi’s political use of dharma, yet there is this strange silence about Ambedkar or Periyar’s general commentaries on faith and religiosity – clearly because their experiments with religion were perceived as part of the caste question rather than as a question before the nation. Very similarly, the early twentieth-century debate about representation via separate electorates has almost always been reduced to the question of religious representation in Indian history-writing, even though separate electorates were as importantly a part of the question of dalit representation. Again, while Partition is seen as the crucial closure to India’s colonial history and

colonial-modern experience with religion, Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism only a few years later, along with a mass of his followers, appears in Indian historiography as a relatively minor incident, even though this moment could as well be formulated as another community's spectacular exit from the nation itself. In other words, the framing of Indian history in terms of the Hindu-Muslim question has resulted in a glossing over of the fact that religion as a question in itself was being radically re-theorized through the caste question in the twentieth century.

Recently, however, some historians have argued for a simultaneous re-writing of the caste and the communalism problematic. In the context of Bengal, for instance, P. K. Datta¹⁹ has shown how the fear of an impending Muslim population explosion caused upper caste Bengali men to campaign for a numerical expansion in the ranks of Hindus. It was this imperative of creating a Hindu majority, which brought the caste question centre-stage, as it began to be strongly felt that untouchables and tribals, who were till then seen as outside the pale of varna samaj, must be 'Hinduised' and brought into the Hindu fold. Shekhar Bandopadhyay's work on the Namasudras of Bengal²⁰ and Sumit Sarkar's essay on Bengali Muslim peasantry²¹ also show how resistance by the rural underclass produced amongst the literate classes of Bengal, both Hindu and Muslim, a nationalistic polemic about communitarian identity, self-improvement and religious emancipation. M. S. S. Pandian shows for Tamil Nadu how the rise of the Brahmin as a dominant, and therefore, a deified figure happened through exchanges about religion, in a public sphere constituted both by missionary and civic and judicial institutions. Refer to the following works relating to the above-mentioned issues.

Carving Blocs: Communal ideology in early colonial Bengal, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1999.

S. Bandopadhyay, 1997; also 'Transfer of Power and Crisis of Dalit Politics in India 1945-47', *Modern Asian Studies*, 34, 4, 2000, pp. 893-942.

Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*.

Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2006.

The Blindness of Insight, Chennai, Navayana, 2006.

More directly, historians like Dilip Menon have proposed a straight and almost unmediated connection in modern Indian history between instances of caste and communal mobilization. According to Menon, this can be shown as a trend from late nineteenth to as late as the end of the twentieth century. If there were a series of communal riots in the 1890s, he argues, it was the direct outcome of lower-caste associations and lower-caste movements that had mushroomed in India in the 1870s and 1880s. At the other end, the rise of Hindutva in the early 1990s, the Babri Masjid demolition and the following riots were also events directly responding to the backward caste mobilization that happened in north India after the 1989 Mandal Commission. He also tries to demonstrate similar connections for the 1920s communal riots and the 1940s Partition violence. Dilip Menon's basic argument is that the structural violence

inherent in a caste society such as India has been repeatedly sublimated in Indian history into violence against an external other, namely the Muslim – as a way of saving the nation-ness of the country, as it were. The nature of lower-caste participation in communal violence– whether it be the Namasudra involvement in the 1946 riots or the so-called tribal and low-caste involvement in the Gujrat anti-Muslim violence of 2002 – shows itself up precisely, therefore, as a displacement of potential caste conflict in local contexts.

Whether or not one agrees with such an unmediated link between caste and communalism, one thing seems undeniable in the light of the above body of work – that there is need for a re-formulation of the problematic of religion from perspective of caste. There has of course been a long-standing debate in mainstream academia about caste that poses the caste/religion question as follows – is caste to be seen as a religious (a la Louis Dumont) or as a socio-political (a la Nicholas Dirks) phenomenon? In context of the above discussion, this now seems to be the wrong kind of question. While nobody seriously sees caste any longer as an articulation of the encompassing spirituality of Indian society, to dissociate caste from the workings of religion in modern times is also to avoid taking the bull by its horns. It is also a refusal to take seriously the concern that critics of caste – from Bhimrao Ambedkar to Kancha Ilaiah – have always spoken out about the problematic of religion and religiosity. In other words, newer kinds of history-writing must rescue the question of religion from the communalism paradigm, for communalism has been the only way in which the nation, and therefore modern historiography, has admitted, and at the same time neutralized, the question of religion, as it were. It is only thus that we can also restage the question of caste in all its centrality.

There is still very little work in this direction in India, if only because our historical and political common sense continues to understand the functioning of religions through a very simplistic self-other formula, borne out of Christianity versus Islam, Islam versus Hinduism and such stories of civilizational encounters. Clearly, such a formula sits easy with the framework of culture/civilization/nation that structures politics as well as the discipline of history globally. What remains underplayed, however, in this version of religion is the long history of the fashioning of the self, the community, and everyday practices thereof, that has marked religion as a changing domain – a domain in which questions of morality and purity, death and sexuality, suffering and liberation, authority and subjectivity, law and custom have been negotiated through time. In ‘our’ religions (and I say religions in the plural to indicate Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam and Christianity, all of which harbour caste, even when professing formal equality), caste, and resistance to caste, seem quite central to the history of this fashioning of the self/community and its internal, transformative dynamics. There is of course interesting work on Gandhi and his practices of the self – and on the place of untouchability (and sexuality) in it. However, the myth of Gandhian exceptionalism somewhat nullifies the significance of such work. Taken further – perhaps through a study of various lower-caste sects and alternative faiths, both of colonial and non-colonial times – a history of practices of selfhood, community and conflict might emerge that would bring back caste into serious reckoning.

Caste and the Body

Talking of caste and practices of the self brings to the fore the question of caste and the body. It is particularly important to raise this question because with it comes the question of the materiality of caste as a category, the precise nature of which has till very recently escaped history-writing. Caste is a very particular form of structural inequality, no doubt, but discourses of modernity have always sought to subsume caste under surrogate categories, namely, either class or race. It is this which has ended up displacing from centre-stage the specific and peculiar materiality of caste itself.

We all know the history of this century and more long process of sub-sumption of caste. It began with the ethnologization of caste by colonial governmental agencies in the late nineteenth century. What emerged was a regime of colonial-modern biopolitics which sought to fix and count caste groups in India as instances of ethnic identity and products of ethnic intermixing. The very fact that the traditional Brahmanical versions of caste also emphasized control over marriage and demonstrated a strong fear of miscegenation only seemed to confirm the colonizer's argument that caste was actually biological race. But more importantly, this ethnologisation also allowed sections of colonial indigenous elite to 'primitivise' so-called tribals and untouchables, and thus both to create a temporal distance from and impose a modernization regime upon them.²⁴ Even more importantly, this technique of racialization of caste was on occasions even turned around, as in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, to the advantage of lower castes themselves –when the myth of Aryan conquest was re-presented historically as a process of establishing Brahmanical control over indigenous races of the country. True, the understanding of race in the latter case was more cultural-linguistic rather than biological, yet the equation of race-culture-civilization-caste was unmistakable in it (Prathama Banerjee, *Politics of Time*).

As unmistakable was the fact that the mobilization of lower castes against the alleged Aryan-outsiders resulted in a conflation of caste solidarity with a form of nationalism – whether it be Tamil linguistic nationalism in the south or the Maratha tradition of kshatriya valour in the west.²⁶ Needless to say, the strategic advantage of reducing caste collectivity to a kind of counter-nationalism was not available in all parts of India. But even more significantly, the identification of caste with race, and thus with a nation, produced a new kind of identity politics, that in turn caused a new kind of exclusion of the dalits by dominant backward castes both in the south and the west of the country. Check the following works relating to the issues discussed above.

Pandian, Brahmin and Non-Brahmin.

Prachi Deshpande, *Historical Memory, Modernity and Regional Identity, India 1700-1960*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2007.

Jyotirao Phule, 'Slavery', 1873, in Selected Writings of Jyotirao Phule, ed. G. P. Deshpande, Delhi, Leftword, 2002; also, Gail Omvedt, 'Jotirao Phule and the ideology of social revolution in India', Economic and Political Weekly, 11 September 1971, 6, 37, pp. 1969-79.

Almost simultaneous to the racialisation of caste late nineteenth century onwards, therefore, there also had to be another representation of caste. This was the parallel mode of constituting caste as primarily a form of economic inequality. Phule himself reconstituted the lower caste question as a peasant question, and the upper-caste/lower caste binary as a form of primordial class antagonism.²⁷ In fact, even as he worked on his historical understanding of Aryan invasion, he foregrounded caste-exploitation through the then globally available political economic category of slavery. In Tamil Nadu as well, as M. S. S. Pandian, shows, despite its articulation through the Dravidian movement, 'backward' caste mobilization had also to be articulated on the ground that lower castes were the ones who really provided the resource and the labour for the Brahman, the temple and the landlord. In other words, the lower castes were really the productive classes of society and their exploitation and subordination was, therefore, really a structural form of resource extraction. And even as Martin Macwan, in 2001, argued that untouchability should be broadly seen as a kind of racialism, he put land reforms first on his agenda, almost in the same way as the Indian communists had traditionally done. In other areas, this caste-class equation became the mainstay of radical politics of change. Bihar is the best instance of such an equation, where the fight for minimum wages for rural landless labour and the fight for the dignity of the dalit appeared one and the same thing in the 1960s and 70s Naxalite movement. Twentieth century history-writing, especially people's history of the Marxist variety, we know, worked further to institutionalize this caste-class conflation, in which caste sensibilities were seen as a pre-modern and displaced form of consciousness of economic interest, which the right politics and the right narrativisation could eventually purify and resolve into modern class consciousness.

I believe that this incessant vacillation of caste as category between these two categories of race/nation and class is particularly significant. It of course explains why caste remains somewhat repressed in dominant historical common sense even today. But to say this is not really to adequately interpret the issue. My argument is that the tense positioning of caste between the categories of race and class is actually an expression of our inability to truly grasp the materiality of caste as category. In the conventions of modern history-writing, in fact in social sciences in general, materiality is recognized primarily in the form of economic interest, in the language of hunger and its satisfaction, disease and its remedy, and debt and its remittance, as it were. This is not merely the local problem of materialist/Marxist schools of thought, which have been repeatedly accused of being economicist and reductionist in their understanding of social reality. It is actually a far more generalized position, shared across ideological divides, which understand materiality as a domain, in which the human body becomes the locus of the operations of larger historical forces. The body – whether starved, bonded, sick or violated – becomes proof and product of material processes. The body is recognized precisely because it carries the mark of such material histories. By itself, however, the body is seen as bare life, biology, opaque, merely a receptacle, and therefore, not quite thematisable through history.

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This understanding of the human body as irrelevant, except in biographical intimacy of disease, death, sex and hunger, is something that fails to make sense of the material experiences of caste and above all, of untouchability – wherein matters of touch, sex, food, filth, flesh, skin, work, worship, bondage and mobility all come together to produce the socio-political realm via deployment of the body, and above all, the body. Which is perhaps why, in response to class formulations, it appears attractive to a large number of critics of caste to invoke the idea of race. For in colonial modernity, race seems to be the only mode through which the body is admitted into public political discourse. It is only through discourses of race justice and human rights against violence that claims to autonomy and rehabilitation of the body appears possible globally. The telling case, already mentioned above, is the debate that emerged when dalit activists sought to present caste injustice as a case of race discrimination and human rights violation on the international forum of a the United Nations Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban in August-September 2001.²⁸ I do not quite believe that dalit activists actually innocently understood caste as race, nor do I believe that they saw the invocation of a universal humanity and human rights as the ultimate way towards abolishing of caste in India. I see the caste-race conflation here as really a deliberate and strategic reminder – that the materiality of caste is above all that it is a politics of the body – to all those who talked of an abstract notion of democratic equality and empowerment, including existing dalit political parties like Bahujan Samaj Party and the Republican Party of India, big electoral players who had maintained an uneasy silence all through this controversy.

²⁸ For a good summary of various views on the issue, including that of Martin Macwan, who was one of those instrumental in ‘internationalising’ the caste issue, see ‘Exclusion: a symposium on caste, race and the dalit question’, Seminar, 508, December 2001.

The following works also may be seen:

Uma Chakravarty, ‘Reconceptualising Gender, Phule, Brahmanism and Brahmanical Patriarchy’ in Gender and Caste, ed. Anupama Rao, New Delhi, Kali for Women, 2003; G. Arunima, There Comes Papa.

B. R. Ambedkar, ‘Castes in India: their mechanism, genesis and development’, in Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar, ed. Valerian Rodrigues, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2002.

S. Anandhi, ‘The Women’s Question in the Dravidian Movement, c. 1925-48’ and V. Geetha ‘Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship’, both in Gender and Caste, edited by Anupama Rao.

Not surprisingly, if there has emerged today any recognition of this problematic of the body vis-à-vis caste it has come from feminist writers, and not all of them historians. To begin with, there is the clear assertion being made by feminist writers today that caste as a structure is centrally reproduced through a patriarchal enforcement of endogamy, where marriage and the control of women’s sexuality are paramount. Uma Chakravarty’s work, both on ancient India

and on the 18th century Brahmanical Peshwa regime of Maharashtra, shows this clearly, as does G. Arunima's work, on the restructuring of patriarchy through a forcible transformation of Nair matriliney into the 'modern' form of patrilineal family in Kerala in colonial times. This perhaps explains why Ambedkar emphasized so much on the centrality of marriage in his understanding of the genesis of caste³⁰ and why someone like Periyar needed to fashion an alternative form of man-woman partnership in his version of Self-Respect marriages.³¹ Though neither of these thinkers formulated this issue as a feminist problematic, they clearly had an intuitive understanding of the centrality of women's body in discourses of caste – an understanding that later theorists would build on.

Other writers, in turn, have sought to narrate the experiential dimension of caste in everyday life to show how central the presence and movement of the body has been to the workings of this form of inequality. One could present numerous instances of this centrality of the body vis-à-vis caste – namely, the questions of proximity and distance through which upper and lower caste bodies are spatially located, the matter of differential clothing, posture and deportment of bodies allowed in conventions of social etiquette, notions of ablutions and defilement that mediate occasions of touch, issues of differential sexual access, by which upper-caste men appropriate lower-caste women's bodies while lower-caste men and upper-caste women are denied contact, forms of labour, enslavement and debt bondage that must produce particular and specially inflected questions of freedom, mobility and control of bodies, even matters of association with beastly bodies by which the cow becomes the Brahman's and the pig the dalit's symbol and so on. Some of these bodily conventions have of course been jeopardized by the contingencies of modern life – public transport, urban migration, rise of caste-neutral institutions and professions, legal intervention etc – as also by successful resistance against them. Yet there is no denying that even today, in cities and in offices, the sweepers and cleaners are almost always dalits, that marriage advertisements are still caste-based even amongst the most elite and educated, that despite reservations, public institutions effectively function through informal procedures of segregation. In other words, attitudes towards the body still strongly inform the materiality of caste. Note, for instance, the telling reports that P. Sainath had filed on dalit daily life across the country some years back, where the organizing principle of caste till date clearly appeared as the opposition between clean and defiling labour.³² Note also the stark way in which feminist sociologist Anupama Rao captures the body politics of it all:

32 'Unmusical Chairs', *The Hindu*, March 14, 1999 and 'Head-loads and Heartbreak', *The Hindu*, October 3, 1999, both reproduced in *Gender and Caste*, ed. Rao.

33 Introduction', *Gender and Caste*, ed. Rao, note 51.

Ironically, the dalit women's physical intimacy with this most abhorred and defiling of acts, excretion, gives them a kind of secret knowledge of the domestic economies from which they are excluded. If the Brahman's access to the secret knowledge from which others were to be excluded formed the psychobiography of his caste mark, the gendered reversal that is performed by the dalit woman's access to the intimate gastrointestinal economies of the household is then a

poignant reminder of the knowledge – of what the upper castes eat, how their shit smells, and so forth – that defiled labour produces.³³

It is this specific kind of materiality of caste inequality – and the centrality of the (gendered) body in it – that history-writing must admit into its narratives. However, it will be a gross error to understand this version of caste as embodied inequality in terms of the primordially of the phenomenon. In fact, this precisely is the problem with our sociological and historical common sense, a common sense which is the product of a colonial-modern historicism that can grasp caste only in terms of its being age-old, archaic, non-modern, a residue of the past in the present, as it were. The task of a history adequate to the category of caste, therefore, would be to show up the changes, through modern times, in the forms of embodiment and materiality of caste – changes that have come about through changing discourses, changing governmental technologies, and above all, through changing forms of resistance and politicization.

Let us end this essay, then, by provisionally suggesting what seems to me one productive way of approaching the problematic of caste, body and history (surely there could be many other ways, and in any case, we are constrained by being a historian of only the nineteenth-twentieth centuries). We think that there is a consensus today that the question of untouchability must be seen as distinct and different from other general questions about caste. This position is understandable because erstwhile untouchables remain even today the most physically exploited and marginalized peoples of our society, and their question is undoubtedly therefore the most urgent of all. However, beneath this admittedly ethical/political position lay hidden a number of specifically historical questions that throw up the connected genealogies of caste and the body. Namely, questions such as when and how does the question of untouchability, and the associated question of touch and the body, get dissociated from the potentially totalizing structure of caste practices in general? Does the separating out of the untouchable happen because mainstream nationalism and its leaders like Gandhi strategically made untouchability into a distinct, localized and therefore containable evil, thus exonerating the rest of caste society from the taint of unjust bodily practices? Does the question of the ‘untouchable’ emerge as a separate question also because of the way other ‘backward’ castes mobilized and consolidated, as they did in early twentieth century in the south and the west and in the late twentieth century in north India, really at the cost of the dalit? In other words, does the special loneliness of the dalit emerge out of newer kinds of hegemonic political practice by which caste gets resisted and reconfigured in the modern nation – making the dalit into an exceptional and residual untouchable body? And does it also signify that the struggle against untouchability and defilement – the embodied form of the experience of caste – becomes the struggle for rights and recognition of a special and specific community of ‘untouchables’ rather than a general struggle for abolition of caste as a totalizing system? Or as importantly, is caste not or no longer a totalizing structure at all, only a Brahmanical fantasy?

Other associated questions also emerge – how does the metaphor of the body work in the history of naming and renaming of the untouchable-the harijan-the broken people? How do we see the figuring of Ambedkar since the 1950s – through the setting up of his many statues and

the occasional desecration of them? What does the politics of language produced by the dalit literature movement, 1970s onward, tell us about the deployment of so-called vulgar, physical, crassly material usages against a sanitized and elitist imagination of the literary and the aesthetic? What does the recent centrality of the autobiographical mode of writing in dalit self-representations say about our conventional knowledge systems and the space they offer, or do not offer, for the articulation of an embodied subject? And above all, what is the role of structural violence – in its bodily immediacy – in the primary recognition of the dalit or the ‘untouchable’ as a subject? Anupama Rao, the feminist sociologist whom I had briefly quoted above, has done some significant work on this last question, which must be mentioned here, for from its history as a discipline has much to learn. (Understanding Sirasgaon: notes towards conceptualizing the role of law, caste and gender in a case of “atrocities”, in *Gender and Caste*, ed. Rao; ‘Death of a Kotwal: Injury and Politics of Recognition’ in *Subaltern Studies XII*, eds. Shail Mayaram, M. S. S Pandian and Ajay Skaria, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2005.)

Anupama Rao argues that if in the twentieth century, the rise of the dalit as identity happened through a politics of representation and reservation, no less important has been the parallel process of reconstituting the dalit as subject(ed) to special forms of bodily violence – defined by the state as legally distinct from other structural/societal practices of violence in modern times. She reminds us that at the time the Indian Constitution was being framed, Ambedkar had suggested in his draft on fundamental rights the provision that ‘[a]ny privilege or disability arising out of rank, birth, person, family, religion and religious usage and custom is abolished’. This general statement against inequality of all kinds, both religious and secular, was however accepted neither by the Draft Committee nor by the Constituent Assembly. In its place came the well-known Article 17 of the constitution which read ‘[u]ntouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of “untouchability” shall be an offence in accordance with law’. I believe that this was the moment of formalizing and legalizing the separation of untouchability as a special case, from its habitus of general social, religious and caste practices.

This was also the beginning of a longer process of law-making by which the ‘untouchable’ was produced as the subject of legal ‘exception’ and special juridical protection (in the way that women would also be constituted through the years). The Government of India passed the Untouchability (Offences) Act in 1955, which was amended in 1976 and renamed as the Protection of Civil Rights Act (Act 22 of 1955). Later in 1989, at the same time as Mandal Commission, the state passed The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, which was much more stringent than the earlier one.

Through a study of cases under the above laws, Anupama Rao shows how through the twentieth century, dalit personhood gets juridically constituted through moments of ‘atrocities’. It was only through acts of violence against the untouchable that the untouchable gets publicly recognized – making public violence and humiliation a structural-legal condition for the emergence of the dalit as an effective and visible right-bearing individual. This also renders invisible in a new way, the ordinary and unspectacular deprivations of the dalit everyday. It also

leaves very little room for a recognition, in legal-juridical terms, of caste sociality in general and of the structure of high-caste personhood, the ‘normal’ citizen, as Rao aptly puts it.

The particular kind of emphasis on violence against the untouchable body also fails to recognize the changing politics of violence itself. Anupama Rao argues that in state sociology, directed violence against a dalit is almost always read as the archaic form of violence based on the ‘superstition’ of untouchability, while it can be shown that since at least the 1960s, if not earlier, such violence has been newly constituted in response to newer contexts of local political assertion by dalits. ‘As we try to navigate past a legalized caste habitus of victim and aggressor’, she says, ‘we need to acknowledge that there has been a change from violence that prevents dalits from claiming political rights, to violence that responds to their political militancy’. She also shows how juridical knowledge, and state apparatuses like the police, the court, commissions and committees, are very much contaminated by the political negotiations happening in society in general which produce criminal cases of atrocity – except that, at the moment of justice and compensation, such politics must of necessity be repressed for the sake of impartiality and evidentiality.

In other words, what we see here is a long and complex history of the changing deployment of the dalit’s body and person through which the materiality of caste gets laid out and transformed. However, it must be evident that this kind of long-term history of caste can only be imagined, and read back well into at least the nineteenth century, only if we are able to go beyond the conventional closure of modern Indian history at 1947. Seen from the point of view of the caste-question, late nineteenth to late twentieth century appears to be a far more productive temporal bracket to work with. It is also quite possible to complicate, from the perspective of caste, the grey area between late medieval and early colonial times in India – though it is beyond my competence to elaborate on this. But it can surely be said that if history-writing has to do justice to caste as a category, historians must begin by disowning significantly the standard periodisation framework of Indian history, across ancient-medieval-modern periods.

Not the least because this periodisation still smacks of that colonial-religious division of our history across Hindu, Muslim and British eras, which produced the nationalism /communalism paradigm, rendered caste secondary, and forcibly ended modern history at the moment of partition and the exit of the ‘secessionist’ kind of Muslim from the nation. Indeed, it is the haunting shadow of this periodisation that keeps the practice of contemporary history from really developing in our academic institutions even today. And without a practice of contemporary history, even the stories of nineteenth-early twentieth century caste mobilization would remain largely untold.